READRESSING SOUTH ASIAN REGIONALISM: THE ROLE OF INDIA

Sachin N. Pardhe

Post Cold War international relations are being determined by the sweeping trends of globalisation and economic integration, giving leverage to economy over polity as against the preceding century world. However, the present era is also marked by the ongoing tussle between the two powerful trends of contemporary world namely multilateralism and plurilateralism (regionalism). Although the roots of regionalism are traced back to the end of the Second World War, the emergence of what many scholars prefer to call ‘new regionalism’ is predominantly a post-Cold War phenomenon. New regionalism as against the old one seeks a multi-dimensional approach and has also increased a North-South interaction free from the bloc politics of the Cold War. Thus newly form regional trade blocs have been major catalysts in bringing about the issues of the global south to the forefront of the agenda of post-Second World War multilateral institutions. However, regions like South Asia are still struggling to mark the beginning of this new change because of the political conflicts between the states. Interestingly, the “new” regionalism in South Asia as argued by Ananya Mukherjee Reed, is almost entirely a product of the contradictions of globalisation, which increases competition on the one hand, and the need for collaboration on the other. South Asia is a classic example of the neo-realist interpretation of cooperation. The inbuilt fault-lines in the geographical texture of the South Asia along with a strong temporal thread attached to it, which has been causing the ‘trust deficit’ among states making regional cooperation a tough task.

In this context the paper will attempt to offer fresh perspectives on the role of India in making South Asian regionalism work in the context of the new trends of globalisation and plurilateralism. The paper will also attempt to look into the theories of regionalism that can be applied to the South Asian region.

Key Words: Multilateralism, Plurilateralism, New Regionalism

Introduction:
Contemporary world appears to be driven more by the neo-liberal economic trends than ever before. The demise of the Soviet Union and the End of the Ideology debate along with the powerful trends of globalisation have further strengthen the role of the neoliberal capitalist oriented economic structures. As a consequence the states in contemporary world seem to have been seeking measures that ensure economic growth and political stability at a same time. These ventures resulted into the emergence of two apparently contradictory initiatives namely multilateral and plurilateral. As early as mid 1940s, the ghoul of two world wars united the world in the formation of a major multilateral initiative the United Nations as a protector and guarantor of world peace and security, followed by a new world economic order based on the pro-Capitalist Western bloc led Bretton Woods system leading towards further division between the states, as an inevitable consequence of the Cold War division. It was at the same time when multilateralism was being seen and proposed as a key initiative, states were also being engaged into various plurilateral (regional) endeavours partly because of the Cold War bloc politics and partly because of their concerns for the newly gained
sovereignty and economic growth. This picture however, gradually started changing after the demise of the Soviet Union and even further the eclipse of the so-called ‘America’s unipolar movement’ (Kaplan, 2011). The end of the Cold War brought about a drastic change in two ways, one it changed the global balance of power in favour of the United States making it the sole superpower having a democratic government and liberal economic orientation. Second, the end of the Cold war also implied relatively more freedom for states free from the bloc politics constraints of the Cold War. As a result post-Cold War world states started relocating their priorities inclined more towards the economic considerations that have been coming to the forefront in the age of globalisation because of increasing interdependence. States could now hardly afford to stress the hard politics issues given the intermingled economic interests in spite of the political differences on several issues. Regionalism, thus, appeared as a measure to serve the dual purposes of states simultaneously, it allowed countries particularly developing countries to integrate themselves gradually into the wider trend of globalisation while preserving their native interests and at the same time it provided them a protective shield to cope up with the North-South divide rationale.

Although, post-Cold War world started witnessing increasing trends of regionalism, South Asia proved to be one of the least integrated regions and the process of regional cooperation failed to achieve the desired outcome. There are various reasons behind the weak regional cooperation yet security seems to be the prime reason in South Asia.

**South Asian Regionalism from a Security Perspective:**

South Asian regionalism is the product of the existing geopolitical complexities of the region combined with the aspirations of the major regional powers and the concerns of the smaller powers in the given geopolitical structure. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as an institutional framework born amid the dire scepticism between the regional actors. Although weak, yet, with a hope to transcend the existing political divisions to unite for the better and prosperous future, SAARC initially appeared as an effective platform to reshape the relations between states. However, SAARC apparently could not deliver up to the mark and could not fetch the desired outcomes. Since its inception in 1985, SAARC countries have been struggling to cope up with two directional challenges; one from within and second from outside. And both the challenges are critically linked with the security concerns of the states. Post Second World War South Asia has seen the emergence of newly independent states. Although wreaked with the colonial imperialism, these states venture the model of Westphalian nation-state which in a way not suitable for the multiethnic and diverse countries of South Asia and posed new challenges of nation-building from within making it a key security issue of these countries along with other economic and developmental priorities. In many cases the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity acted as a key catalyst in defining the fate of these newly born states.

Second challenge was coming from outside and beyond the boundaries of the states and defined by the systemic and sub-systemic forces along with the geopolitical line of the region that had been shaping the larger security architecture of the region. The South Asian security architecture is shaped by the interplay of both the geographical and hard politics forces that have been influencing the behaviour of the regional states along with the involvement of extra-regional actors. Thus these forces need to be addressed properly to understand the security dynamics of the region. Geographical configuration of South Asia has been decisive in shaping the security architecture of the region and behaviour of the states. There are five prominent geographical features that are crucial to note in this context.

i) First, considering the physical geography of South Asia, the region appears to be an ‘Indo-centric’ (Kishore C. Dash, 2008). Occupying almost 72 per cent area of the region, India appears to be a ‘de-facto hegemon’ irrespective of the intentions
of India to be so or not. ‘It is one of the inescapable realities of life in South Asia that India lies at its center in every way imaginable. Its massive landmass lies at the physical center of the subcontinent. Every South Asian state, except Afghanistan and the island nations, borders India, and practically none of the others share borders’ (Hagerty, 2005). This Indo-centric geography has been playing a psychological catalyst in shaping the threat perceptions of smaller states like Bhutan, Nepal or Maldives on the one hand and major states like Pakistan and Bangladesh on the other hand, making them sceptic about the potential role of India in the regional politics. For minor and smaller states it seems to be causing what Hewitt suggests ‘small state’ complex (Hewitt, 1997). For major states like Pakistan the concern is potential dominance of India in the region. Some scholars like Mohammed Ayoob had suggested that the ‘the primary objective and overriding concern of Indian foreign policy since the dawn of independence in 1947 has been the establishment of India’s predominance in South Asia -a predominance whose legitimacy would be accepted by other nations in the region.’ (Ayoob, 1990). However, scholars like Subrata Mitra (Mitra, 2003) have been describing India as a ‘reluctant hegemon’ and concluded that the hiatus between India’s self-perception as a status quo power and its perception by neighbouring states as a regional bully is a main cause of stalemate in the South Asian security environment. Considering above inferences it can be argued that this Indo-centric geography has caused fear among smaller states and scepticism among major states which seem to be based on the assumption that India might extend its borders or may interfere in the domestic affairs of other states.

ii) Secondly, Although South Asia has ‘Indo-centric’ geography yet it is not a unipolar region. Even in terms of analysing South Asia from security point of view Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver have described South Asia as bipolar regional security complex. One of the major reasons behind the bipolarity of the region is the presence of the nuclear element.

iii) The third geographical feature is linked with the political aspect of the region more specifically the political boundaries of the independent states. Political boundaries are the key structural elements of nation-states. These boundaries are crucial because of two major reasons; one, boundaries demarcate the territorial extent of the sovereign states and secondly, they create identity barriers that separate states from each other. Therefore, there is an intrinsic relationship between political boundaries and the security of states. The way in which geography gets divided among nations is often of critical importance in defining the relations of the states. South Asia is an apt example of this, where the geography has been crucial in defining the relations of post independence states. The physical geographical boundaries of Indian subcontinent are not consistent with the political boundaries. Thus the demarcation of political boundaries in post colonial South Asia has been one of the major sources of conflicts because of the geopolitical realities as well as the overlapping identities of post colonial states. A strange combination of political and economic interests along with a geopolitical dimension inevitably leading the states towards the competition over scarce natural resources which has been a major catalyst behind the conflicts over disputed territories and borders in South Asia. As Graham Chapman in his ‘The Geopolitics of South Asia’ says that South Asia is distinctive and unique: Cohen classifies it as an independent geo-political region, the only such on earth, not contained within either of the geo-strategic regions’ (Chapman, 2000). From strategic and security point of view geography,
though, not the only security determinant, however, is the most prominent one in defining regional security dynamics as well.

iv) The fourth geographical feature is more based on the theoretical framework of an ancient strategic thinker Kautilya who suggested that the neighbouring states are more likely to be enemies than friends, in South Asia almost each state that share physical border with India has some or the other disputes either over border or over river water or sharing of other natural resources with India, thus, making the region more prone to conflicts and disputes. Still, it is primarily the relationship between India and Pakistan is seen to be more decisive not only in defining the security architecture of the region but also determining the success of the regional integration. This relationship has been shaped by many factors including the ‘colonial legacy in India and Pakistan’ (Jalal, 1995). The trauma of partition and the Kashmir issue still haunts the relationship between India and Pakistan. The creations of Bangladesh form the eastern territory of Pakistan as an independent state in 1971 not only completed the existing conflict between India and Pakistan, but also changed the geopolitical structure of the region.

v) The fifth geopolitical feature has wider linkages to the systemic power dynamics that inevitably involves the extra-regional actors into the picture. The strategic geographical location of both the major and minor states of South Asia has been critical to the realpolitik of the region that has inevitably attracted the involvement of the great powers in the regional security architecture. For example the geostrategic location of Pakistan as well as Afghanistan and their proximity with the oil rich West Asia attracted US and USSR involvement in these countries, the geostrategic location of Nepal that has been acted as a buffer state between India and China and its proximity with Tibet, The decisive location of Sri Lanka and Maldives in Indian Ocean Region led to the Chinese involvement. Thus making the role of extra-regional actors a key feature in determining the security architecture of South Asia is equally important.

Stumbling Blocks:
Ever since the inception of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, it has been struggling to emerge as an effective platform for economic cooperation and as a symbol of South Asian common cultural heritage, however, there are certain geopolitical issues that have been making this task tough and more difficult. There are two critical features that are directly and indirectly defining the fate of regional integration in South Asia and equally linked with the security dynamics of the South Asian balance of power.

i) The role of extra-regional actors and its implications:
There are at least three extra-regional actors that are crucial in influencing the behaviour of regional actors and shaping their relations with other South Asian actors. The United States has been one such important extra-regional actor in the extended security architecture of the region because of its vital interests in the adjoining region as well as Afghanistan and the subsequent extended relationship with Pakistan. The role of the United States in South Asian security dynamics had become critical after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 from Afghanistan. The dawn of the Cold War politics and subsequent Nuclearisation of the region in the context of tense Indo-Pak relations and India’s inclination towards the Soviet modelled socialism further attracted the US involvement in the region. Post Cold War period changing geopolitics in the context of the ‘Asian century’ narrative and the rise of China further changed the US approach towards the South Asian region and resulted into cooperation between India and the US, apparently, to counterbalance the Chinese growing influence in the wider Indo-Pacific and South Asia regions, causing fundamental changes in the security
dynamics of the region. This shift obviously led the other extra-regional actor i.e. the People’s Republic of China to emerge as an another major stakeholder in the region having not only geographical proximity but also vital interests in South Asian region and the Indian Ocean Region concerning to quench its increasing thirst of energy. It is this energy requirement that has led China to secure its oil root in the Indian Ocean Region by developing ports and bases in neighbouring states of India including Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, which India perceives as the encirclement of India by China, described as ‘the string of pearls’, (Athwal, 2008), and as a threat to its national security. The third extra-regional actor is Russia. Although, the post Cold War balance of power had not been much inclined in favour of Russia, yet it seems to start a new inning in the politics of South Asia by reviving its relationship with South Asian countries like India and Pakistan along with the China and has potential to influence the security dynamics of the region. Therefore, the role of extra-regional actors in the region has also become more important because many smaller states tend to rely more on extra regional powers for security than forming any regional security arrangement ‘to offset’ (Dash, 2008) the power of India, making regional integration much difficult.

ii) Political complexities:
Inter-state political relations in South Asia are shaped by many factors including the geography of border tensions, multiethnic composition, illegal migration, history of colonial legacy and mutual distrust, polity and economy of sharing of natural resources, cross border terrorism and over emphasised nationalism. Although, South Asia as a region has seen almost every type of government in the recent past, including democracy, authoritarian rule, military rule and monarchy there is a unique element of common cultural and colonial legacy among states. The political relations between the states are predominantly shaped by both history and geography of conflicts. To further worsen the situation it has two largest states as neighbours that had fought four wars and are nuclear states, making the region more dangerous. It is primarily the tense political relationship between India and Pakistan that has been a major hurdle in regional integration in South Asia, because of two obvious reasons. One, India and Pakistan are two largest states in the region and regional integration is not possible without their cooperation. Second, both the states are nuclear powers and hence their behaviour influences not only the behaviour of smaller states in the region but also attract major global powers towards the region.

This political perspective, has two core dimensions to it, one internal dimension which is shaped predominantly by the behaviour of India and Pakistan the two largest and powerful at the same time rival states in the region and the second, that is external dimension which is shaped by the extra-regional actors or global great powers influencing the behaviour of not only smaller states but also major states like India and Pakistan. T.V. Paul aptly suggests that ‘the peace and conflict patterns of a given region are often significantly affected by the interactions and interventions of great powers in that region’ (Palit, 2011) which is more visible in South Asia.

Internal dimension defines inter-state relations including conflicts (like between India and Pakistan the issue of Kashmir, India and Bangladesh the issue of illegal migrants, between India and Sri Lanka the issue of Tamils, etc.) and cooperation (Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950, Pakistan-Sri Lanka relations, etc.), between and among the regional states at the same time the role of regional major powers in influencing the behaviour of smaller as well as major states. Another significant feature of the internal dimension of security architecture in South Asia is its bipolarity or what Barry Buzan and Ole Waever prefers to call a ‘bipolar Regional Security Complex’ (Buzan and Waever, 2003). The
bipolarity, however, is combined with the element of ‘trust deficit’, making cooperation more difficult.

The external dimension on the other hand has wider implications for South Asian security. Since it involve wider key strategic interests of extra-regional actors that tend to counterbalance the influence of major regional actors like India, as Dash has observed that India’s has limited ability to exert too much control in the region because of three factors including India’s inability to meet with all the development needs of small states, Indo-Pakistan, Indo-China rivalry and the perceived threat of India to the security of small states (Dash, 2008). These elements of strategic involvement provide an opportunity to the extra-regional actors to play in the regional game of balance of power. Further, ‘the asymmetry paradigm, which favours China over India and India over Pakistan, offers certainly a clue to the triangular configuration, particularly to its strategic dimension’ (Racine, 2001) compel states, even major regional states like India and Pakistan, to strengthen ties with extra-regional powers like USA and China. This explains the emerging patterns of new alliances of South Asian state like why India’s relations with US are in a drastic change or Pakistan’s changing relations with China. C. Raja Mohan and Alyssa Ayres, however, argue that, ‘China’s economic penetration of its peripheral states has encouraged India to adopt the slogan of promoting a ‘peaceful periphery’, open its market for goods from the neighbours, and go more than halfway in resolving the many contentious bilateral political disputes.’ (Mohan and Ayres, 2009). To sum up it is obvious that this element of extra-regional actors does influence the pattern of cooperation between South Asian states on the basic of their interests and priorities including both hard politics and economics.

Theoretical Framework:
Regionalism can simply be define as an interstate grouping of states on the basis of geography, however, this definition of regionalism is not enough to explain the process of regional integration in many parts of the world including South Asia a major weakness of this definition is that it limits a region on the basis of geographical proximity and thereby neglect other dimensions of regionalism. However, the definition of a region given by Joseph Nye comes closer to explain the dynamics of regional cooperation in general and regionalism in particular. According to Joseph Nye, a region is ‘a limited number of states linked together by geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence’. If we rely on this definition of a region which highlights not only geography but also the degree of mutual interdependence to considered any entity as a region. Thus the strength of regionalism is not only based on the geographical proximity but also the degree of mutual interdependence, however, the mutual interdependence may not be looked as a positive notion if the security concerns or threat perceptions collide with each others in any given region and there neo-realism starts dominating the picture. There are various theoretical frameworks available to analyse the process of regional integration, prominent amongst these frameworks are; Karl Deutsch’s Transactionalism and David Mitrany’s Functionalist and Ernst Haas’s Neo-Functionalism. However, when it comes to analyse the process of regional integration and cooperation in South Asia, these frameworks do not appear to fit in the South Asian model of regional integration and cooperation and one of the major reasons is the prominent security dimension of regional cooperation in South Asia. Therefore, Neo-realism seems to provide key analytical tools to understand and explain the behaviour of South Asian actors towards the process of regional cooperation and integration in the context of the security linkages of the given issue.
There are at least three major neo-realistic assumptions that can be applied in defining the security dynamics of the South Asian region which are critical in defining the possibilities of cooperation and conflicts in the given region. The three key assumptions of neo-realism are:

A) One, the power & security consciousness of states,

B) Second, the role of the system structures and sub-structures in shaping state behaviour and decisions, and

C) Third, the primacy of relative gains over the absolute gains.

South Asian security architecture as discussed above revolves around these neo-realist assumptions. Unlike Europe regionalism in South Asia did not evolve on the bricks of mutual trust or need of cooperation. It was in fact the geopolitical necessities of the few actors that laid the foundation of the SAARC as a concrete initiative towards the institutionalisation of the region. If we analyse both neo-realist and neo-liberal frameworks of analysis to regional integration of South Asia, there appears a major disjuncture between perceptions of benefit from an increased economic integration versus the suspicions of security competition which can be more acute in case of rival powers within a region. In the context of South Asia, the case of India-Pakistan relationship as seen from a neo-realist lens and by applying the ‘relative gains’ theory, seems a major factor that is causing slow movement towards regional integration in South Asia. It also explains the behaviour of smaller states as the intensity of the security dilemma of these states differs from one another, making some of them willing partners and others still sceptic. This perhaps explains why Pakistan long denied the MFN (Most Favoured Nation) status to India under SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area), despite potential trade benefits to both the countries or why the initiative to form a regional group like SAARC came from a small state like Bangladesh and not from major powers like India or Pakistan.

Thus South Asia remained the least integrated region in the world and one of the major reasons is the primacy given to the relative gains over the absolute gains by the major actors because of mistrust and suspicion between and among states. At the same time the role of extra-regional powers and their relations with the South Asian states have been playing a decisive role in creating mutual distrust among South Asian states. However, the picture is not altogether gloomy. It doesn’t mean that the initiatives towards cooperation and integration had not been taken or there are zero chances of regional integration in South Asia. A major and concrete step towards regional cooperation and integration was taken in 1985 by forming the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). However, SAARC couldn’t prove a panacea, primarily because of the primacy of hard politics issues over the economic and developmental needs. Yet it has a tremendous potential and had taken further initiatives like SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) and South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) towards regional integration. Thus the role of SAARC in regional integration needs to be analysed with the study of its inbuilt fault lines and major challenges.

The Role of India:
The SAARC seeks to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, promote and strengthen collective self-reliance, promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in various fields, strengthen cooperation with other developing countries, strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes. However, it needs to be emphasised that the countries of South Asia were ruled by leaders of different denominations when SAARC was conceived and created. They included two military dictators from Pakistan and Bangladesh, two monarchs from Nepal and Bhutan, two democratically elected leaders from India and Sri Lanka and one autocrat from Maldives who
came together to establish this body. To think that these leaders did not have any agenda other than a regional agenda would be a mistake.’(Pattanaik, 2011) and hence from the very creation of SAARC, member States remained sceptic about the hidden agendas of each other. Therefore, at least because of two important things one, India being the prominent state of the region in terms of both the geography and economy, and second being the most stable democracy in the region, has more responsibility towards the process of regional cooperation and regional integration in the region.

India has the largest economy of the region. Currently India accounts for about 80 percent of the region’s GDP, Pakistan accounts for about 10 percent, Bangladesh 6 percent, Sri Lanka 2 percent, and the rest less than 2 percent and the modest impact in the post reform era indicates that India is able to influence growth in the region, yet, the level of India’s growth spill over remained low compared to other economic powerhouses (Ding and Masha, 2012)

India’s economic role in the region thus can be understood in the light of the fact that despite the increase in overall trade with SAARC states, the share of India’s trade with non-SAARC countries is also increasing considerably. It is because of this increasing trade with non-regional states; critics argue that even institutional arrangements like SAFTA may not substantially help intra-regional trade in SAARC.

India’s policies and proactive role can play a decisive and crucial role in defining the future of regional integration in South Asia. Therefore, although seen with scepticism the role of India needs to be projected in more cautious and friendly manner to reshape India’s image in South Asia. As it is very clear that the primary factors that have been adversely affecting regional integration in South Asia are; the so-called Indian hegemony, the trust-deficit among states, the Indo-Pakistan relationship and the reluctance of the major powers particularly India and Pakistan, to discharge the responsibility to ensure the success of the regional integration mechanisms and institutions. Thus while dealing with the existing situation in South Asia two directional positive efforts to strengthen cooperation are required;

a) Efforts towards cementing the existing gaps between the relations of major and minor powers in general and India and Pakistan in particular. There have been initiatives to embark upon bilateral relations and cooperative measures. However, there are few efforts to promote the common cultural and historical linkages that had acted as a thread in holding together these diverse societies, there is an urgent need to strengthen the democratic institutions and democratic culture among the states that would create a healthy civil society. Although it appears that the cooperation between states is decided by the upper echelons or the political and bureaucratic elites, however, the fact in fact is that it should come from within.

b) Efforts towards strengthening the role of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation as a common platform to address the issues of common interests including poverty, underdevelopment and inclusive economic growth of the region.

In both the cases, India being the key actor in the region needs to adopt a more proactive role in strengthening existing institutional structures and need to shoulder more responsibility on the basis on non-reciprocity that might change India’s image. Responsibility should not be seen as a burden but an opportunity.

Conclusion:

Although, South Asia as a region has huge potential to emerge as a vibrant market and achieve tremendous economic growth, yet, unless the political issues are kept aside by the regional actors and decision makers, cooperation seems to be a complex process. Because, South Asia is one of the regions where there is an intricate link between security and
cooperation. And unless the security issues are addressed properly, cooperative measures could hardly find sound ground. Considering the geographical and political factors it can be stated that the role of geopolitics in defining the security architecture is much crucial in South Asia. When it comes to security, the realist and neo-realist frameworks appear to be more effective tools to analyse the case of cooperation or the lack of cooperation in a given region. Therefore in the context of the above discussed geo-political factors, it can be argued that the cooperation among states remain a difficult task not only because of the political tensions among regional states but also because of the strategic choices of the great powers while forming ties with South Asian states that further lead to increase the existing suspicions among regional states. It is therefore need to be emphasised that when it comes to cooperation in such politically fragmented and geographically asymmetric region like South Asia it is primarily the political will of member states, to respond to the cooperative agreements that determine the success of the regional integration.
References:


Web link: