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**Jasveer Singh**  
Ph.D. Candidate in Diplomacy  
and Disarmament division of  
the Centre for International  
Politics, Organisations, and  
Disarmament (CIPOD), School  
of International Studies (SIS),  
at Jawaharlal Nehru  
University, New Delhi, Delhi,  
India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Jasveer Singh**  
Ph.D. Candidate in Diplomacy  
and Disarmament division of  
the Centre for International  
Politics, Organisations, and  
Disarmament (CIPOD), School  
of International Studies (SIS),  
at Jawaharlal Nehru  
University, New Delhi, Delhi,  
India

## Peace and Regional Economic Integration: Analysing India's Centrality in South Asia

**Jasveer Singh**

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### Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between peace and regional economic integration in South Asia, focusing on India's centrality. South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, exhibits cultural homogeneity and political heterogeneity shaped by historical colonial legacies and post-independence geopolitics. India's geographical and economic dominance significantly influences regional trade; it represents 80% of its GDP and commands a substantial share of intra-regional trade. However, despite multiple bilateral and multilateral trade agreements under the SAARC umbrella, this region remains least economically integrated, driven by complex conflicts and political tensions among member states. The paper argues that while peace and economic cooperation are mutually reinforcing, persistent regional conflicts hinder trade and integration efforts. By examining conflicts, such as territorial disputes and ethnic tensions, the research emphasises the need for a stable political environment as a prerequisite for economic cooperation. The findings suggest that regional conflicts and geopolitical dynamics hamper India's leadership potential and that the success of economic integration initiatives like SAFTA is stifled by unresolved political issues, limiting the ability of South Asian countries to collaborate effectively. To analyse India's centrality in South Asia, the paper followed the liberal peace theory. It relied on an extensive literature review based on secondary sources to examine the relationship between peace, conflicts, and economic integration.

**Keywords:** India's Centrality, South Asia, peace, conflicts, regional economic integration

### Introduction

#### 1. Background

South Asia is a geographically cohesive region comprising eight modern nation-states-Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka which worked under a regional grouping of SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation).<sup>1</sup> All eight countries, including rivers, mountains, and oceans, were part of the everyday ecological organic system. They shared a common heritage of culture and traditions, shared historical colonial legacy and civilisational affinities and ethnic commonalities. This commonness or homogeneity leads to overlapping of culture, the tradition of politics and economic structures, social norms, and linguistic character among the countries, which makes South Asia a complex region. But except for this homogeneity, South Asia also has the characteristics of heterogeneity in the past and present, especially after their independence from the British, such as different political systems, i.e. democracy, monarchy, and military rule. India and Pakistan were a single country before the partition; Pakistan was further divided into Bangladesh in 1971<sup>2</sup>, which gave South Asia a new regional structure.

The most vital or unique feature of South Asia is India's centrality in the region, which makes it distinct from the other regions worldwide. India is a big country in terms of geography, military, and economic power compared to other South Asian countries; they were relatively small in size and power potential. India covers 64 per cent of land in the region and shares a common border with all neighbours.

<sup>1</sup> SAARC came into being in 8 December 1985 in Dhaka with seven foundational members.

<sup>2</sup> India helped East Pakistan in his liberation war through Mukti Bahini to become new country Bangladesh in 1971.

Due to geographical hindrances, they depend on India for their direct trade relations. Except for Pakistan and Afghanistan, all other countries, including Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, have no direct trade roots with each other. Therefore, India played a central role in granting them transit roots. India contributes nearly 80 per cent of the regional GDP and comes in 3<sup>rd</sup> position in GDP under PPP (purchasing power parity). India's bigness or centrality gave her an advantage in trade or economics. Due to this advantage, India corners 65 per cent of regional trade. "A predominant share of 87 per cent in intra-South Asia exports is cornered by India. In intra-regional imports, though, its share of 13 per cent is much smaller" (Batra 2013) [7]. But at the same time, bilateral or intra-regional trade volume is very low among the countries, remaining around 5 per cent of bilateral trade, even lower than in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is the least economically integrated region in the world. South Asian countries have signed bilateral and multilateral regional trade agreements such as bilateral FTAs-India-Nepal, India-Bhutan, India-Sri Lanka, Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Treaty (APTTA) and regional trade treaties under the SAARC umbrella such as SAPTA and SAFTA. However, these trade agreements were more or less not proven very successful due to the extensive Sensitive List of products, or more importantly, due to Political reasons and other conflictual issues.

## 2. Peace, Conflicts and Economic Integration

Conflicts and contentious issues, although negative, are important features of South Asia. India, despite its continuous efforts for good neighbourhood relations, due to its centrality, had conflicts with almost every country in the region. For example, territorial disputes (such as between Indo-Pak, which had already led to 4 wars), Terrorism, refugee issues (such as the Rohingya issue), Ethnic conflicts (Tamil issue in Sri Lanka), Communal conflicts (Hindu-Muslim between Indo-Pak) and other politico-economic and strategic disputes. Indeed, these contagious issues are not only due to India's centrality but also other variables like colonial or partition history, and third-party (former USSR, USA, and now China, etc.) roles are important in conflict. Domestic regional and extra-regional factors lead South Asian countries towards misperceptions, instability and conflicts, which remain the permanent feature of this region today. It was a well-known fact that conflict had a negative effect on peace and economic integration, and South Asia remained no exception to it. Thus, conflict limited the intra-regional trade in South Asia. Due to conflicts, they substituted trade with other distant partners, which is more costly for them by defying the proximity or shared borders (homogeneity). As well as also defies the argument of the liberal peace theory.

Peace and regional economic integration are closely tied to each other. It is generally said that when there is economic cooperation between countries, then there will be peace. Liberal peace theory argues that bilateral trade flows reduce the probability of a bilateral war, especially among geographically proximate countries, by increasing the opportunity cost of trade relations. Thus, it led to peace and economic integration. On the other side, global or international trade openness leads to peace among distant countries. However, some thinkers argued that global or multilateral trade openness reduced the opportunity cost of war, especially among the proximate countries, which led

them to violently engage with each other. Generally, thinkers give much emphasis on the economic rationale of regional integration and neglect the political rationale behind it. But political motivation is equally or more important for regional economic integration. In the case of the European Union (EU), historians and political scientists emphasised that the broader motivation behind the creation of the EU was initially political because they wanted to prevent World War from happening again or to prevent killings and bloodshed. It had two objectives the intermediate objective, which is economic integration, and the final objective, which is peace. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Robert Schumann famously declared in 1950, "Through the consolidation of basic production and the institution of a new High Authority, whose decisions will bind France, Germany and the other countries that join, this proposal represents the first concrete step towards a European federation, imperative for the preservation of peace" (Martin *et al.*, 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, MERCOSUR (common market of the south), created in 1991, was to curtail military engagements between Argentina and Brazil for the wider aim of peace, eventually leading to economic integration. Another example was the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), created in 1967; the initial objective was political to prevent Chinese ideological domination in the region, then shifted towards economic integration. These examples of the EU, ASEAN, and MERCOSUR show the step-by-step process of economic integration. In South Asia, the regional organisation SAARC, created in 1985, was an exception to this step-by-step regional integration process. Although the South Asian region was very conflict-ridden and sensitive, countries did not come together for political reasons (peace) but for economic reasons. This economic reason was not motivated by peace but by the perception of the leaders to lag in the global economic arena. During that time, a flood of RTAs came into the world, especially bilateral Regional Trade Arrangements (RTAs; now more than 300), which helped to build a perception of leaders. SAARC countries have done economic agreements SAPTA in 1993 (which failed in 1999) and SAFTA in 2004 (currently in force after 2006) as steps towards regional economic integration. However, SAFTA did little better than its former SAPTA, and it also seemed to fail to unite the region economically. Intra-regional trade is still around 5 per cent, which is lower than the actual potential. Barriers such as bilateral conflicts, political ideologies, leadership reluctance, and misperceptions are reasons for the failure of SAFTA and SAARC.

Although peace and economic integration are closely tied or reinforce each other, some sort of peace is necessary for economic integration. Regional economic integration can be looked at as a tool or method for perpetuating peace. This paper tried to analyse India's centrality in South Asia through the relationship between peace and regional economic integration, with a focus on economic integration as a tool for peace. India's asymmetry and bigness are hard facts which cannot be denied. India can potentially play a leadership role or bind neighbours in the region together. However, as SAARC more or less failed, it showed India's unwillingness to utilise its centrality. SAARC's failure was

<sup>3</sup> Martin *et al.* (2010), the economics and politics of free trade agreements, 9 April 2010.

not due to India; other countries have played significant roles. The following literature review and analysis examines the linkages among asymmetry, hegemony and political opposition in the context of India's centrality as a leader and regional economic integration within South Asia.

### 3. Literature Review

Amita Batra (2013) <sup>[7]</sup>, in her study "Political Economy of South Asia: Commonalities Overshadow by Conflict", explains how India's centrality and consequent geographical and economic asymmetry in the region dominated the psyche of the other smaller countries on issues related to sovereignty and fear of overtaken by India, bilateral conflicts worked against regional economic integration. This psyche is why India is not accepted as a regional leader. She also finds the predominance of conflict and political rationality over economic rationality, which is a barrier to collective action and regional economic integration in South Asia. Even though faced with common developmental problems, countries were not able to come together, denying geographical proximity.

Chandra D Bhatta (2004), in his study on "Regional integration and peace in South Asia: An analysis", explains how economic integration in South Asia is deeply connected to conflict. There are the lowest possibilities in every part to establish peace through the concept of economic integration. In this article, the author wants to explain that the process of evolution and formulation of peace takes place through regional economic cooperation in South Asia.

Rajiv Kumar and Manjeeta Singh (2009), in their study "India's Role in South Asia Trade and Investment Integration", analysed the prospects and potential of "regional integration and intra-SAARC trade and investment flows and concluded that progress in regional trade is far short of potential" (Kumar & Singh, 2009). They also discussed the real impediments to regional integration. This paper focused on three arguments first, increased intra-regional trade is contingent upon heightened cross-border investment flows, and thus, greater emphasis should be placed on fostering the latter. Second, India should take more responsibility as a dominant member and continue its unilateral concessions to neighbouring countries. Third, there is a greater desire for regional integration in each member country's civil society, academics, and industrial sections; it is an opportunity to reduce all impediments that need to be considered by political rationale.

Vinitha Revi (2020), in "Regionalisation: A Better Strategy in a Post-Pandemic World?" It explains the current fragility of globalisation and older regionalism and suggests that India should use the new regionalisation strategy for its developmental goals. This paper also focused on the need to change the outlook of India's foreign policy after COVID-19 and suggested that India should take a regional approach to economic cooperation while acknowledging that regional integration remains a faraway goal fraught with difficulties. This paper is based on the arguments of the new regionalization theory, which focuses on the role of the state and non-state actors such as NGOs and emphasises state or political will for integration. Finally, it appreciates India's sub-regional initiatives, such as BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal), for sub-regional cooperation.

Madhavi Bhasin (2008), in her study "India's Role in South Asia-Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership", analyzes regional interactions through or beyond the

SAARC forum for India's perceived hegemony policies or leadership policies and the perceptions of the neighbouring countries. This paper discusses that bilateral conflicts dominate the psyche of neighbours, and India's bigness plays a significant role in it. These perceptions or psychological predispositions are so shaped that any bilateral reference of relations presupposes India's hegemony, and any multilateral assertion is viewed as pressure-generating tactics On India. Finally, this paper focused on the reluctance of India's leadership and the lack of vision for regional integration not only among Indian leaders but also among leaders in other countries.

Monalisa Adhikari (2018) <sup>[1]</sup>, in her study "India in South Asia: Interaction with liberal Peacebuilding Projects", focused on the role of Western liberal peacebuilding projects and Indian peace building in South Asia. Moreover, the study examines the unique characteristics of normative foundations, practices, and engagement modalities. It argues that for India to assume a constructive role in the region, it must formulate a policy that addresses its engagement with liberal peace building norms and their implementation.

Constantino Xavier (2020) <sup>[6]</sup>, in his study "Sambandh as Strategy: India's New Approach to Regional Connectivity", discussed the geo-strategic, economic, and cultural factors that lead to a new approach towards South Asia. He focused on how India tried to reconnect with neighbour, but some challenges remain, such as financial capacity, bureaucratic coordination, and project implementation. He argued that due to China's factor, regional connectivity became the top priority for India after 2014. Now, India is more focused on sub-regional connectivity roots such as BBIN and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). These initiatives remained present since the 1990s but have become top priority after 2014. The paper finds three driving forces for it China's increased influence in the region, India's centrality in the region, and cultural vision that is based on the reactivation of India's past centrality as a civilisational power.

### 4. India's centrality and economic integration in South Asia: Analysis and Observations:

The process of regionalisation for integration that started with the formation of SAARC in 1985 seems elusive and unworkable today. SAARC has failed to hold countries together for economic cooperation, development and peace. Although its failure is not because of India, it certainly reflects the reluctance of India for regional groupings on one hand and, on the other side, it's striving for bilateral and minilateral ties with partner countries. The anatomy or structure of South Asia gives India an advantageous position. This anatomy in the context of geography, culture, people, economy, and politics reflects the asymmetry. One part more significant than others in every context of India reflects asymmetry and Indo-centricity, whether one likes it or not. Geographically, it shared boundaries with all South Asian countries except Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, India is a big economy; it holds the key to any economic integration in the region. Although many initiatives were taken for regional integration, they reflect either partial success or failure due to leadership reluctance. According to the realist argument, Power is defined in terms of potential. India is a primary regional force in South Asia due to its potentiality. Thus, its role is more important than others to

take responsibility. India cannot go alone. It needs reciprocity from neighbours for peace and stability in the region. Peace is a necessary precondition for economic integration to take place. However, the bilateral conflict dominated and still dominates this process of regional peace and hinders economic integration.

Therefore, India's bigness and asymmetric structure in South Asia gave birth to a distinct kind of regional politics. This politics dominated the psyche of the leaders, which led to anti-India sentiments, radical nationalism, and the misperception of fear of being overtaken by India. Opposition political parties in India's neighbourhood had played an important role in building perceptions in the past and still playing this role in the present. They accused India of being a "hegemonic state" which tried to dominate them. They cite the examples of the Indira Doctrine, India's role in separating Pakistan-Bangladesh (1971), India's role in the Sri Lanka civil war (1987), India's diplomatic statements on the deteriorating situation in Baluchistan, and bilateral conflicts on various issues to build misperception towards India.<sup>4</sup> This "big brother syndrome" works against peace in the region, perpetuating conflicts and hindering regional economic integration.<sup>5</sup> For example, the recent Sri Lankan decision to abandon the East container terminal treaty with India-Japan clearly reflects the role of opposition politics, overshadowing economic rationality. One of the reasons for the success of these oppositions lies in the cultural overlapping, such as Tamils in India-Sri Lanka, Punjabis in India-Pakistan, Indo-Nepali culture, etc., in the region with their spill over effect. However, when there is peace or cordial relationship between countries, then also this political opposition tries to oppose government policies towards neighbours. The realistic theory of state behaviour shows that big countries always try to influence small ones. Idealistically, India always rejects or opposes this hegemonic argument and promotes good bilateral relations with its neighbours. India adopted the policy of non-reciprocity under the Gujral doctrine<sup>6</sup>. This policy of non-reciprocity is desirable, but it is not without faults. It can sometimes be considered patronisation, which is the feature of Big Brother. Altaf Gauhar, a Pakistani columnist, stated, "The Gujral Doctrine is not a doctrine of good neighbourly relations but a Bharti Plan to seize the neighbour peacefully".<sup>7</sup> Thus, this psyche created misperception among the South Asian countries, and these perceptions are deeply internalised. Therefore, any regional economic initiative by India was seen as a tool for empowering India, not other states. Thus, it leads to a lack of trust, which is one

of the main reasons for the failure of SAARC. In spite of this, Neighbours' failure to devise a national consensus and national policy-how much they need to engage with India is a big stumbling block in bilateral relations. The hegemony argument against India needs any kind of force behind it, such as domestic politics and extra-regional powers, to internalize this idea.

As mentioned earlier, some sort of peace is necessary for regional integration in South Asia. However, long persisting conflicts, mistrust, and leadership reluctance predominantly challenged countries' collective action for economic integration. SAARC came with the objective of economic cooperation, but very late, it took the initiative for its aim. And time by time, it has taken initiatives such as SAPTA (1993), SAFTA (2004), and SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) in 2010 and also created the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). But all of these initiatives have had remarkable success. Intra-regional trade is still very low and stagnant compared to other regional groupings. There are many factors responsible such as the high level of transaction cost due to lack of trade facilitation, other tariff and non-tariff barriers, a large number of sensitive lists of products, etc., for this low level of intra-regional trade. Another main reason is that 'the informal trade volume between countries is even higher than formal trade (Taneja, 2001) [4]. Apart from these, political reasons are more responsible for creating mistrust and hindering intra-regional trade. Although several agreements were signed on paper, they were not implemented with true spirit. India is central to any development in South Asia. Thus, its role should be central. However, its leadership remained reluctant towards SAARC and remains unable to implement policy initiatives on the ground. South Asian countries adopted protectionist economic policies against each other due to trust deficit. Although India has taken steps such as duty-free access for all LDCs, FTAs with three countries, Sri Lanka-Bhutan-Nepal, and reducing the sensitive list of products, the ghost of mistrust negatively dominates the relations. India gave the status of MFN to Pakistan. However, it refused to give MFN status to India, with a clear violation of WTO norms (India scraps MFN status of Pakistan after the Uri terrorist attack). Most of the time, Indo-Pak conflicts overshadow regional economic cooperation initiatives. For instance, a terrorist attack in Uri (India) altogether suspended relations with Pakistan and dismissed SAARC's 19th submission in 2016 for an uncertain time period. Another important reason for the least integration is globalisation, which gives countries an alternative to trade with distant partners even if it defies notions of natural trading partners and geographical proximity. This is visible in the case of South Asia. It certainly shows the unwillingness of countries to come together for their common concerns. Thus, India's centrality matters to making, shaping and dominating the political motivation in the whole region. Various governments in India have come up with their flag of neighbourhood policies but failed to implement them. According to C. Rajamohan, "neighbourhood is India's first sphere of influence"<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, if India wants to be a global power,

<sup>4</sup> Indira Doctrine refers to the policy in the context of a hegemonic position that India would consider the presence of extra-regional power in South Asia adverse to its interests and to prevent the region from the adverse effects of extra-regional power rivalry.

<sup>5</sup> Gupta, Bhabani Sen (2014), 'Tamil-Sinhala conflict is not India's creation', India Today, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2014, URL <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/guest-column/story/19840430-tamil-sinhala-conflict-is-not-india-creation-803002-1984-04-30>

<sup>6</sup> The Gujral Doctrine encompasses five guiding principles for India's foreign policy towards its immediate neighbors. The core tenet of this doctrine is the provision of unilateral concessions to these countries, without anticipating reciprocal actions.

<sup>7</sup> Times of India (1997). 'India's Role in South Asia-Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership, analyse', cited in Madhavi Bhasin.

<sup>8</sup> Rajamohan, C. (2016). 'Raja mandala: Pragmatic about SAARC', The Indian Express, URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/saarc-nations-meet-india-pakistan-nawaz-sharif-burhan-wani-pm-modi-2962301/>

then it needs to take the leadership role more seriously in the region.

Another main factor that relates to India's centrality is its interaction with extra-regional powers in the context of development and peace-building in the region. SAARC does not have any dispute settlement arrangement, and no political conflictual issues were discussed on its platform, which is one of the main causes of its frozenness. India's centrality is not only challenged by China and the USA in the region, but non-state actors like the United Nations, EU and World Bank, IMF, terrorism, etc. also play a vital role in it. These factors tried to influence countries' policies through aid, assistance and peace-building efforts. "India does not yet have any peace-building policy towards neighbours" (Adhikari, 2018) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, its efforts in peacebuilding in Afghanistan were impressive. However, its asymmetry and bigness create stumbling blocks in the role of peace-building in the region. For instance, India's role in Bangladesh's liberation struggle (1971) is still viewed as having the potential to reshape regional structure, which leads to apprehensions. Thus, in balancing regional power structure, external power plays an important role. It is very visible in the context of China in the region. Therefore, it creates competition and a struggle for influence in the region, which eventually hinders peace and regional economic integration efforts.

SAARC is unworkable in the present scenario; therefore, countries are moving towards bilateralism and other interim arrangements. India is now focused on sub-regional groupings such as BBIN, BIMSTEC, etc., for better connectivity in member parties. According to S. Jaishankar, India's external affairs minister placed South Asia in "the first circle of priority" and emphasised that "Neighbourhood First is about connectivity, commerce, and contacts" (MEA, 2019)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the current government focus more on intra-border connectivity. These groupings have existed since the 1990s but came to the forefront after 2016. However, the problem lies the same. These initiatives, like connectivity facilitation, need economic liberalisation because roads, ports, railways and airports will remain useless until tariff and non-tariff barriers persist. Another problem is the implementation of policies and the contradiction between domestic and external policies, especially after COVID-19. For example, countries' policies seem more protectionist and based on economic nationalism, such as Modi's make in India, and the COVID-19 vaccine nationalism slogan in some countries is looking as a threat to the process of regionalism and regional economic integration. Indeed, India is taking responsibility and initiative. However, the hard reality is that its asymmetric and hegemonic picture is so strongly internalised in domestic opposition politics, and they use it according to their narrow interests. Thus, India seems to have failed not in an individual capacity but in a group capacity as a regional leadership role. India cannot go alone. It needs reciprocity in its initiatives. Thus, we can say that political rationality predominated over economic rationality and still dominates it.

<sup>9</sup> Government of India. Ministry of External Affairs (2019). Transcript of press conference, external affairs minister on 100 days of government. URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/eam-speeches-interviews.htm>

Bhabani Sen Gupta (2014) said, "Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. Moreover, the seventh, that is India will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful".

## Conclusion

Peace and economic integration are closely tied to each other. Political motivation is essential for economic integration, which seems absent among South Asian countries. It has remained among the least integrated regions due to a lack of trust, bilateral conflicts, and political factions. Moreover, these conflicts directly and indirectly relate to India's centrality in South Asia. This led to distinct opposition politics in the region, which worked against peace and regional economic integration. However, various initiatives were taken, and prolonged persisting conflicts, mistrust, and leadership reluctance predominantly challenged countries' collective action for economic integration. India is central to any development in South Asia. Thus, its role should be central. However, its leadership remained reluctant towards SAARC and remains unable to implement policy initiatives on the ground. Most of the regional developments were hindered by Indo-Pak conflicts. SAARC has more or less failed, and its failure reflects India's failure to convince countries to come together. However, India can do nothing alone and needs reciprocity from the neighbouring countries. India's bigness works against her. Thus, peace is a necessary precondition for economic integration. Countries need to focus on economic, trade facilitation, and regional connectivity instead of narrow political interests. As regional economic integration seemed elusive in the present situation, India's policy shift towards the BBIN initiative was exceptionally welcoming for at least some sort of cooperation in the present scenario. However, sub-regional initiatives should not be seen as an alternative to the greater benefits of regional economic integration.

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