

BIMSTEC or SAARC?

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Among the highest priorities of India's foreign policy figure the two imperatives: managing the complex and evolving pattern of cooperative relationships with the major powers, and nurturing stable, peaceful and positive ties with the immediate neighbours, both at bilateral and regional levels. The two imperatives are equally important – and inter-related. New Delhi devotes a huge chunk of its political capital, resources and energy to pursue these fundamental goals.

Today, at the beginning of a new decade, it is evident that more progress has been achieved on the dossier of major powers rather than in India's South Asian neighbourhood.

India's bilateral relations with its neighbours – all except one – are mostly sound: high-level visits take place and projects in a broad range of areas are being executed. But its record looks less impressive when compared with China's spectacular success in deepening economic and strategic connectivity with, for example, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and even Maldives. Besides, differences and divergences on a host of issues between India and some of her neighbours are a constant, although they have been kept within manageable limits.

More worrisome is that regional cooperation has gone adrift in recent years. The neighbourhood stands divided even on such a basic issue as which regional institution may be utilised for conducting dialogue and forging cooperation projects. For example, the guest lists for the two swearing-in ceremonies of the Modi government indicate the distance covered in the past five years: leaders of the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries were invited in 2014 while those from the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) figured on the invitee list in 2019.[1]

SAARC or BIMSTEC?

Between October 2016 and August 2018, BIMSTEC made progress and hopes of its rejuvenation arose.[2] Of late, however, India and the neighbourhood are engaged in a discourse marked by rising dissent. Nepal's consistent view has been that SAARC, which has stayed frozen for long, needs reanimation. More recently, Sri Lankan prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa made a polite, but clear plea in favour of the older and bigger regional organisation. "We have already gone a considerable distance in building SAARC and that should be continued," he said in an interview earlier in February 2020, while also taking note of India's attachment to BIMSTEC.[3] (Soon after taking office as the external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar had observed that India saw a mix of "energy, mindset and possibility" in BIMSTEC.[4])

Even Ranil Wickremesinghe, former Sri Lankan PM and perceived to be the most India-friendly leader, has called for the revival of SAARC. Earlier in the week, he observed, "SAARC is deadlocked. While BIMSTEC is not a substitute for SAARC, it is, nevertheless, a starting point for integration." [5]

Not only Nepal and Sri Lanka, but even Bangladesh – 'the father' of SAARC – has a natural nostalgia for it. Besides, Dhaka is understood to be quite unhappy with the slow progress in BIMSTEC and in yet another grouping, Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal (BBIN). Thus, besides Pakistan, which continues to harbour the ambition to host the 19th SAARC summit (which was to be held in November 2016, but was postponed indefinitely due to India's opposition), other regional players also seem to favour a return to SAARC.

The disturbing implication that India can hardly ignore is obvious: inadequate political will exists to move ahead on the package of reforms approved at the BIMSTEC summit in 2018. What then should be done?

The way out

New Delhi's diplomatic choices need to be addressed creatively, and here are three ways which could be considered:

First, realists agree that India-Pakistan bilateral relations are unlikely to see a forward movement in the foreseeable future. Until Islamabad affords ample satisfaction to Delhi on cross-border terrorism and related issues, the latter is unlikely – quite justifiably – to revise its fundamental formulation that talks and terror do not go together. India has no option but to stick to this line.

Second, New Delhi could find a way to introduce some flexibility in moves to convene the next SAARC summit in Islamabad. India, as host of the next Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, has already invited Prime Minister Imran Khan. Pakistan, as host of the next SAARC summit, can renew the invitation to Prime Minister Modi. A serious cost-benefit analysis needs to be undertaken to determine if the two leaders could accept the invitations, attend the two summits, and confine themselves to discussing only regional issues.

Third, all member-states of BIMSTEC should reiterate publicly the commitment to show sincerity and vigour in implementing the agreements reached earlier. They should announce the date of their next summit, which may be held this year. They may also move ahead on finalising a new charter, empowering the secretariat, creating a development fund, and devising a small package of core areas in which cooperation is expanded in the short term.

In his Ramnath Goenka lecture in November 2019, Jaishankar aptly noted that India, with its ambition to be a leading power some day, could not "continue with unsettled borders, an unintegrated region and under-exploited opportunities." [6] Settling borders, a task that began in 1947 and reached a critical stage in 1962, may still take a very long time. However, taking small and meaningful steps towards regional integration is doable in the short term. Only then can opportunities for cooperation be utilised. The region's leaders have to recognise that they swim – or sink – together – and that both organisations have their uses.

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References

- [1] SAARC, which was established in 1985 with eight countries, worked well until 2014-2015. BIMSTEC, set up in 1997 and comprising seven countries, two of which are from South East Asia, has made only modest progress in the last 20 years. Both serve their purpose in the areas identified.
- [2] Bhatia, Rajiv 'Green shoots of revival: on BIMSTEC summit', The Hindu, 4 September 2018.
- [3] Haidar, Suhasini 'If India agrees to postpone debt by three years, we can convince others too, says Mahinda Rajapaksa', The Hindu, 8 February 2020.
- [4] Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy, 'SAARC has problems, BIMSTEC full of energy, says Jaishankar', The Economic Times, 7 June 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/saarc-has-problems-bimstec-full-of-energy-says-jaishankar/articleshow/69684367.cms>
- [5] Srinivasan, Meera, 'Regional integration pegged to SAARC revival', The Hindu, 24 February 2020.
- [6] Ministry of External Affairs, 'External Affairs Minister's speech at the 4th Ramnath Goenka Lecture, 2019', Government of India, 14 November 2019
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