BEYOND GEOPOLITICS

Rethinking regional cooperation in South Asia

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For the last four decades, regional cooperation in South Asia has been interpreted primarily through the prism of geopolitics and traditional security. South Asia has long been recognised as one of the least integrated regions in the world despite its shared geography, cultural connections and historical links. The policy discourse on regional connectivity and integration has largely revolved around the issues of rivalry between India and Pakistan, territorial disputes, military competition, divergent security interests and political tensions. This long-standing trend of mutual distrust and animosity has largely hampered the functioning of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded in 1985. Political tensions have repeatedly stalled regional initiatives, postponed summits and prevented the organisation from realising its full potential.

South Asia is now confronting a new generation of risks, vulnerabilities and security threats that are largely non-traditional and transboundary in nature, requiring coordinated action by both state and non-state actors. The evolving security landscape demands a fundamental rethink of how regional cooperation is understood and practised.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW SECURITY LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH ASIA

The strategic environment of South Asia has been undergoing a profound transformation owing to both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Today, policymakers across South Asia are increasingly concerned with "what threatens South Asia" rather than "who threatens South Asia." This shift in understanding clearly reflects the growing importance of transnational challenges that affect all countries regardless of their political alignments or military capabilities. For example, climate change has emerged as perhaps the single greatest threat to the lives and livelihoods of people across South Asia. Accelerating glacier melt in the Himalayas, increasingly erratic monsoon patterns, rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events have disrupted agricultural patterns and productivity, damaged infrastructure, and threatened the livelihoods of millions over the past two decades. Moreover, the region's interconnected river systems demonstrate how environmental challenges transcend national borders, making unilateral responses both inadequate and costly.

Beyond climate change, the region is confronting a complex web of interconnected risks in cybersecurity, pandemics, human trafficking, organised crime, maritime insecurity and energy market disruptions. The intersection of these risks and vulnerabilities often creates cascading crises that many analysts describe as hybrid threats.

The consequences of non-cooperation in responding to these complex and interconnected security threats are becoming increasingly visible across the region. The absence of coordinated disaster response systems, limited cooperation on transboundary water management, inadequate regional preparedness for public health emergencies, and weak collaboration on digital security have all contributed to rising human and economic costs during emergencies and crises. Consequently, these shortcomings resulting from insufficient regional cooperation have increased dependence on external powers for financing, technology transfer and strategic support, often compromising the region's ability to shape and secure its own future.

The costs of non-cooperation are perhaps most evident in the digital domain. As social media platforms have already surpassed traditional media in both reach and influence, the rise of political and religious extremist voices across South Asia has created enormous potential for fuelling tensions throughout the region. In the absence of any regional fact-checking mechanism, this growing disorder in the information space has undermined public trust, heightened tensions between neighbouring societies, and complicated diplomatic engagement.



PATHWAYS FOR BUILDING REGIONAL COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION

If South Asian countries are to move beyond decades of geopolitical stalemate, regional cooperation must begin where national interests and priorities already converge. There are significant opportunities to build trust incrementally through practical cooperation in areas that can generate tangible benefits for all. The following four areas represent critical starting points where even modest regional cooperation could deliver measurable improvements in people's lives while creating the confidence necessary for deeper regional engagement.

1. Water security and climate cooperation

The Indo-Gangetic and Brahmaputra river systems support the livelihoods of nearly 400 million people, and the broader Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra basins depend heavily on the Himalayan glacier system, which provides freshwater to approximately 750 million people across South Asia. Bangladesh, for example, depends on transboundary rivers for approximately 97 per cent of its surface water, while India and Bangladesh alone share 54 transboundary rivers, underscoring the extent of their hydrological interdependence. These shared ecological realities make unilateral responses increasingly ineffective. The region therefore requires an integrated approach that prioritises joint river basin management, integrated flood forecasting, glacier monitoring, climate data sharing and coordinated disaster preparedness. Investments in regional early warning systems and climate adaptation programmes would reduce humanitarian losses while strengthening resilience across borders, building mutual trust and demonstrating that shared environmental challenges can become opportunities for confidence-building.

2. Digital cooperation and information resilience

The second major driver affecting the lives of ordinary citizens in South Asia is the rapid pace of digital transformation, which has emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge. It has created enormous opportunities for economic growth and social connectivity, but it has also exposed societies to new forms of insecurity. Misinformation, disinformation and cyber threats increasingly transcend national boundaries, influencing public opinion, spilling over into street mobilisation and vandalism, undermining trust, and occasionally fuelling diplomatic tensions through confrontational rhetoric. As a result, strengthening digital resilience through regional cooperation, promoting media literacy and collaborative fact-checking has become not only essential but also inevitable for advancing peace and security in South Asia. Regional cooperation across borders to counter information disorder is important not only for protecting the digital space but also for safeguarding democratic institutions and critical infrastructure, while strengthening public trust so that it does not become an obstacle to regional cooperation itself.

3. Blue economy and regional energy cooperation

The Bay of Bengal represents one of South Asia's greatest untapped opportunities for regional collaboration. It supports fisheries, maritime trade, tourism, offshore renewable energy and marine biodiversity while connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. Yet the bay also faces growing pressures from marine pollution, overfishing, coastal erosion and increasingly severe climate-induced disasters. The sustainable management of this shared maritime space requires coordinated regional efforts rather than fragmented national policies. Joint marine conservation initiatives, scientific research, sustainable fisheries management and disaster response mechanisms could generate significant economic and environmental benefits for all littoral states.

Like the blue economy, regional energy cooperation offers an equally promising avenue. Nepal and India's north-eastern states possess substantial hydropower potential, estimated at 40 GW and 63 GW respectively, while Bangladesh faces rising energy demand as its economy continues to expand. Cross-border electricity trade has already demonstrated its feasibility through existing power exchanges between Bangladesh and India, as well as recent arrangements enabling Nepalese hydropower exports to Bangladesh through the Indian grid. Greater cooperation in hydropower development would significantly expand regional connectivity, strengthen regional interdependence, and reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels.

4. Border management and human mobility

While borders in South Asia are conventionally viewed through the lens of territorial sovereignty and national defence, they also represent complex intersections of humanitarian, environmental and development challenges. Recent trends in cross-border migration, forced displacement, human trafficking and climate-induced mobility have highlighted the need for a regional policy framework that balances security imperatives with humanitarian standards and international law. For example, the recent episodes of unilateral "push-backs" and "push-ins" along the India-Bangladesh border, together with the prolonged Rohingya refugee crisis, point to the highly complex nature of managing cross-border mobility in today's world. Traditional approaches to border management have frequently contributed to humanitarian crises by creating de facto no-man's lands populated by stranded people along border regions. Effective border management in South Asia must therefore move beyond coercion and embrace a comprehensive framework that addresses the structural causes of human mobility. Rather than viewing such cooperation as a compromise on state sovereignty, regional actors should recognise it as a pragmatic necessity for addressing shared transnational challenges that no country can effectively manage in isolation.

FUNCTIONAL EEGIONALISM: A PRAGMATIC ROADMAP

Regional organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) did not begin with comprehensive political agreements. Instead, these organisations evolved through sustained cooperation on practical issues that gradually delivered tangible benefits to their citizens. The history of the European Union demonstrates how initial cooperation in coal and steel ultimately evolved into broader political and economic integration. Likewise, ASEAN has gradually strengthened regional cooperation through consensus-based initiatives in trade, connectivity, disaster management and economic development despite considerable political diversity among its members.

While South Asia's circumstances are undoubtedly unique, and neither model can be replicated in its entirety, the region can nevertheless draw an important lesson: trust is often the outcome of sector-specific cooperation rather than its prerequisite. A similarly pragmatic roadmap could be developed for South Asia by strengthening existing regional and subregional mechanisms, including SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN and other sector-specific initiatives. Alongside governments, universities, research institutes, civil society organisations, youth networks, women's organisations and the private sector should all be given greater opportunities to initiate regional and subregional cooperation. Only then can South Asia make meaningful progress in climate resilience, disaster risk reduction, transboundary water sharing, renewable energy, digital security and humanitarian response through regular technical exchanges, joint research and coordinated policy platforms.

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The dragon, eagle, elephant and tiger in a changing South Asia

ZILLUR RAHMAN

Three years ago, I used four animals—the dragon, eagle, elephant and tiger—to describe the competing ambitions shaping South Asia. The dragon represented China, the eagle the United States, the elephant India, and the still-emerging tiger Bangladesh.

The metaphor remains useful, but the geopolitical landscape surrounding these animals has changed considerably. The contest is no longer simply between an established US-led international order and a rising China. It now encompasses trade wars, technological rivalry, maritime security, supply-chain competition, domestic political transitions, and the increasingly assertive diplomacy of smaller states.

South Asia is not merely witnessing this contest from the sidelines. It has become one of its most consequential arenas.

The dragon changes its modus operandi

China's ambitions remain clear. China seeks an international order in which it is free from the constraints of institutions and rules established largely by the West. However, its method of pursuing this ambition has changed.

In the early days of the Belt and Road Initiative, the dragon was obsessed with constructing large-scale projects such as ports, highways, power stations, railways and industrial zones. When concerns were raised about the sustainability of these projects and the dependence they created among recipient countries, the dragon became less obsessed and began talking about high-quality BRI cooperation involving digital infrastructure, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, industrial investment, and smaller projects with greater commercial viability.

This does not mean the old obsession with constructing infrastructure has disappeared. Rather, the dragon has learned that it can build its long-term influence through technology, finance, education, trade, defence cooperation, and politics. South Asia continues to be of crucial importance to China in its ambition to shape an international order.

Pakistan continues to be important to China for its westward connectivity. Sri Lanka lies beside some of the busiest shipping routes in the Indian Ocean. Nepal and the Maldives are of geopolitical significance to India. Bangladesh's location between South and Southeast Asia and on the Bay of Bengal makes it economically and strategically important to China.

Consequently, relations between Dhaka and Beijing have not been confined to infrastructure. During the high-level engagements of 2025 and 2026, the two countries highlighted maritime cooperation, the blue economy, industrial development, education, and people-to-people linkages. Even the Teesta River management project, which inevitably carries strategic significance because the river originates in India, has drawn Chinese interest and participation.

However, the dragon's challenge is one of trust. While many South Asians welcome Chinese investment, they remain concerned about political dependence, a lack of transparency, and the long-term consequences of strategic infrastructure projects. The dragon can finance many of the things that others cannot, but financial capability alone does not generate public confidence.

The eagle becomes more transactional

The United States remains the most powerful external player in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, US Indo-Pacific policy is becoming increasingly transactional.

While the US continues to advocate for a free, open and peaceful Indo-Pacific, it has developed strong security partnerships with Japan, Australia and India, and views India as an indispensable partner in maintaining the regional balance. The two countries have enhanced cooperation in defence technology, intelligence, logistics, maritime security and supply chains. Their stated goal of increasing bilateral trade to US$500 billion by 2030 speaks volumes about the economic dimension of this strategic partnership.

However, US policy is now more transactional, with decisions increasingly driven by calculations concerning market access, tariffs, technology, defence procurement and economic reciprocity. Values such as democracy and human rights have not disappeared, but they increasingly compete with an "America First" approach that emphasises strategic and commercial gains.

Bangladesh should avoid interpreting strategic autonomy as equidistance between Washington, Beijing and New Delhi. These relationships are not interchangeable.

Thus, while South Asian countries have many opportunities in this evolving landscape, they also face many complications in an increasingly transactional world. The US remains an important partner for Bangladesh and other South Asian countries in development, security and trade. It is Bangladesh's largest export market, primarily for ready-made garments. Security cooperation encompasses maritime security, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and defence institution-building.

However, unlike China, the US has been reluctant to finance many large-scale infrastructure projects without imposing extensive requirements relating to economic, environmental and governance standards.

Washington's comparative advantage in the region lies not only in its military power but also in the appeal of its markets, universities, technology, financial systems and democratic institutions. The eagle remains extremely powerful, but it needs to demonstrate that its Indo-Pacific vision offers smaller countries more than simply a place within a strategy directed against China.

The elephant faces a neighbourhood problem

India, the elephant, is no longer merely an emerging country. It is now an indispensable global power—a major economy, a nuclear power, an influential voice among developing countries, and a strategic partner of the US, Japan, Europe and Australia.

Nevertheless, while India has become a global power, it continues to face serious problems in its neighbourhood.

Its relations with Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have frequently been marred by tensions. Political changes occurring in neighbouring countries are often viewed in India primarily through the lens of its strategic competition with China. At the same time, political leaders in South Asian countries frequently raise concerns about Indian interference.

The fact of the matter is that India cannot change its geography. Nor can Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan or Sri Lanka escape the reality of India's economic and security importance. But geography alone does not create leadership. Leadership depends on the confidence of neighbours that their sovereignty and interests will be respected.

Bangladesh has a particularly complicated relationship with India because the two countries share much in terms of history, rivers, trade, energy, transit, culture and their land boundary. No government in Bangladesh can hope to pursue a sustainable foreign policy if it ignores India's existence and continuing relevance.

Nonetheless, because of unresolved issues concerning Teesta water sharing, border killings, trade barriers and political interference, public confidence in this relationship has suffered. During Bangladesh's political transition after 2024, the relationship deteriorated to the point of becoming a potential trigger for geopolitical realignment in South Asia.

It is hoped that India will learn a lesson from this experience. To remain a natural partner in the region, it must stop thinking and acting like a big brother.

Can the hidden tiger come out of the shadows?

Bangladesh has ceased to be the geopolitical cub it was once considered to be. Its population, manufacturing capacity, strategic location, role in UN peacekeeping, and control of a key section of the Bay of Bengal give it considerable geopolitical importance.

Nevertheless, these strengths do not make it a strategic power.

Bangladesh's economy is facing slower growth, inflation, financial-sector vulnerabilities, low levels of investment, and increasing economic pressures. The World Bank has underscored the need for stronger institutions, financial-sector reforms and job creation to sustain the recovery of exports and remittances following recent disruptions.

All these domestic weaknesses limit Bangladesh's capacity in foreign policymaking. A country with weak institutions, a poor regulatory regime and unstable politics has limited capacity to negotiate effectively with major powers. It becomes dependent on external finance instead of using external relations to advance its national interests.

Bangladesh should avoid interpreting strategic autonomy as equidistance between Washington, Beijing and New Delhi. These relationships are not interchangeable. China is a major source of infrastructure, defence equipment and industrial investment. The US and Europe are essential export markets and sources of technology, investment and institutional support. India is Bangladesh's inevitable neighbour, with shared interests in water, energy, security and connectivity. Japan, South Korea, the European Union, ASEAN members and the Gulf countries offer further opportunities for diversification.

Issue-based alignment—cooperation with different powers according to Bangladesh's national interests, without falling strategically into the orbit of any one of them—should remain the guiding principle of its foreign policy.

This will require transparency in infrastructure projects, competitive procurement processes, the protection of national assets, and careful evaluation of debt and environmental consequences. Most importantly, it will require Bangladesh to pursue a foreign policy shaped by institutions rather than by the personal relationships of its leaders.

Diplomatic credibility begins at home. Democratic legitimacy, good governance, an independent judiciary, media freedom and political stability are not only domestic virtues but also strategic strengths. A government that commands public confidence can engage with foreign powers from a position of greater authority and resist external pressure more effectively.

The old unipolar order is fading away. A new multipolar order has yet to replace it. The dragon advances, the eagle repositions, and the elephant struggles to overcome its neighbourhood complexities amid its growing global ambitions.

The future of the tiger depends on how Bangladesh engages with these animals diplomatically and strategically rather than merely reacting to their actions.

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