

The Impact of Regional Powers on South Asian Domestic Politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of regional powers on South Asian domestic politics, a region characterized by rapid economic growth and persistent geopolitical instability. It highlights the critical need for a nuanced understanding of internal political dynamics within neighboring states, arguing that past oversights are unsustainable in today's globalized information environment. The study is significant for moving beyond conventional analyses and critically examining how regional powers influence internal politics and stability, particularly regarding arms control behavior. Employing a qualitative, case study approach, the paper analyzes specific instances, such as the 2014 Maldivian abductions and the 2021 fall of the Afghan regime, focusing on the impact of regional actors, including India and China. Findings suggest practical regional cooperation hinges on nation-state actors reassessing political and material risks. The conclusion highlights the importance of enhancing regional connectivity through increased trade, cultural initiatives, and people-to-people interactions to promote security and welfare, while acknowledging the persistent vulnerability of democracy to external pressures.

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Introduction

South Asia, a region with over a billion people and rapidly growing economies, has recently undergone significant political transformations. Despite its immense economic and social potential, geopolitical instability and unresolved territorial issues persist as major impediments, particularly between India and Pakistan. The lack of a deep understanding of domestic politics in neighboring countries, as seen with the rise of political parties in Pakistan or the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, is unsustainable in today's globalized information age, where ideological shifts transcend borders.

This paper aims to study and assess the influence of regional powers on domestic politics and stability in South Asia, focusing on arms control behavior as a key aspect. The study addresses two primary research questions: (i) What impact do regional powers have on domestic politics? Moreover, (ii) How do regional powers influence their partners' domestic politics? By extending the research agenda to examine the impact of regional powers on partner governments in South Asia, this paper critically evaluates the topic at regional and global levels, thereby transcending conventional diplomacy-focused analysis.

Significance of the Paper

The significance of this paper lies in its critical examination of how regional powers influence domestic politics in South Asia, moving beyond previous limited understandings focused solely on nuclear proliferation and the Indo-Pakistan rivalry. It explicitly addresses China's rise, which poses an "existential challenge" to newly emerging South Asian states. The paper explores this significance

from four angles: theoretical constructs, the evolving dynamics of New South Asia, policy implications, and empirical contentions. Ultimately, it aims to broaden the inquiry into how various regional powers, such as India, Iran, and Turkey, affect smaller states like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, recognizing this as a complex two-way process.

Research Method

The research method employed in this paper is a qualitative, case study approach, selected for its suitability in conducting an in-depth analysis of how regional powers influence the domestic politics of South Asian states. The thesis focuses on specific case studies, such as the abductions of the 2014 Maldivian and the fall of the 2021 Afghan regimes, due to their significant emphasis by New Delhi and Beijing in substantiating their influence. The historical evolution also informs this choice of case studies, which examine the influence of great powers on domestic politics and the perception that existential threats are treated with greater seriousness. The methodology also considers India to be a significant regional power.

Findings and Discussions

Regional Powers in South Asia

The state system in South Asia was established during the imperial era, when colonial powers defined its borders, assimilating existing kingdoms into a single framework. The disintegration of this system led to intense rivalries and conflicts, as regional powers that had once allowed some autonomy faced chaos in the post-colonial period, marked by civil wars. As external influences shaped separate nation-states, the fragmentation of prior powers resulted in intra-state conflicts that challenged their legitimacy.

Smaller states struggled against larger geopolitical forces, reflecting deep-rooted imbalances from imperial structures.

Statehood definitions concentrated on territory, population, and political agency. Efforts for diverse political systems emerged, often through foreign intervention or internal reforms, frequently accompanied by violence. States sought to balance disparities with dominant powers through diplomatic, economic, and military strategies, using military force only when softer approaches failed.

India

India's power accrued over half a century as a post-colonial state, likely a century-long struggle. A credible military deterrent capability and the launch of mass diplomacy towards neighbors have facilitated its rise to regional power, effectively conceiving and beginning the use of soft instruments of power. India has a vast soft power arsenal, albeit borrowed and largely unutilized, and what exit is a substantive Indian adjustment of its never-considered approach whitewashed by pseudo-realism [1].

The expectation that the new Indian regime will enhance national grandeur seems exaggerated. Mega-power implies singular dominance, and lofty ambitions may fall short. An emerging India must be cautious, striking a balance between high rhetoric on policy shifts, military readiness, and diplomatic innovation. In fifty years, India must solidify perceptions of investments while managing institutional checks, as unpredictability from a savvy adversary like China looms.

China's development over the past twenty-eight years starkly contrasts India's modernization efforts. The decline of the Soviet Union diminished India's influence, while enduring distrust from historical rivalries remains. Despite its nuclear capabilities, India's fifty-year failures reflect its historical burdens. Moreover, the absence of a US-Pakistan alliance highlights India's limited foresight amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Pakistan

Pakistan is sometimes discussed through an exaggerated, almost conspiratorial lens, especially when critiqued for providing support to groups such as the Taliban or Ilyas Kashmiri's group. However, the country's rulers have pragmatically chosen many second-tier groups in a region where jihadism is omnipresent. Indulging in and supporting extreme sub-state actors is also not peculiar to Pakistan. It is a daunting challenge for any state to deal with a hostile environment. Cost-benefit analyses of support for sub-state groups can sometimes induce severe miscalculations. The sub-state actors nurtured to project power can turn autonomous and attack the sponsor state. Non-state actors with global aspirations are seldom confined within territorial bounds. This is something that terrorism theorists have noted [2].

Pakistan has a deep-rooted historical mistrust of India. The two states emerged with radically different national identities in 1947, creating hostility. This was compounded by the Kashmir issue, which inevitably devolved into an arms race and mutual suspicion regarding nuclear capability [3]. Any military setbacks on one side reverberated on the other, initiating a cycle of hostilities that deeply rooted military confrontations in both states' domestic spaces. Given the primacy of the Indo-Pak conflict in Pakistan's foreign policy, rivalry has overwhelmingly dominated the thinking in policy-making echelons, making it challenging to escape the legacy of history. The only deterrence for Pakistan against extreme hostile action or a high level of hostilities from across the border is a strong military posture from the Pakistani side. Domestic political and social issues pose a clear handicap for Pakistan in embarking on a sustainable and stable democratic path.

Bangladesh

2013-14, India-Bangladesh ties entered a new phase with Sheik Hasina's return to power. Committed leaders understand and address each other's concerns, developing mutually beneficial frameworks for cooperation. During a long and fruitful visit to India, Hasina expressed her resolve to complete the bilateral agenda, including the land boundary agreement and the Teesta water-sharing treaty, promptly. India, in turn, expressed its commitment to providing all possible cooperation to Bangladesh in its development efforts. India welcomed Bangladesh's concerns about cross-border human trafficking and currency counterfeiting. India-Bangladesh security cooperation expanded with an agreement on joint operations against terrorism, crime, and drug trafficking; New Delhi and Dhaka also agreed to supply helicopter gunships, sniper rifle sets, and other equipment to the Bangladesh border security force. An arrangement regarding humanitarian laws during border operations was agreed upon. India agreed to a multi-phase cooperation with Bangladesh on natural disasters.

Time-tested views in Indian strategic circles have maintained that there is a friendly gap between economic cooperative arrangements and raw politics in South Asia. Twenty years after SAARC was conceived, a well-constructed institutional framework survived just a few years of goodwill, after which politicisation became the order of the day. The self-centeredness of central states essentially obstructed any robust cooperative arrangement. This has remained so even after retrospective and post-9/11 attempts to bring cricket diplomacy down with consultative dominance at various security levels. This had kept Bangladesh away from Indian surveillance. In contrast, the pathisation of regional power activity inside India had lost credence and sustained public support due to suspicions about the decisive role of Indian intelligence agencies in the death of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other politicians through direct involvement or abetting. Old-school econometric models, dowry-based on money-based infeasibility, were dismissed as a medium of analysis after the 1980s, when regional infrastructure, connectivity, and border check post expansion gained currency in South Asian elite discourses.

The 2013-14 India-Bangladesh agreement agenda was a move to address these concerns and a significant shift in Bangladesh's strategic stance. The prospect of renewed Bangladesh-India engagement emerged given a complex regional scenario. China appeared on the verge of further strategic intrusion into Bangladesh's territorial politics, and India seemed seriously concerned about it. The investment agreement included export credits, loans, other credit lines, and the India-Bangladesh Comprehensive Trade Agreement. It also covered cooperation in power, water, land boundary, anti-terrorism, transport, connectivity, and culture, along with the Fast-Track India-Bangladesh Agreement.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, post-civil war momentum accelerated, especially after President Mahinda Rajapaksa took office in 2005. China emerged as a major player in Colombo's foreign policy calculations. Rajapakse adopted a pro-Chinese stance, reinvigorating ties to their fullest extent. China supported the Sri Lankan army's internal security expansion and provided naval submarines [4]. In Rajapakse's efforts to legitimize a robust central government, open up economic space, and ensure regional autonomy and inclusion of minorities, Beijing was undeniably helpful.

Many Sri Lankan leaders showcased India as the closest neighbor and benign power, expecting cooperation in all fields, including economic development and military capacity. Before the civil

war, Sri Lanka was embroiled in accusations of human rights violations and war crimes. Many nations, including India, were pessimistic about President Rajapakse, especially in light of the unprecedented military offensive and significant civilian casualties, and were hesitant to come forward and assist Sri Lanka. In such an atmosphere, Beijing was a major benefactor to Colombo. China initiated a quasi-official dialogue with Sri Lanka in 2005 and offered extensive financial support to military expansion in the campaign against the LTTE. Colombo strategically played the anti-India card.

Under President Rajapakse, the Chinese presence in infrastructure development expanded significantly. Along with military assistance, China provided loans well below market interest and canceled significant debts owed by the previous regime. Had the opposition, led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, won power in the 2005 elections, it is unlikely that this would have happened. The proliferation of Chinese projects confirms President Rajapaksa's political decision to realign Sri Lanka in a disadvantageous manner to India.

Nepal

Nepal is landlocked between two of the world's most populous countries, China and India. Neither of the neighbouring countries fully satisfies Nepalese aspirations, which seek greater autonomy through increased freedom of external action and issue linkage, to derive maximum benefit from the international political system. Aggressive policies pursued by China and India to enhance their respective strategic positions inevitably conflict with each other in the Nepalese theatre of operation, making planning difficult. While the situation is volatile, the stakes for the major powers in Nepal and South Asia are significant and widely acknowledged.

Formally, Nepal is a multi-party democracy. However, the relationship between the monarchy and political parties has been contentious. The era of democracy cannot be said to be a time of national integration, social justice, or development. The 1990s saw the influx of commercial capital and assessments of Nepal's domestic and bilateral situations. In 1996, the Maoist underground group, the Maoist Communist Party of Nepal, attacked the Nepalese state. The dominant security paradigm in Nepalese thinking regarding the Maoist problem is that they find sanctuary in India, where they are assisted, abetted, and supported by anti-monarchist Indian political parties. The Maoists are just anti-monarchists. While the King has gone to great lengths to convince the Indian leadership of his intention to end the Maoist insurgency and political violence against the democratic powers in Nepal, the Indian leadership has gone out of its way to underplay the pernicious impact of the situation on India's image security. The increasingly uncomfortable proximity of European nations has not gone unnoticed, leading to adjustments in tribal lodging arrangements elsewhere [5].

Bhutan

On the northeastern frontier, Bhutan lies on the periphery of India, a small Himalayan country. Bhutan is a landlocked South Asian country bordered by India, China, and Nepal. Its area is 38,394 km² and it has a population of approximately 747,000. It is the world's only Buddhist kingdom; its people are the most religious and peaceful. Bhutan was a monarchy until 2008, when a democratic system of governance was introduced. Bhutan may be a part of SAARC, as its geographic condition and nation-building process are closely related to its neighboring countries, particularly India. Bhutan has been India's close ally since its independence. The growth of a strong democratic system of governance is generally

believed to be in favor of regional peace and stability, as well as to enhance Indo-Bhutan ties.

An extensive analysis is presented in this section on the impact of Indian assistance on Bhutan's nation-building efforts, compared to the impact of US assistance in developing countries in Latin America. An intensive and exclusive Indian assistance, in pursuit of friendship rather than political domination, has been examined in the study. This exam also analyses the impact of such assistance on Bhutan's governance.

Bhutan has maintained a peaceful and stable domestic political environment since introducing a multiparty democratic system. Nation-building is claimed to be a high-priority area of Bhutanese politics and has been well-documented, but no extensive studies have focused on domestic politics. Current scholastic works are so scant that this study section can claim to be the first of its kind. It examines the relationship between Bhutan, its nation-building efforts, and its politics. The impacts of the assistance received from India in this regard on Bhutan's domestic sphere of politics are explored.

An analysis of Bhutan's political system before introducing multi-party democracy reveals that a unique type of democratic monarchy governed the country. Histories of Bhutan prior to the establishment of the monarchy are about cherished democratic traditions being diluted by the rise of Drukpa Buddhism and the consequent emergence of the monarchy. The form of governance was absolute until the second king of Bhutan, enthroned in 1926, initiated some reforms and changes. The monarchy system was redefined in a semi-democratic sense by promulgating a constitution in 2008. This section highlights how these reforms were undertaken in response to the situation, their impact on the country's political governance, and how external factors, specifically Indian assistance, influenced the stance of the ruling elite.

Maldives

The Republic of Maldives comprises an archipelago of nearly 1200 islands, of which only about a third are inhabited. The country is characterized by a high degree of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. The predominant religion is Islam. The current political crisis was engendered mainly by the 2013 electoral victory of then-opposition leader Abdulla Yameen. President Yameen abused executive authority, manipulated the judiciary, and instigated civil strife while overseeing China's growing influence in the Maldives. This pursuit of strategic depth irked India, which had previously enjoyed overwhelming influence in the island nation and addressed the nation's economic woes through maritime security cooperation. This offshore advantage could be lost to India should the Maldives assume a quasi-client state status vis-à-vis China [6].

The current crisis in the Maldives is an acute catch-22 situation for India. President Abdulla Yameen has refused to budge amid domestic political and economic concerns. His title, "Maldivian President," and the Shaikh's Movement have remained in power. He has either arrested, overseen, or complained about a previously ill-defined and misunderstood concept of a new world order regarding personal safety concerns. As an alleged authoritarian, he has denounced all opposition in a move reminiscent of the pre-spring Arab world. Though shaped by historical contingencies such as the island's emergence as a quasi-state, the current crisis in the Maldives presents an opportunity for India to recover its lost influence in the country and the region. Should India be called

upon to intervene in the Maldives, it might risk re-instituting the very authoritarian regime that it had condemned for too long. The Indian situation regarding the Maldives is considerably more involved than pre-spring Egypt's. India's emerging major power posture presents several constraints to the policy option of direct intervention. It would also conflict with New Delhi's professed diplomatic intent of never discussing regime changes or closely observing the internal politics of neighbors. It is naive to attempt a parallel with India's 1988 military interventions in the Maldives, which had a tacit but broader international consensus following the coup-de-fouquet narrative of inspire and condemn.

Afghanistan

The collapse of the Afghan state and the seizure of power by a militant movement with deep roots across the country have generated a tremendous amount of commentary from politicians and commentators in both media and think-tanks. Afghanistan tends to be described in its claims to centrality in multiple security dilemmas, whilst it is rendered both 'exotic' and 'troubled' in broader academic discourses [7].

Afghanistan's geography is perceived as conferring vulnerability, hindering the national government, and rendering prospects for commerce contingent on global strategic shifts. A 'state-centric' approach to thinking about security in Afghanistan is often implicit in this scholarship. Alongside such re-conceptualization, it is evident that much of this literature aimed to rally support for protecting the fledgling Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police and safeguarding Afghanistan from the Taliban. There is cynicism about the degree to which either of these seems tenable, with the security focus framing the bar lower than to expect good governance or sizeable levels of development. Instead, academic literature is dominated by histories of a dysfunctional state.

Afghanistan is often viewed as the quintessential example of state failure, shaped by entrenched assumptions about tribalism and informal networks. However, a burgeoning literature broadly accepts the state as a site of contestation rather than an immanent one. Some explicitly attempt to study Afghanistan as a site of tension between state forms; other writings examine state-society relations outside the state's proper borders, perceiving a broader space to locate Afghan political communities.

Theoretical Framework

The effects of regional powers on the domestic politics of smaller states have been examined using multiple frameworks by some international relations scholars. This paper aims to broaden this inquiry to encompass a broader range of Asian regional powers, its vulnerability and enhancing its influence on regional matters. Regional powers gain strength and legitimacy through leadership roles, often facing internal contradictions.

Influence and Interdependence

Understanding the motivations and tools of regional states is crucial for analyzing their influence on conflict in South Asia. States utilize various means, including conflict, economy, politics, and bureaucracy. Their goals vary from aggressive tactics to more subtle policies to prevent war and promote cooperation. However, post-conflict stabilization attempts have often been ineffective, while low-key deterrence measures have not ensured peace, leading to sporadic hostilities and global concerns.

including India, Iran, and Turkey. Their importance regarding smaller states such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, and vice versa, is examined as a complex two-way process. Existing conceptual frameworks that unambiguously affirm or deny regional actors' power and agency are largely inadequate in comprehensively integrating and explaining their domestic effects [8].

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews how traditional powers have exerted influence over the domestic politics of smaller states, focusing on the mechanisms of such influence and its major independent variables. Section 3 examines how newer and more varied regional powers have affected the domestic politics of smaller states, highlighting similarities with or differences from previous regional powers. Section 4 draws together general conclusions and skeptical remarks regarding the existing frameworks and the case of Asian regional powers, providing further research directions for future studies. The conclusion also discusses the implications of this inquiry for International Relations (IR) as a whole, in terms of reconsidering the primacy of Western Europe as the origin of the discipline and as the best example of the contemporary pattern of world politics.

Power Dynamics

The concept of a regional power is context-dependent, stemming from regionalization, which involves establishing and institutionalizing a geographical area. States dominating neighboring countries and participating in regional institutions are considered regional powers. Scholars of international relations analyze how states leverage their material capabilities to meet significant objectives, with those capable of independent action seen as powerful.

Regional powers may seek to establish leadership through regionalism as a tool for power projection. They may undertake costly actions, hoping other states will follow, promoting deeper regional integration and collaboration within the international order. While regional leadership can enhance a state's capabilities, the benefits are uncertain and rely on cooperation. Regional powers managing institutions may find their access restricted by a leader or be pressured to relinquish privileges, thereby limiting their maneuverability.

Exposure to the coercive power of a dominant state limits a less powerful state's capacity to independently pursue its interests, as the expected reactions of regional powers and neighboring states often influence its decisions. By joining a regional security institution led by a powerful state, the weaker state can strengthen its resistance to unilateral pressures, thereby reducing

Profound connectivity and economic interdependence are key guarantees against war between nations. Regionalism establishes trade regimes that benefit all member nations, serving as a remedy that fosters cooperation and combats extremism. India and Pakistan can significantly benefit from trade-oriented policies. India's economic potential can promote peace in South Asia. Currently, bilateral trade between the two countries is low, at \$2.7 billion, representing just 0.05% of India's total trade. There are promising avenues for increased trade, such as reducing items on India's sensitive list to enhance trade with Pakistan [2].

Case Studies

This section outlines the regional powers of South Asia that impact the domestic politics of a target state. There are three case studies: first, the impact of India on Bangladesh; second, the impact of

Pakistan on Bangladesh; and last, the impact of China on India. The outline is for a South Asian audience, yet similar viewpoints can be attained.

India shares a significant border with Bangladesh, making its foreign policy significantly influence Bangladesh's politics. India has engaged in various ways, mainly through propaganda. The Awami League and BNP are not pro-India but have allied with India for political support. Historically, India had a close relationship with the Awami League during the Liberation War. However, tensions arose when India addressed the minority rights of Hindus in Bangladesh, contributing to the BNP's rise in 2001 [9].

This government shifted from pro-India to pro-Islamism policies, straining India-Awami League relations. Despite this, India re-engaged with the Awami League to tackle terrorism and border issues, while oppressing the BNP. Anti-Indian sentiments resurfaced, creating a contested political landscape in Bangladesh. The West has prioritized income-based poverty alleviation since World War II, which, although significant, underscores the need for political changes to achieve sustainable poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. India's foreign policy has negatively affected Bangladesh's domestic [10].

Pakistan shares a larger land boundary with Bangladesh than India, making it the second case study. This boundary, while previously fluid with many border haats, faced instability due to armed operations by Pakistan's forces and territorial claims. Efforts in the mid-2010s aimed to address past grievances through investigations into war crimes and other atrocities. However, critics argue that the Prime Minister's response was hypocritical, as it ignored specific forces implicated in the issue. Furthermore, India's SIT has been accused of not investigating impartially or quickly, fueling anti-Indian sentiment.

China is the last regional player and a long-time partner of Pakistan, providing significant military support and influencing its intelligence and politics. Chinese investment is also on the rise in Bangladesh. Concerns about the "debt trap" persist, with debates on whether the Maldives might face a takeover similar to Sri Lanka's, or if it is a tactic to hinder cooperation. These matters require close monitoring.

India-Pakistan Relations

After the 1947 partition, India and Pakistan emerged as distinct nation-states with aspirations for viability and prosperity. India, a secular nation with a Hindu majority and a significant Muslim minority, contrasts with Pakistan, an Islamic republic with a Muslim majority. The violent partition and territorial disputes overshadowed initial diplomatic relations. Since independence, the two nations have fought three major wars and several military standoffs, culminating in the 1971 war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. In the twenty-first century, calls for peace and cooperation were marked by efforts such as the Shimla, Agra, and Lahore summits.

The Lahore summit on February 21, 1999, and the Agra summit on July 14, 2001, gained notable attention before significant conflicts erupted, such as the Kargil war and the Indian Parliament attack. However, attempts at rapprochement were often followed by prolonged periods of tension. Since the early 1980s, relations have deteriorated, complicating cooperation. India cites rising communalism among its Muslim population as a barrier to peace, while Pakistan insists that India's stance on Kashmir

exacerbates hostilities. Allegations of state-sponsored terrorism from Pakistan and cross-border attacks have repeatedly stalled bilateral discussions and initiatives such as granting Most-Favoured Nations status.

Terrorism-related incidents have overshadowed notable achievements in the peace process. The 2003 ceasefire agreement and the Delhi-Lahore Bus Service were effective measures that helped deter further tensions. However, periodic terrorist attacks, like the 1999 Indian Airlines hijack and the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, reinforced the saying, "Bad news travels faster." Consequently, peace-process meetings are often remembered for these atrocities. Despite the ceasefire and dialogue efforts, events in South Asia have progressed rapidly, resulting in a mix of successes for Indian policy and crises [1].

Nevertheless, the emerging peace between India and Pakistan represents perhaps the most significant and major achievement for the people of the sub-continent who have seen considerable turbulence in their region in the last half a century; a promise for human development among the disadvantaged, marginalised and disfranchised citizens of the region which has remained mostly unfulfilled.

Bangladesh's Political Landscape

Bangladesh has a multi-party political system allows for competition; however, it has often shifted toward unstable or dictatorial governance since its independence. Early coalition governments were often overthrown by power-hungry politicians, eroding democracy and contributing to political instability. The intense political rivalry has become too hostile to function effectively within democratic frameworks. This volatility has adversely affected citizens and threatens the country's international standing. A stable government is crucial for development, economic growth, democracy, and the pursuit of justice.

The political landscape of Bangladesh is characterized by the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The Awami League has maintained power through successive elections, while opposition parties and ongoing activism have hindered the implementation of reforms. The opposition parties have contested government authority, leading to lethal crackdowns on leaders in early 2015, resulting in strikes and unrest. The BNP must urgently reform to gain credibility and offer a viable alternative to the AL [1].

Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflicts

The northern districts are part of the Lankan Tamil homeland, encompassing areas of the Northern Province, including Jaffna, Mannar, segments of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, and Trincomalee North, which are currently under the control of the LTTE. These regions were ruled by various kingdoms from 235 BC to 1300 AD. Ancient Tamil literature, including 3rd-century poetry, references rulers, poets, temples, and religion, affirming Tamil settlement. Archaeological research has uncovered coins, Tamil inscriptions, temples, burial customs, and prehistoric caves [11].

Formidable evidence highlights a rich cultural landscape, showcasing toponymic, dialectal, musical, and literary traits shaped by demographic and historical links. The Stratified Social Structure reveals caste hierarchies and some egalitarian aspects. Predominantly Hindu, the population includes a minor presence of Muslims and Christians, with various caste networks in the mix. This region was once part of pre-colonial kingdoms facing disinvestment, with royal support fostering a vibrant agrarian

society until the British conquest. This led to land alienation and community dislocation before the 1940s land division. Current resources cover only 19% of expenses, with the rest sourced from Orders totaling around two crores. The area gained prominence during the Eelam struggle, led by the LTTE, which was influenced by Tamil nationalism [12].

Support for the LTTE declined after the intervention in land issues, but factors such as territory, rights, and governance kept it relevant. The LTTE's proximity to seacoasts, forests, and wetlands, combined with a strong defense strategy, significantly enhanced its military capabilities. With ample munitions and support from the Tamil diaspora, it expanded in size and firepower, extending its strategic reach. However, limited international backing restricted resources, leading to the storming of a sluice point and efforts to control the A-9 Corridor. The loss of eastern territories prompted a military focus in Colombo, but leaders' ambitions led to neglecting prior territorial goals. Economic incentives and development initiatives have since aimed to draw Tamils to the government [13].

Nepal's Political Turmoil

Despite some democratic progress in Nepal since 2006, the failure to finalize a new constitution over the past four years has led to considerable political unrest. Key issues like federalism, historical injustices, and citizenship stoke regional discontent, notably among the Madhesi and indigenous populations. New political actors complicate the situation, and while tensions may ease temporarily, threats persist, such as disputes over Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura. Additionally, efforts by the ruling party to alter unconstitutional eminent domain risk instability similar to the Siti Bazar uprising, while judicial interventions threaten to deepen conflicts between the executive and judiciary amid the consolidation of judicial power [14].

Predicting the actions leading to current turmoil as isolated events is naive. Nepal's democratic transition from autocracy is not unique and reflects broader regional patterns involving its South Asian neighbors. Nepal's geographical position ties it closely to India and China. Over the past 70 years, India has intervened at crucial junctures, supporting democratic movements against the Rana regime and the Monarchy, while trying to counter Maoist influence. China has also sought to strengthen its economic and political presence amidst Nepal's democratic changes. The shifting dynamics have sparked India's concern over its waning influence and Beijing's anxiety about a politically weakened monarchy, aligning the interests of these major powers in Nepal's affairs.

Security Concerns

South Asian states have paid high prices for national security, driven by fears of risks. Analyzing power accumulation reveals security concerns in regional politics, focusing on military capabilities, the security dilemma, and changes in power structures by aspirants. Notably, power distribution is asymmetric, with India maintaining a dominant military position among these states (Huque).

The asymmetries in global military capabilities render India the most potent power among its rivals. Indian conventional advantages vis-à-vis Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are less glaringly pronounced. However, India's potential for nuclear expansion and ballistic missile development, particularly regarding China, may be considered its most formidable threat compared to its immediate neighbors [14].

It is commonly presumed that South Asian security concerns should focus on India due to its military superiority. However, the past two decades indicate otherwise, as India faces risks of being hemmed in by regional powers and an increasing push for the internationalization of South Asia. Security competition typically follows an asymmetric distribution of military capabilities, with regional powers seeking to internationalize security issues when they feel threatened and cannot keep pace with military developments. In South Asia, differing national security threat perceptions have often overshadowed military acquisition metrics. Rivalries with China, especially regarding Sri Lanka and Pakistan, have been evident since the 1980s. Additionally, India's soft-power competition for strategic interests, particularly surrounding the China-backed String of Pearls, has unfolded extensively.

Military Alliances

The influence of regional powers on domestic politics in South Asia is mainly exerted through military alliances. India, a significant regional power, is allied with smaller South Asian states to address security threats. This alliance system reflects a collective security approach at regional summits, resulting in a chaotic balance of power. Rival powers like India and Pakistan maintain formal and informal partnerships for selective cooperation. Weaker states, such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, align with these regional powers through bilateral security pacts. India's patron-client relationship with Nepal exemplifies an asymmetrical alliance, leading to dependence on military aid and negative perceptions of India.

India's 'Neighborhood First' policy may revive regional tensions over time, especially with political shifts in neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, which have considered stronger ties with China. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor have heightened anti-Indian sentiments as they highlight the advantages of regional cooperation. In response, New Delhi may need to adopt a more assertive military diplomacy and competitive financing to avoid regional isolation. If the dynamics shift significantly, it could lead to a resurgence of counter-hegemonic alliances, resembling the original SAARC, which would challenge India's strategic position. Nonetheless, the situation appears more favorable than in the past, prompting reassuring proactive measures from New Delhi [16].

The at-grade alignment of regional and global powers makes South Asia a complex geopolitical domain. A great power rivalry has destabilized domestic politics, leading to proxy wars and internal conflicts in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and India, as well as military coups in the Maldives. Domestic politics are influenced by multi-layered, cross-cutting processes involving diverse actors. The dynamics of regional alliances complicate analysis, while differing governance arrangements impact foreign policy and contribute to domestic turbulence.

Terrorism and Insurgency

Terrorism remains a significant threat to security in South Asia, highlighted by the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, the Kashmir insurgency in India, and the actions of groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additional challenges include Islamist, ethnic, and Left-Wing terrorism in India, as well as ethnic violence in Bangladesh, Nepal, and separatism in the Maldives and Bhutan. Responses to these threats include UN Security Council Resolution 1373 and independent actions by South Asian countries. The 9/11 attacks shifted the global focus from state-sponsored to Islamic terrorism, complicating India's efforts to address cross-border terrorism. Therefore, domestic

strategies for tackling the transnational aspects of terrorism in South Asia must be reassessed [9].

Regional powers must unify rather than engage in sub-IMU contention, as the extremist ideology behind terrorism affecting India and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan aligns with that of the Taliban. Pakistan should cease its use of terrorism as a state policy in Kashmir and address domestic Wahhabi elements that threaten its sovereignty through sectarian violence. India needs to reassess its management of the Kashmir conflict. Political theories suggest that violently repressed ethnic groups are less likely to pursue their agendas compared to those not suppressed. Furthermore, fostering economic cooperation, border trade, and connections among people can help reduce entrenched social animosity, highlighting the shared grievances and aspirations of ordinary communities in the region.

Regional Organizations

In South Asia, regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC have limited direct influence on domestic politics. However, they may do so indirectly by expanding the acceptable behaviors that affect stability. Member countries have made small moves to shift the political landscape through regional efforts and are establishing frameworks for future changes. These processes are early in development, and their effectiveness will be more apparent only after significant changes to the status quo occur, making it premature to predict outcomes.

The SAARC acts as a watchdog over regional stability at both the intra-state and inter-state levels, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of regional powers and promoting a moderate and stable environment. Individual states hesitate to address aggressive agenda items that could upset neighbors. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, SAARC is a platform for these nations to influence political developments in their neighboring countries. By reframing current practices, the focus can shift from a zero-sum game to fostering diplomacy, addressing economic issues, advancing trade, controlling extremism, broadening acceptable actions, and redefining excessive behaviors.

In Sri Lanka and India, the underutilized SAARC framework limits strategic options for altering the regional political climate and acceptable behaviors. Nevertheless, these countries can pursue diplomatic initiatives to play a more active role in SAARC's efforts to promote domestic stability. Past successes, such as strong statements against the 1980s ethnic insurgency and a less effective stance on the Maldives' military rule, demonstrate that simpler efforts can yield positive outcomes without significant risks.

SAARC's Role

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), formed after the South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993, is a unique regional group in South Asia. Unlike ASEAN and APEC, SAARC emerged as a trading bloc later, despite intraregional trade exceeding 40%. The role of services trade in the economy is often overlooked in literature, especially in developing South Asia, which is becoming more integrated into the global economy. Services trade is skyrocketing in South Asia, aiding job creation and economic growth [17].

Most SAARC member countries do not implement liberal trade policies for agricultural and consumer goods, resulting in extensive negative import lists that hinder trade despite their natural advantages. This situation reflects 'behind-the-border' constraints, characterized by high tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Recent studies

highlight these constraints, focusing on infrastructure, market access, anti-dumping measures, and trade facilitation policies. An analysis using fixed-effects panel data from 2005 to 2012 reveals that these constraints significantly widen the gap between potential and actual exports for SAARC members. Consequently, examining and enhancing country-specific constraints to boost trade is crucial.

BIMSTEC's Influence

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) enabled India to assert itself as a regional counter to China, leveraging its geographical advantages and cultural connections with its Buddhist-majority neighbors, Myanmar and Thailand. India viewed BIMSTEC as a chance to forge a coalition among South and Southeast Asian nations under its leadership. While not directly competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative, BIMSTEC conceptualized its project, the BIMSTEC economic corridors. However, following early enthusiasm in 2017-18, interest waned as attendance at subsequent summits declined and coordination issues stalled plans for a free trade agreement [18].

Under ex-PM Modi's government, the idea of a smaller regional grouping, but one that excluded Pakistan, was given a lifeline through a strong public diplomacy effort with the BIMSTEC member countries. Meanwhile, Pakistan, the BRI's historic partner, was preoccupied with the rapidly deteriorating ties with the US and an economic crisis, giving India an opening to lead this forum. Some BIMSTEC member states viewed India as a counterweight against a more assertive China, seeing geopolitical value in the forum's focus on security cooperation beyond economic integration. As a result of a year-long effort, former Prime Minister Modi was finally able to revitalize and host the BIMSTEC summit in 2022, with much fanfare. However, even with this new role, India struggled with its regional domestic political challenges, especially with the rise of political Islam within its eastern neighbor.

Geopolitical Challenges

The post 9/11 international environment is more complex than anticipated. In South Asia, various global events have led to a precarious situation. The assassination of former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, amidst the country's army-dominated politics and religiously defined terror, has raised concerns in the West and the region. The ongoing neo-colonial occupation in Afghanistan exacerbates the crisis. What was seen as a West versus militants conflict is increasingly viewed as an ethnic and religious confrontation involving groups like Pashtun, Tajik, and Shi'a. This loss of legitimacy in the international order fuels tensions, resulting in a state of 'moral anarchy' deeply impacting South Asia.

Despite structural vulnerabilities, South Asia's political elite, especially in Pakistan, remain oblivious to China's rapid rise in the region amid the ongoing war on terrorism. Chinese-financed mega projects are creating significant economic and geopolitical interdependence, complicating any potential shifts in allegiance for South Asian states. This development poses troubling implications for the region's elites and intelligentsia.

The rise of India, influenced by events like 9/11 and concerns over Russia, Pakistan, and China, is driving a new phase in the arms control debate. Indian strategists seek to end the moratorium on fissile material to address imbalances from China's support for Pakistan's nuclear capabilities. In response to evolving security challenges, India has allied with the U.S. against terrorism,

provided aid in Afghanistan, limited Taliban movements, and addressed ethnic separatism in its Northeast through advanced military enhancements. Afghanistan risks becoming a haven for groups opposing India, reinforcing fears of a destabilized regional balance as great powers vie for influence [9].

China's Influence

The rising Indonesian presence marks a shift in Sri Lanka's foreign policy. China has signed a new agreement with Sri Lanka, which involves a development package to settle debts, fund key projects, and provide concessional loans for infrastructure development. Meanwhile, India and the US are enhancing trilateral cooperation to counter China's influence, with India's role remaining limited. The next few years will be critical for Sri Lanka's status as a credible partner in South Asia [5].

After winning the war against the LTTE, the UPFA government under Mahinda Rajapakse shifted its foreign policy to deepen ties with China and adopt a "Look East Policy," fostering closer relations with East Asian nations. This included defense elements, such as military supplies and UN political support. Economic assistance also increased, focusing on infrastructure development following the post-war victory, resulting in numerous projects [18].

Sri Lanka became the patron of US and Japan-funded development schemes and other soft development initiatives in South Asian countries, witnessing economic growth in piecemeal fashion. However, China's expansion into Sri Lanka came to a complete halt. However, it remained the primary supplier of complex infrastructure, including ports, expressways, deep-water harbors, international airports, power plants, and modern urban infrastructure. Sri Lanka also became a key part of the ambitious initiative.

US Engagement in South Asia

Scholarly analyses of US engagement in South Asia originate from the Indian subcontinent, whereas academic writing comes from the United States. This section highlights two meetings that significantly influenced the Trump administration's South Asian perspective. It will also cover US involvement in post-1971 India-Pakistan conflicts, including the Kargil War and the Mumbai attacks, to understand why Washington views New Delhi as a potential balancer. These interventions have often fallen short of American ambitions, leading to case studies on bilateral relations. The Rohingya Crisis and Kashmir/Terrorism will facilitate ongoing analysis of strategic trilateralism among New Delhi, Washington, and Moscow [19].

Much of the analysis on US engagement in the Indian subcontinent focuses on great Power politics. Reviewing hearings, testimony, and interviews with key officials is essential to understanding contemporary US-South Asia relations. On March 18, 2003, during the Iraq War, the House International Relations Committee chairman addressed the new South Asia Sub-Committee on the changes in South Asia over time. His speech and subsequent testimonies from Ambassadors illustrate how outdated concerns continue to influence significant defense partnerships with India, even two decades into the 21st century. The Kargil War remains a significant event for the bureaucracy and media in Washington and New Delhi. Gen. Mike Mattis, then leading US Central Command, highlighted the urgency of addressing the situation during a discussion about the conflict.

Future Prospects

The emergence of the regional state as a development site in South Asia hinges on nation-state actors reassessing political and material risks to foster practical regional cooperation. While some optimism exists for regional collaboration, it faces constraints from a history of tensions, particularly the India-Pakistan conflicts, which have hindered confidence-building efforts and restricted trade and commerce. Critics point to rising military capabilities and nuclear weapons in both countries as factors exacerbating instability.

Despite this, the need to enhance awareness of regional connectivity and challenge existing biases is recognized. Increased high-level cultural and media initiatives are essential to promote peace. Expanding trade, business, and people-to-people interactions are crucial for regional security. Trade should not be tied to the Kashmir issue or treated as an Indo-Pakistan mechanism requiring Pakistan to justify its stance. Instead, it should focus on welfare improvements across South Asia, with no preconditions on business ties, free trade agreements, or government partnerships throughout the [21].

Emerging Trends

The areas of concern for domestic politics discussed stem from interviews with current and former state actors, academics, civil society members, judicial officials, and media authorities across the region, as well as significant secondary research—this involved observations, discussions, and data collection techniques within the region. Interviews focused on the impact of events following September 11, civil-military developments, economic transition processes, postcolonial development, nuclear capabilities, and refugee challenges. Questions aimed at assessing the role of local NGOs, citizen advocacy, courts, political parties, and the military in Pakistan's domestic affairs. A comprehensive data set for Pakistan (2003-2008) and India (1996-2003) was developed using specific knowledge elicitation methods.

There is uncertainty about the effects of external factors on state actors. Islamic parties have gained popularity in Pakistan and Bangladesh, showing that even in predominantly Buddhist or Hindu nations, alternative religious parties have made an impact, as seen in Sri Lanka. In the mid-1990s, secular Hindu parties supported early Congress rule in Maharashtra, financing the construction of a sanctuary. This led to sectarian protests, the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya, a political shift in Taiwan, and anti-Muslim riots [9].

Hindu zealots have been supported by bureaucratic excesses that hinder Indic culture and religious tolerance. External interventions seem neutral to domestic politics, reflecting various positions that deepen uncertainty. Initiatives viewed skeptically could transform based on differing decisions, resulting in governance characterized by dualism and mutual animosity. The debate on democracy's ability to thrive under external pressures persists, as it remains vulnerable regardless of agency effectiveness [21].

Potential Conflicts

Political analysts and international economists believe increased economic cooperation among South Asian nations can reduce political conflicts and tensions. Enhanced trade and a free flow of services, such as tourism, are anticipated to strengthen ties. With USD 3 billion in goods traded annually between India and Pakistan, a business community may influence political leaders to act more cautiously regarding military or diplomatic measures.

A broader structure of relationships in this region presents potential conflicts that hinder cooperation. To exploit the Indus basin, a multinational corporation must invest approximately USD 15 billion annually, becoming part of this complex framework of conflict. The resource dispute in the Nile basin, which involves Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, exemplifies this situation. Joint investment often leads to ongoing political competition, affecting domestic political paths in each nation [22].

India shares the Indus basin with Pakistan and the Ganges basin with Bangladesh. The Gautam Buddha International Airport in Lumbini could enhance tourism for South Asian nations, but India's dam construction on the Ganges has hindered this. Unresolved border disputes from British rule complicate cooperation, particularly regarding water resources, affecting political relations.

Conclusion

The emergence of the regional state as a development site in South Asia relies on nation-state actors reassessing political and material risks to foster practical regional cooperation. Despite some optimism for regional collaboration, it is constrained by a history of tensions, especially India-Pakistan conflicts, which have hindered confidence-building efforts and restricted trade. Critics highlight rising military capabilities and nuclear weapons in both countries as factors exacerbating instability.

Nevertheless, there is a recognized need to enhance awareness of regional connectivity and challenge existing biases. Increased high-level cultural and media initiatives are essential to promote peace. Expanding trade, business, and people-to-people interactions are crucial for regional security, advocating for trade without preconditions on the Kashmir issue or as an Indo-Pakistan mechanism. Instead, the focus should be on welfare improvements across South Asia, with no preconditions on business ties, free trade agreements, or government partnerships. The debate on democracy's ability to thrive under external pressures persists, as it remains vulnerable regardless of the effectiveness of its agencies.

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