

## **Re-imagining South Asia: Understanding the Eastward pivot in India's South Asia Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

The geopolitical construct of South Asia and south asian regionalism, as exemplified by SAARC, continues to remain dysfunctional. The stagnation is largely attributed to historical antagonism and the geopolitical drag of the India-Pakistan conflict, which has prevented meaningful pan-subcontinental cooperation. While many studies describe the shift away from SAARC, a knowledge gap persists in fully understanding the strategic intent: How does India utilize its multi-dimensional cross-regional cooperation strategy to fundamentally restructure the geopolitical conceptualization of South Asia?

This paper addresses this gap by postulating that India's proactive engagement in a range of specific initiatives (such as BIMSTEC and BBIN) is a purposeful strategy to redefine the idea of South Asia. This policy constitutes an explicit strategic choice to shift the functional locus of the region eastward, moving away from the historical turbulence on India's western front. The objective of this study is to analyze how this reorientation is designed to forge a viable South Asia that acts as a key link between the ASEAN region and this new construct. The methodology involves a focused study of policy documents and empirical data from cross-border connectivity, trade, and energy projects that define this new architecture. The analysis concludes that this eastward strategy is India's attempt to create a more functional and resilient regional entity, holding significant implications for regional integration and India's leadership role in the evolving architecture of South Asia.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical Strategy, cross-regionalism, South Asia, Regional Cooperation, India's Foreign Policy, Eastward Shift

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## Introduction

The geopolitical construct of South Asia presents a profound paradox: it is a region bound by a shared civilizational history and contiguous geography, yet it remains one of the least integrated economic zones in the world. For decades, the institutional expression of this region—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—has been characterized by a paralyzing dysfunction. Established in 1985 to foster mutual assistance, SAARC has instead become a casualty of the geopolitical drag imposed by the intractable hostility between its two largest members, India and Pakistan. While the region possesses the theoretical prerequisites for a vibrant economic union, the reality is one of stagnation and dysfunction, where political mistrust supersedes the logic of developmental cooperation. This dismal state of affairs in South Asia is not merely a bureaucratic failure but a structural feature of a regional architecture held hostage by the India-Pakistan security dilemma, which acts as a perpetual impediment hindering meaningful pan-subcontinental connectivity.

In response to this institutional deadlock, a discernible shift has occurred in India's foreign policy orientation over the last decade. There is a growing consensus among scholars that New Delhi is progressively decoupling its regional aspirations from the moribund SAARC framework and reinvesting its diplomatic capital into other sub-regional organisations, chiefly, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). However, existing literature often characterizes this shift as largely reactive, a tactical maneuver to isolate Islamabad regionally, or a frantic search for an alternative platform. While these elements are undoubtedly present, such a perspective leaves a critical knowledge gap. It fails to fully interrogate the strategic intent behind this changed course. Is India simply seeking a bypass, or is it engaged in a more fundamental restructuring of the geopolitical conceptualization of South Asia itself?

This paper addresses this gap by postulating that India's engagement with BIMSTEC and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative constitutes more than a tactical adjustment; it represents a purposeful "Eastward pivot" designed to redefine the functional locus of the region. By shifting the center of gravity from the turbulent western front, dominated by the India-Pakistan conflict, to the eastern sub-region, India is effectively attempting to construct a new regional ontology. This strategy is not merely about exiting a failed institution but about reimagining South Asia's geography to align with the Act East policy, thereby forging a viable

connectivity architecture that links the Indian subcontinent with the dynamic economies of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The necessity of this re-imagination is underscored by the empirical reality of the Bay of Bengal region. Unlike the landlocked anxieties of the western front, the eastern front offers a maritime and riverine geography that historically facilitated deep integration before the partition of 1947 severed these arteries. Scholars like Constantino Xavier have argued that the Bay of Bengal, once a thriving hub of commerce, became a zone of "disintegration" in the post-colonial era. India's current strategy can thus be understood as a restoration of these historical linkages, leveraging the logic of pragmatic sub-regionalism where cooperation proceeds among the willing, free from the consensus-based paralysis of SAARC. This paper argues that the eastward pivot is India's attempt to operationalize a "functionalist" integration model, prioritizing tangible outcomes in energy, transport, and trade over the high politics of identity that plagued SAARC.

This pivot has also significant implications for India's leadership role. By championing initiatives like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and cross-border energy grids within the BBIN framework, India is moving from a position of hegemonic dominance—which often invited resistance—to one of public goods provision. This transition is critical in an era where the rise of China, with its deep pockets and pack of moral inhibitions, has introduced a competitive dynamic to regional infrastructure development. As C. Raja Mohan notes, the rebalancing of Asia compels India to discard its traditional ambivalence and actively structure a new regional order that secures its strategic autonomy while delivering economic prosperity to its neighbors.

The objective of this paper is to analyze how this reorientation is designed to forge a new and resilient South Asian construct that survives the failure of SAARC. The methodology involves a focused analysis of policy documents, such as the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, and empirical data regarding the progress of specific cross-border projects. By examining the shift from the continental fixation of the past to the maritime possibilities of the future, this paper concludes that the eastward strategy is India's definitive attempt to break free from the geopolitical drag of the west and anchor south asia's future in the dynamism of the east.

## **The Strategic Logic of Exit**

The fundamental stagnation of South Asian regionalism is not merely a consequence of bureaucratic inertia, but a structural inevitability born of the region's geopolitical architecture. For nearly four decades, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has functioned, or rather malfunctioned, under the shadow of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. At the heart of SAARC's dysfunction lies its foundational charter, specifically the unanimity clause (Article X), which requires that all decisions at all levels be taken on the basis of unanimity. While originally designed to ostensibly protect the interests of the smaller states from hegemonic tendencies, this clause has been weaponized by Pakistan to exercise a veto over regional connectivity projects (Kumar, 2015). The result is a "stagnation of sovereignty," where the preservation of rigid state borders supersedes the functional logic of economic cooperation (Jha, 1992). The empirical evidence of this paralysis is stark. Despite possessing geographic contiguity, intra-regional trade in South Asia hovers abysmally low, largely because political hostility precludes the necessary transit agreements. Sreedhar (1994) noted this phenomenon relatively early on when he argued that the security situation in Southern Asia creates a "hostile regionalism," where security dilemmas invariably trump trade logic.

This pattern of institutional dysfunction reached its clearest and most consequential manifestation at the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2014. Coming to office with a decisive electoral mandate and an explicitly articulated commitment to revitalizing India's regional diplomacy, the newly elected Indian government sought to reposition SAARC as a functional platform for economic integration rather than a hostage to political deadlock. In this context, India proposed two cornerstone initiatives, the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) and the SAARC Railways Agreement, aimed at facilitating seamless cross-border movement of goods, services, and people across South Asia. Conceptually aligned with global best practices in regionalism, these agreements were intended to reduce transaction costs, enhance supply-chain efficiency, and embed economic interdependence as a stabilizing force in an otherwise fragmented subcontinent.

Despite broad support from other member states, Pakistan vetoed both agreements, invoking procedural justifications such as the absence of internal approvals. This obstruction, however, was widely interpreted as a manifestation of Islamabad's strategy of instrumentalizing multilateral forums to advance bilateral political objectives, particularly its enduring rivalry with India. By exercising its veto power within a consensus-based institutional structure,

Pakistan effectively subordinated collective regional interests to its bilateral disputes, thereby immobilizing SAARC's core integrative agenda (Politics for India, 2024). The Kathmandu episode thus exposed a structural flaw within SAARC itself: the organization's susceptibility to paralysis by a single dissenting member, irrespective of the broader regional consensus.

For India, this moment proved catalytic. It underscored the realization that under the existing SAARC framework, the trajectory of regional cooperation would remain constrained by the lowest common denominator of political will among member states. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar later observed, a foreign policy architecture that is structurally dependent on unanimity and hostage to obstructionism is ill-suited to a rapidly transforming global and regional order (Jaishankar, 2024). Consequently, India's disengagement from SAARC did not occur through a formal exit or institutional rupture, but through a strategy of functional bypass. New sub-regional and minilateral arrangements—such as BIMSTEC and BBIN—were increasingly prioritized, allowing India to pursue connectivity and economic integration with willing partners while circumventing the veto-induced stagnation embedded within SAARC. In this sense, the Kathmandu summit marked not merely a diplomatic setback, but a paradigmatic shift in India's regional strategy—from consensus-bound multilateralism to pragmatic, outcome-oriented cooperation.

### **From SAARC Minus One to Opportunistic Sub-regionalism**

The strategic response to this deadlock was the conceptualization of SAARC minus Pakistan, which rapidly evolved into opportunistic sub-regionalism. This approach posits that if consensus is impossible, cooperation must proceed among the coalition of the willing. The immediate operationalization of this logic was the activation of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) sub-regional grouping. Following the failure in Kathmandu, India moved swiftly to sign a similar Motor Vehicles Agreement within the BBIN framework in 2015 (Delhi Policy Group, 2018). This shift represents a profound change in India's strategic calculus. Historically, India bore the burden of trying to carry the entire region, including a reluctant Pakistan, towards integration. The new strategy acknowledges that the holding power of the India-Pakistan conflict is insurmountable within a singular institutional framework (Global Defense News, 2025). By pivoting to sub-regional vehicles like BBIN, India has effectively insulated its eastern neighborhood from the toxicity of its western front. Kumar (2015) argues that this form of sub-regionalism is not a negation of SAARC but a pragmatic realization that functional cooperation cannot wait for political normalization. Furthermore, the cancellation

of the 2016 SAARC Summit in Islamabad following the Uri terror attacks served as the final psychological break. It legitimized the narrative that SAARC, in its current form, is incompatible with India's core security interests. It allowed New Delhi to frame its "exit" not as a failure of leadership, but as a necessary quarantine of a state that utilizes terror as an instrument of state policy (Politics for India, 2024).

The eastward pivot signifies a normative split in how India conceptualizes its neighborhood. The western front (Pakistan-Afghanistan) is increasingly viewed through the lens of hard security—defined by border management, counter-terrorism, and containment. In contrast, the eastern front (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar) is viewed through the lens of developmental partnership—defined by connectivity, energy grids, and trade facilitation (Mohan, 2004). This dichotomy allows India to apply different strategic logics to different frontiers. In the west, the logic is defensive and characterized by a zero-sum mentality where India's gain is perceived as Pakistan's loss. The eastern theater, however, allows for positive-sum games. For instance, the connectivity projects with Bangladesh and Nepal are framed around mutual prosperity and shared aspirations rather than security competition (Saha & Chaudhury, 2022). By shifting the institutional focus to BIMSTEC and BBIN, India is effectively choosing to engage with the 'developmental neighborhood' while managing the 'security neighborhood' bilaterally.

### **BIMSTEC as the New Functional Locus of South Asia**

The paralysis of SAARC has necessitated not just an exit strategy, but the construction of a viable alternative architecture that can sustain India's regional aspirations. This alternative has found its most robust expression in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Far from being a mere "rebound relationship" following the failure of SAARC, BIMSTEC represents a fundamental shift in the functional locus of South Asian geopolitics. It moves the center of gravity from a landlocked, conflict-ridden continentalism to a maritime-linked, connectivity-driven regionalism. This shift is geographically intuitive; while the western front is defined by the holding power of the India-Pakistan security dilemma, the eastern front offers a natural bridge between the ecosystem of South Asia and the dynamic markets of Southeast Asia. C. Raja Mohan (2004) posits that BIMSTEC allows India to reclaim its historical role in the Bay of Bengal community, a role that was severed by the artificial borders of partition. By institutionalizing this Bay of Bengal

identity, India is effectively bypassing the western drag and anchoring its growth story in the Asian Century unfolding to its east.

In contrast to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which repeatedly succumbed to the destabilizing effects of high politics and entrenched bilateral antagonisms, BIMSTEC has deliberately insulated its cooperative agenda from such disputes by prioritizing sector-specific, development-centric collaboration. Its institutional design emphasizes pragmatism over grand political symbolism, thereby enabling incremental but tangible progress in areas such as connectivity, trade facilitation, energy cooperation, and maritime security—domains that directly correspond to the developmental imperatives of its member states.

The formal adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter marked a critical inflection point in this evolution, signaling the organization's transition from an ad hoc consultative mechanism to a rule-based institutional framework. Equally significant was the rationalization of its sectors of cooperation, which streamlined earlier diffused mandates into a focused set of priority areas, with India assuming leadership of the security pillar. This redistribution of responsibilities reflects not merely administrative consolidation, but a conscious effort to embed accountability, specialization, and strategic clarity within the organization's architecture. By anchoring security cooperation—particularly maritime security, counterterrorism, and disaster response—within BIMSTEC, India has sought to institutionalize its role as a net security provider in the Bay of Bengal region while simultaneously avoiding the veto-prone dynamics that plagued SAARC.

Crucially, this institutional consolidation aligns seamlessly with India's broader foreign policy doctrines, particularly the Act East and Neighborhood First policies, which emphasize connectivity, economic integration, and strategic engagement across India's eastern and immediate peripheries. BIMSTEC functions as the ideal institutional vehicle for this convergence because it uniquely bridges South Asia and Southeast Asia within a single multilateral framework. By bringing together key South Asian states—India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—with Southeast Asian partners such as Thailand and Myanmar, BIMSTEC operationalizes India's long-articulated eastward pivot in concrete institutional terms rather than rhetorical aspiration.

As Pattanayak (2025) persuasively argues, this distinctive composition enables India to pursue multilateral arrangements that are better attuned to the structural transformations of the

contemporary global order. In an era marked by geopolitical flux, supply-chain reconfiguration, and the decline of rigid bloc-based regionalism, BIMSTEC offers India a flexible, issue-based platform capable of adaptive cooperation. Rather than being constrained by unanimity and political brinkmanship, the organization allows for variable geometry and functional coalitions—features increasingly characteristic of effective regional institutions in the twenty-first century. In this sense, BIMSTEC does not merely replace SAARC as an alternative forum; it represents a qualitatively different model of regionalism, one that privileges strategic utility, developmental relevance, and institutional resilience over formal inclusivity.

Moreover, the strategic value of BIMSTEC is amplified by the geopolitical imperatives of the Indo-Pacific era. The organization provides a legitimate framework for India to project power and foster security regionalism without provoking the direct backlash that unilateral actions might invite. By embedding security cooperation—such as joint disaster relief exercises and intelligence sharing—within a developmental organization, India is able to construct a security architecture by stealth. This contrasts sharply with the western front, where every security maneuver is viewed through the zero-sum lens of the India-Pakistan conflict. In the east, security and development are mutually reinforcing; better connectivity (like the Kaladan project) requires better security (counter-insurgency cooperation with Myanmar), creating a virtuous cycle of integration. Thus, BIMSTEC is not just a substitute for SAARC; it is an evolution of South Asian regionalism into a more pragmatic, maritime, and outward-looking entity.

### **Materializing the Pivot – Connectivity, Energy, and Trade**

The re-imagination of South Asia from a security complex defined by conflict to a developmental community defined by connectivity is most visibly operationalized through the materialization of specific sub-regional initiatives. This transition from the abstract rhetoric of Act East to the concrete reality of infrastructure is anchored by the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative. As a minilateral grouping, BBIN exemplifies the strategy of opportunistic sub-regionalism, where functional cooperation proceeds among a coalition of the willing, effectively bypassing the consensus-based paralysis that has long plagued the broader SAARC framework (Nepali, 2026). The flagship of this approach is the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), signed in 2015. By allowing for the seamless movement of passenger and cargo vehicles across borders, the MVA seeks to dismantle the regulatory silos that have

historically made South Asia one of the least integrated regions in the world (Kumar, 2015). This initiative is not merely about transport; it is a strategic proof of concept. It demonstrates that the eastward pivot is capable of delivering tangible economic dividends—reducing transit costs and time—thereby creating a demonstration effect that validates the exclusion of obstructionist actors on the western front.

Beyond regulatory frameworks, the Eastward pivot is being cemented through hard infrastructure projects designed to physically stitch the Indian landmass to the Southeast Asian littoral. The Kaladan Project that seeks to link Kolkata with the Sittwe port in Myanmar and extending up the Kaladan River is a key pillar of the architecture India aims to build. While frequently criticized for its implementation delays, the logic behind the Kaladan project remains profound: it provides an alternative outlet for India's northeast, effectively integrating it into the Bay of Bengal's economic ecosystem (Xavier, 2018). Complementing this is the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway, which envisions a continuous road link from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand. This highway is the physical embodiment of the Act East policy, transforming the Northeast from a peripheral security buffer into a vibrant land bridge connecting two dynamic economic zones (Datta, 2022). These projects collectively represent a move away from the continental fixation of traditional South Asian geopolitics, where connectivity was often blocked by the hostile terrain of the northwest, towards a connectivity-driven regionalism that leverages the cooperative potential of the east.

Crucially, the materialization of this pivot is perhaps most revolutionary in the domain of energy diplomacy, which serves as the invisible infrastructure of the new South Asia. The emergence of a sub-regional energy grid represents a shift from bilateralism to trilateral interdependence. India has aggressively pursued cross-border electricity trade (CBET) agreements, facilitating the export of hydropower from the Himalayan nations (Nepal and Bhutan) not just to India, but potentially to Bangladesh through Indian transmission lines (Saha & Chaudhury, 2022). The recent agreement allowing Nepal to export 40 MW of electricity to Bangladesh using India's transmission infrastructure is a landmark development. By integrating the energy grids, India is fostering a positive-sum dynamic where the benefits of cooperation—energy security for Bangladesh, revenue for Nepal, and strategic transit fees for India—are tangible and immediate (Jaishankar, 2024).

This energy architecture effectively creates a hydro-power diplomacy belt that binds the eastern sub-region together. Unlike trade in goods, which can be halted by border closures, energy

interdependence creates a stickiness in relations that is harder to sever. It also addresses the trust deficit by creating long-term binding commitments. Furthermore, the integration of the Northeast into this grid transforms the region's economic identity. No longer just a recipient of central funds, the Northeast becomes a critical transit hub for energy and digital connectivity (internet gateways via Cox's Bazar), further validating the Eastward pivot as a domestic economic necessity as much as a foreign policy strategy (Delhi Policy Group, 2018). Consequently, the eastward pivot is not just re-drawing lines on a map; it is wiring the region together, ensuring that the new functional locus of South Asia is sustained by the powerful currents of trade, energy, and transit.

### **Conclusion: A New Regional Ontology**

India's strategic maneuverings in the region in the last decade constitute a fundamental ontological redefinition of South Asia. The eastward pivot is a deliberate attempt to excise the geopolitical drag of the hostile western front from the functional definition of the region. By shifting the center of gravity to the Bay of Bengal, India is effectively rewriting the mental map of the subcontinent, moving away from a landlocked psychology dominated by the trauma of Partition borders to a maritime consciousness defined by connectivity and trade. This restructuring acknowledges a harsh but necessary reality: the idea of south asia as a monolithic political entity, encompassing the entirety of the British Raj's legacy, is defunct. In its place, a pragmatic, multi-speed regionalism has emerged, one that privileges the coalition of the willing over the consensus of the reluctant. As C. Raja Mohan (2004) argues, this shift allows India to bypass the veto power of Pakistan and reconnect with its historical role in the Asian littoral, effectively merging the economic destiny of South Asia with the dynamism of the ASEAN region. The eastward pivot is, therefore, not an abandonment of regionalism, but its salvation through a structural decoupling that insulates the developmental agenda from the intractable security dilemmas. Moreover, this strategic reorientation also seeks to fundamentally alter the nature of India's leadership within the region. In the traditional SAARC framework, India's overwhelming size often fueled a big brother syndrome, where smaller neighbors viewed New Delhi's initiatives with suspicion and fear of hegemonic dominance. However, the logic of the Eastward pivot, anchored in public goods provision through connectivity, energy grids, and disaster management, transforms this dynamic. In the context of BIMSTEC and BBIN, India is positioning itself not as a hegemon but as a net security provider and a first responder, a shift necessitated by the competitive pressures of the Indo-Pacific era and the rising influence of

China (IISS, 2025). This transition from coercion to capacity building is critical. By embedding its leadership in tangible projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and cross-border energy trade, India is building a reservoir of trust that was perpetually drained in the SAARC environment (Xavier, 2018). The eastward pivot thus offers a model of leadership that is cooperative rather than prescriptive, relying on the logic of interdependence to secure India's strategic autonomy (Jaishankar, 2024). The success of this re-imagined South Asia, however, hinges on the transition from intent to implementation. The vision of a seamless connectivity architecture linking the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal is compelling, but it remains vulnerable to the delivery deficit that has historically plagued Indian infrastructure projects. As this paper has argued, the functional locus of the region has successfully shifted in diplomatic and institutional terms, but its physical materialization is an ongoing process. If India can sustain the momentum of initiatives like the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement and the trilateral highway, it will have successfully proved that the idea of south asia can survive the failure of its primary institution (SAARC). The region that emerges will be less cohesive politically but far more integrated functionally—a trade-off that aligns perfectly with the pragmatic dictates of the fragmented and polarized 21st century. The eastward pivot is, therefore, the strategic bridge over the troubled waters of the past, leading towards a more resilient, connectivity-driven future (Pattanayak, 2025).

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