



How Interests and Ideas of a Dominant Actor Make a Big Difference: Analyzing India's Role in SAARC and BIMSTEC

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Abstract

States always function as rational actors as protecting the national interests of a state depends on the choices it makes in the international context. Hence, choices and preferences are central to the study of both public policy and international relations. Policies are driven and influenced by the attention and behaviors of the actors which ultimately create a path to failure or success. In the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), India, in the absence of Pakistan, can enjoy a friendly environment and establish its goal of geo-political and economic dominance in South Asia and Southeast Asia, while countering China's continuous upsurge. On the other hand, in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), constant intervention from Pakistan means that India shifts its attention to use its full potential elsewhere. This article is based on secondary sources and illustrates how the interests of a major actor (India) can shape the paths of two similar regional organizations (SAARC and BIMSTEC), despite these organizations sharing characteristics such as the same member states, the same socio-economic situation, and the same vision.

Keywords SAARC · BIMSTEC · India · Regionalism · Ideas · Interests · Big Actor

1 Introduction

In the international context, states are aware of their surroundings and of other actors, as behaviors by the latter can influence states' strategies for endurance. States are unitary rational actors, and their ideas and interests drive them to set up strategies through which they can achieve their most preferred outcomes (Frieden 1999). States voluntarily implement strategic and adaptable policies, such as collective security, regionalism, and the balance of power, while strengthening new and existing alliances to survive and play a meaningful role on the global platform. As an

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emerging power, India has adopted this approach in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions through playing distinct roles in two different regional organizations, namely, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). These strategies carry tremendous significance for India. How dominant actors understand and establish different rules within the emerging multipolar global order will set the tone for the future global structure, with India wanting to play a major role in that domain (Menegazzi 2020). In 1985, SAARC was established to increase regional cooperation, accelerate economic growth, reduce the rate of poverty, and promote improved socio-economic conditions in the South Asian region. Consisting of eight member countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), SAARC has established itself as a regional forum; however, it has failed to fulfill its potential. On the other hand, BIMSTEC, comprising five countries from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and two from Southeast Asia (Thailand and Myanmar), has emerged as a natural platform for increasing regional cooperation in the South Asian region (Kaul 2006). Gauvin (2014) argues that the ideas and interests of actors always determine the outcome of an organization. Whether it is in domestic or international politics, the policy preferences of an actor originate from their basic interests. For a big actor, this refers to maximizing their ability to retain regional influence (Milner 2021). Therefore, as a major actor in terms of economic power and political influence, India's interests and preferences are playing a key role in producing different outcomes for these two organizations.

This study, through its hypothesis, seeks to demonstrate that BIMSTEC's success is harmonious with India's foreign policy orientation towards BIMSTEC's member states and its intensive and engaging hegemonic role within the organization. India understands that regional organizations offer economic incorporation, political support, and resolution and action to address shared problems, with these being core ingredients for developing inclusive regional identities (Beeson and Lee-Brown 2021). Not only does BIMSTEC offer India a distinct identity, but it also provides several strategic options to establish the balance of power, take the leading role, and counter China's dominant and destabilizing role in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions. In contrast, India's growing disinterest in moving forward with SAARC is leading the organization towards failure. Arguably, fostering regionalism through SAARC would allow India's arch-rival, Pakistan, to equally benefit from the organization, with this being contradictory to India's vision of establishing and asserting its geopolitical dominance. When India undertakes initiatives under the SAARC banner, it faces several obstacles from its direct rival, Pakistan, which opposes India's leadership role. Furthermore, the gap between India and other member states in terms of geography, the economy, military strength, and influence in the global context unsettles smaller countries (Bhattacharjee 2018). Therefore, the performance of SAARC has been mediocre, with the organization failing to play a key role in strengthening regional cooperation. Conversely, BIMSTEC fits India's vision which prioritizes 'Neighborhood First' and its Act East policy; hence, the role India plays in fostering regional cooperation under the BIMSTEC banner is the key to the organization's success.

Based on secondary sources, the research presented in this article illustrates how the interests of a big actor can determine the outcome of an organization. India's role in each organization and how India is helping to promote regional cooperation, while establishing its geopolitical agenda in the case of BIMSTEC but acting differently in the case of SAARC, are analyzed. This research article is structured as follows. Section 2 sheds light on the theoretical background and methodology of the research. In Sect. 3, the article explores the concept of regionalism and why the choices and interests of India, as a big actor, matter in fostering regionalism. Section 4 is designed to analyze how India's ideas and interests are compatible with BIMSTEC's success. In Sect. 5, the article highlights how India's different choices and interests generate different outcomes in the case of SAARC, with this followed by the conclusion in Sect. 6.

2 Theory and Methodology

In the international context, the interests and ideas of actors magnify the policy development framework. The term 'interests' refers to the set of agendas of different stakeholders, including politicians, civil servants, societal groups, and policy entrepreneurs, in a policy domain (Gauvin 2014). Rational choice theorists suggest that interests are preferences that a rational actor state chooses to pursue (Dodds 2018). This highlights a common hypothesis that, be it real or perceived, the interests of different stakeholders influence policy developments and choices in both the national and international context (Majone 2019). The different actors in a policy domain always try to control the policy structure and development process, ensuring that it is in their favor to gain maximum benefit. In each context, when a big actor like a state analyzes the possible interests of different stakeholders in a policy issue, it emphasizes options that decide two things. First, which actor would benefit most from a policy decision and, at the same time, which actor would bear the most costs? Second, in a given setting, how much would the actor gain or lose from the context if it allows other actors to play their role (Milner 2021)? Therefore, as a rational actor, the state always analyzes policy alternatives and chooses the best possible option to pursue its own interests. However, if a state will gain little from the decision made, it usually forms a coalition to mitigate the loss (Gauvin 2014).

On the other hand, the term 'ideas' refers to the knowledge or beliefs of different actors, with these gained through empirical study (Gauvin 2014). Ideas can influence an actor to make a decision, define a problem, and perceive a rational policy option which might be effective, feasible, and acceptable. The reason is that an actor's informed and experiential knowledge shapes policy development and choices (Hay 2004). However, informed knowledge can also be uncertain and complex among different actors as it shapes how actors frame their problems and how they perceive different policy options in a policy domain (Dodds 2018). This is vital as ideas shape the lawmaker's understanding of how global politics work, with this understanding modifying the lawmaker's perceptions affecting the drafting of proposed policies through to their outcomes (Frieden 1999). In addition, ideas can be influenced by the values and cultures shared by professional groups as their education, experience, and

participation in networks can generate certain values and help countries adopt the best possible policy option (Hall 1997). A close relationship exists between interests and ideas as today's ideas are considered tomorrow's interests. Thus, if policymakers want to achieve a short-term goal, they develop the policy based on interests. In taking a long-term approach, policymakers depend upon their empirical knowledge and beliefs (Mukand and Rodrik 2018). The interaction between the ideas and interests of an actor is often hard to determine as concrete empirical evidence is lacking. However, defining the correlation between ideas and interests still holds the key to regulating how ideas and interests would fit together to provide a fuller image of both the policy structure and the development process (Beland 2017).

India's ideas, interests, and other activities in the international context can be analyzed through realism theory. Realists, like Morgenthau, claim that the lust for state power is human nature through which an individual drives states to acquire power from their rivals and that power has always been prioritized over morality as, in the international context, political actions are entirely about increasing and demonstrating power (Williams 2004). Conversely, if policies are taken based on morality, it could lead a state to weak position or possible destruction by its competitors. Therefore, ensuring national interests is not a subject of morality in the international context (Scheuerman 2009). Since the end of the Second World War, realism has become a significant part of international relations that focuses on the role of the state, the balance of power, national interest, and military power (Dunne et al. 2013). Bell (2017) argues that state behavior and a set of strategy prescriptions can be explained accurately through realism. In the international relation context, policy prescriptions are vital as these strategies can alleviate tensions between two states. Even though realists acknowledge the importance of non-state actors like international organizations, multinational cooperation, and individuals, they are still considered as secondary elements in the international context (Scheuerman 2009). Realists claim that states are the fundamental and most important actors, because they can practice legitimate force to resolve disputes between individuals and groups within their territory. Additionally, the behaviors and decisions of non-state actors in the international system are conditioned and controlled by states (Dunne et al. 2013). Realists view the state as a unitary actor and the state functions and speaks when it comes to leading the state during moments of crisis or when the state feels that it must act to protect national interests. Realists strongly believe that the state is an integrated actor, and if states think it is necessary to prevent alternative views, it will intervene (Bell 2017). However, alternative views can remain if the state believes that it is important. When opportunities and threats are generated by the international system, decision-makers will react on behalf of the state. The state is a rational actor and always focuses on achieving national interests. States analyze alternatives that spawn from the international arena and chose the best practical alternative. States define their interest based on their national power, but do try to avoid taking such decisions which might make the state vulnerable, as that would not be rational action (Williams 2004). Hence, the state is a consistent goal-oriented actor that makes a cost–benefit analysis of every choice. According to realists, no centralized authority exists to protect one state from another. Therefore, a state needs to formulate its security sphere to protect itself, following a couple of vital strategies to counter its lack of security: first, undertaking

strategic and flexible initiatives such as establishing the balance of power; and, second, states, at times, taking extreme steps such as using force to mitigate a threat.

India's roles and choices are vital as they determine the success of regional cooperation under the banner of these two different regional organizations. The independent variables (IVs) of this research are the roles of India in each organization; India's foreign policy orientation towards its eastern neighbors and Southeast Asian countries; and India's bilateral disputes with Pakistan (see Table 1). The vision of both organizations is to enhance regional cooperation. Hence, the success of these two organizations is measured by their degree of regional cooperation in both economic and technical sectors. The dependent variable (DV) of the research is regional cooperation. India's distinct role in each organization is creating mistrust and trade imbalance among SAARC's member countries (see Table 1). To understand how the ideas and interests of a big actor (i.e., India) generate different outcomes in two similar kinds of organizations, our research thus focuses on analyzing India's role in each organization, India's foreign policy orientation, and India's bilateral disputes with Pakistan and other member states.

To test the hypothesis, the research has applied a comparative method. Howlett (2002) believes that policy outcomes are largely influenced by an actor's interests and behaviors. The interests and approaches of India, as a major actor, in both organizations are the key object of this analysis. The research compares India's role in SAARC to the role it plays in BIMSTEC. Furthermore, this study is conducted based on the method of difference (the most similar system design) which indicates that the selected cases share similar characteristics, but differ in the study variable (McNabb 2015). In cases that are very similar, it is easier to identify the real causes and effects when studying fewer possible candidates (Van Evera 2015). In this study, SAARC and BIMSTEC share remarkably similar aspects. In both organizations, their member states have a similar socio-economic background. Their member states also share a very similar gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP per capita. Both organizations share the same vision, with their member states having similar characteristics (see Table 2). Yet, as an organization, BIMSTEC has achieved more and is considered the preferred platform for regional cooperation despite SAARC having been formed a decade earlier. The ability of actors to attain and exercise their interests depends upon the distribution of resources and power, individual capacity, and skills in a policy domain. This, therefore, creates an opportunity to critically analyze the role of India as a big actor in each of these two organizations. Despite economic challenges, all seven member states of BIMSTEC have been able to sustain an average annual growth of GDP between 3.4 and 7.5% in the last 5 years; however, this is not the case for SAARC's member states (Bhattacharjee 2018).

Table 1 Different variables of this study

Independent/study variables	Role of India in both organizations, India's foreign policy orientation, bilateral disputes with Pakistan, and other member states
Dependent variable	Regional cooperation

Table 2 Socio-economic conditions of BIMSTEC and SAARC member countries 2021 (country economy.com 2022)

Name of the country	Annual GDP (US\$)	GDP per capita (US\$)	Human development index (HDI)
Afghanistan	\$20,116 m	\$517	0.511
Bangladesh	\$323,057 m	\$1962	0.632
Bhutan	\$2503 m	\$3244	0.654
India	\$266,0240 m	\$1928	0.645
Maldives	\$3738 m	\$6915	0.740
Myanmar	\$81,257 m	\$1493	0.583
Nepal	\$33,983 m	\$1166	0.602
Pakistan	\$261,726 m	\$1255	0.557
Sri Lanka	\$80,677 m	\$3681	0.782
Thailand	\$501,712 m	\$7188	0.777

India's motivation is to make itself a dominant force in the geopolitical arena and to isolate Pakistan and counter China in the region; therefore, it is vital for India to be recognized as a success to achieve its purpose within these two organizations. The purpose of this study is to explore how the ideas and interests of a dominant actor (India) have affected the goals of these two organizations over time and have led each organization towards a different direction.

3 Regionalism and Why India's Choices and Interests Matter

The concept of regional cooperation has been important in world politics. The large economic powers, such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, and Japan, invested little in regionalism after the Second World War. However, due to the changing dynamics on regional trade and foreign investment in the developing world, large states embraced the idea of regionalism with open arms in the post-Cold War era (Katzenstein 2018). In terms of policy coordination, regionalism is a more solid and feasible concept in balancing politics and various interests than global cooperation, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Baldwin 1993).

More recently, regionalism has become a common tendency among countries seeking to foster inter-state relations. The concept of regionalism may vary from context to context, but, from an international relations' viewpoint, it is a process in which countries that share geography within close proximity have some common agreed history which helps them to achieve mutually set goals (Paul 2020). Regionalism not only promotes multilateral cooperation but also helps member states to expand in several sectors, including trade, investment, education, governance, and democracy. This broadening of scope has opened the path for policymakers from different countries to form a coherent agenda through regional organizations that incorporate political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The success of

regionalism depends upon political stability, economic interdependence, and a common regional identity. Conversely, the absence of any of these factors would create a huge void between projected outcomes and actual gains (Paul 2020). Therefore, regionalism helps us to understand the nature of wider issues, such as global governance, democracy, and trade, which are key factors in the operating global marketplace (Farrell et al. 2005). Ideas and functions of a regional organization can both be redefined by members themselves. For example, the Bay of Bengal is of significant importance in the region; hence, states are echoing their latest ideas through the theoretical framework of ‘maritime regionalism’ for substantial economic gain. “The sea is no longer separate from the land,” thus indicating the importance of maritime regionalism and maritime regionalism has now become the reality of the region due to its multidimensional impacts in terms of global trade, labor, and security (Sengupta 2020).

Through platforms such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, South Asian and Southeast Asian nations are following the same trends. These platforms provide an enormous opportunity for policymakers at the highest level to meet regularly for informal discussions on vital regional and bilateral issues. Moreover, regionalism plays a key role in preventing war, and fostering peace and prosperity among nation-states (Dash 2008). In the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions, both international policy and national development are influenced by regional dynamics (Kumar 2017). Rational actors set their goals according to their purposes when a nation becomes part of any regional organization. Therefore, regionalism has a distinct significance for each nation. Even if a member state appears to concur on some issues at a regional level, the state may have a different agenda due to its different vision and perception of regionalism (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2008). For example, when BIMSTEC was formed, every nation publicly stated its desire to cooperate and play a meaningful role in several sectors for the mutual benefit of all.

Leadership is an ambiguous concept in the international setting as some actors prefer to demonstrate it through disguised hegemony, while others prefer to be a focal point by developing a consensual coalition (Kahler 2020). However, emerging powers buttress dominant norms to strengthen regional leadership. Hence, the strategies undertaken by them somewhat explain and predict why they have chosen specific action in the current global order. From India’s perspective, BIMSTEC was not only a platform for fostering regional cooperation and reducing economic disparities. India also believed it to be a platform for establishing both geopolitical dominance and the opportunity to apply its Look East policy to secure India’s security in the region. Member states (both large and small powers) have their own interests and needs in both organizations; some are more distinct, while others try to read the context and act accordingly. For example, India’s interests are to establish geopolitical dominance and counter both China and Pakistan through the regional platform. However, other member states want to liberalize financial and investment flows to foster regional cooperation in multiple sectors and improve interactions between member states. To get the maximum benefits from regional platforms, such as BIMSTEC or SAARC, all member states need to analyze other stakeholders’ needs and demands, distinguishing them separately and forming their own ideas and interests. Therefore, small nations on the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean prefer

regional blocs, such as BIMSTEC, as they can help nations to gain greater economic outcomes than would be achieved through the disjointed multilateralism and platforms promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Moreover, factors, such as dependence, openness, insularity, and weakness, propel smaller states to engage in regional blocs.

With BIMSTEC offering opportunities for smaller states in the region, the idea of promoting shared prosperity is feasible due not only to India's sheer desire to take the leading role, but also owing to its commitment to share center stage with smaller states. On the other hand, smaller states understand that promoting regional cooperation under the SAARC banner might not be possible due to India's ambiguous stance. In addition, common member states from both organizations simply cannot exert pressure on India for several reasons. First, smaller states, due to their resource constraints, often fail to conduct effective interactions with larger member states. Second, limited resources place smaller states in a weaker bargaining position. Therefore, they are forced to analyze relevant information to project their positions and deploy coalitions, setting strict objectives to reduce their initial disadvantage and to place themselves in a position where they can foster economic and regional cooperation (Long 2017). For smaller nations, BIMSTEC is the ideal platform as they can enjoy the privilege of playing a crucial role in several sectors, including technology, energy, agriculture, trade and investment, poverty alleviation, etc. through this regional organization (Bhowmick and Basu 2020). A common phenomenon is that the success or failure of a regional organization depends upon the role played by a powerful member nation in that organization. As a regional organization, SAARC has not been as successful due to the constant India–Pakistan tension (with India and Pakistan both member states) and the hegemonic role played by India in that region. In terms of the economy, population, and military capability, the principal position in the South Asian region is held by India. The territory held by India occupies 73% of the entire region. In terms of the region's GDP, India contributes close to 80% (Bhattarai 2016). Such a massive structural imbalance between India and other countries in that region has generated contrasting policy goals. In short, although India has formed a hierarchical regional order, Pakistan and other smaller states in the region have denied the hierarchy. Smaller states have also developed extensive mistrust towards India for its expansionist activities. From its own perspective, India has constantly refused the idea of regional dispute settlement, believing that this would propel collaboration against India by its South Asian neighbors.

India is a significant factor in relation to developing successful regionalism, as it has wide scope to play effective roles in stimulating regionalism. As a major actor in terms of its economy, military capability, held territory, and population, India's choices and intentions contribute significantly to the success of economic and political organizations, such as SAARC and BIMSTEC. Table 3 illustrates what it looks like with India, as a major actor, choosing to act differently in two similar kinds of organizations. In terms of fostering regional cooperation, this demonstrates why these two organizations are taking two different approaches. In increasing intra-regional trade and promoting regional cooperation through various sectors, BIMSTEC is achieving much greater success. Hence, it generates trust among member

Table 3 A tale of two organizations [adapted from Kumar (2020b) and Majid (2017)]

SAARC	BIMSTEC
Intra-regional trade only 5%	Intra-regional trade has increased around 7% in a decade
Postponed annual summits 13 times for bilateral disputes and other reasons	Never postponed a summit due to internal conflict (recently postponed due to COVID-19)
Most sectors are inactive	Fourteen (14) sectors are dedicated to enhancing regional cooperation

states which is the key to attaining a common goal through regional platforms. Conversely, SAARC has taken a backseat in promoting its regional goals. Several summits postponed due to bilateral disputes confirm the serious trust issue among its member states when trying to achieve common goals. Therefore, the initiatives or projects undertaken by SAARC to promote regionalism are mostly inactive.

Despite India's hegemonic role in the region, the same countries are willing to help India to promote regionalism through BIMSTEC as their interests are aligned with support for India. Smaller states can only bargain with larger states when they have the necessary resources (primarily economic resources) and military power. However, in reality, none of the member states common to both organizations has the necessary resources to oppose India's hegemonic role. Hence, they are forced to play along with India's diplomatic game. If India wants to foster multisectoral developments through regionalism under the SAARC banner, it must undertake substantial initiatives to fix the unbalanced and asymmetric power structure in South Asia.

4 Are India's Ideas and Interests Compatible with BIMSTEC's Success?

The end of the Cold War in 1991 hinted at a paradigm shift in the foreign policies of several countries including India. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in India losing a crucial ally that could have provided economic, military, and diplomatic assistance at an international level. Hence, India was forced to alter its economic and foreign policies. India had a vision of being a 'tiger economy' through fostering strong economic and maritime partnerships with the East Asian states, with this branded the Look East policy. At the same time, China's growing influence has significantly changed the dynamics of Indo-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) relations. For example, India believes that China's increasing military engagement in the region is designed to displace India from its hegemonic position (Karki 2021). China, as the offensive strategic competitor in the region, has forced India to adjust its strategic goals, as strategic imbalances propel one country to transform its interests and ideas into acute economic and security policies. From India's perspective, the Look East policy not only fosters economic growth to offset China's rising influence in South Asia, but would also serve India's purpose by achieving developmental goals in its northeastern region (Ziipao 2018). Since BIMSTEC's formation, India has been more interested in making it an active platform, particularly in comparison to India's approach to SAARC. Once formed, BIMSTEC

took some time to settle down. However, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited six other BIMSTEC member states to attend his oath-taking ceremony in 2019, this indicated that India had finally cemented BIMSTEC as its preferred platform for regional cooperation. India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, stated that BIMSTEC fits perfectly with India's vision, as expressed in its 'Neighborhood First' and Act East policy. This statement reflects the importance attached to BIMSTEC by India (Rahman and Kim 2016). It also illustrates the common assumption that India is being driven by interests that are likely to establish India's vision of increasing its geopolitical dominance and economic strength in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions.

4.1 Strategic Importance

The above statement by India's Minister of External Affairs confirms that BIMSTEC has great strategic importance for India for two reasons. First, BIMSTEC has strategic importance for both China and India, with this leading to a 'tug of war' between these two countries that each want to gain control of energy resources, sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and cultural influence in the region. Over the years, SLOCs have become the integral means for economic transactions within the region. Therefore, taking control over SLOCs would result in greater economic benefits and decrease possible inimical activities which could challenge security (Agarwala and Saha 2019). This cultural phenomenon can be defined as 'soft power diplomacy' which refers to a country's ability to influence the ideas and interests of different actors, including states, in the international context through its culture, political values, and foreign policies (You 2018). Second, BIMSTEC is important in asserting authority in a densely populated coastal area to tackle the likely impacts of climate change. The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay in the world and over one-fifth of the world's population live in the seven member states in its coastal area (Kellegama 2001).

If India intends to increase its geopolitical and economic influence, it must act as a big actor and obtain control of the region. India has taken several initiatives to integrate the region, knowing that BIMSTEC can play a key role in bridging the gap between South Asia and Southeast Asia. India's specific objectives concerning the Bay of Bengal are to use the benefits from cost-effective maritime routes in both national and sub-regional contexts and to make good connections with the north-eastern part of India to foster economic growth (Upadhyaya 2018). India's growing engagement and maritime security initiatives with BIMSTEC are completely compatible with India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) programs with their aims of growing connectivity and development in the northeastern part of India (Ramachandran 2019). Even though India took the initiative in the broader setting of the Indian Ocean region in 2015, India's 'Neighborhood First' vision is very pertinent in the context of the Bay of Bengal's coastal countries. India's close relationship with BIMSTEC will help it to protect the huge untapped resources in the Bay of Bengal, such as natural gas and unrefined oil, from China and other major foreign powers (Hossain 2013).

However, China has several strategies that it can use to challenge India's ambition to gain leadership in the region. China can use its economic and political influence, as well as providing military support to peripheral countries in the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal holds a key position in the global economic system: it also functions as a strategic network to the Malacca Strait which is a major trade route for China (Kumar 2020b). Hence, China is now expanding maritime relations with countries, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, through infrastructure funding. China is purposefully investing heavily through projects, such as the maritime silk route, anti-piracy, and anti-terrorism operations in the Bay of Bengal, to make its presence felt and to limit India's power and influence (Anwar 2022). China is particularly investing significantly in Pakistan through projects such as the China–Pakistan economic corridor. This comprehensive project has mammoth potential to expand connectivity and regional integration. This economic corridor will lay the foundation for China to connect with other regional countries and establish itself as a dominant actor (Hussain and Jamali 2019). This vigorous initiative from China challenges India's territorial integrity and hegemonic ambition in the region. Hence, India strongly opposes Chinese investment through the development of different infrastructure projects in this region. Using these strategies, China can solidify its ability to manipulate the foreign policy decision-making processes of other countries. Other member states also feel the maritime realm of the Bay of Bengal as it provides them with a major opportunity to integrate regional cooperation, regional security, and foster economic development.

China's initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (China's vision for inclusive international cooperation), constant submarine movement, and ship visits in the Indian Ocean, are also weakening India's status as a dominant actor in the region (Chhibber 2017). China's investment in the BRI has particularly threatened India in terms of economic and regional dominance, while, at the same time, the region offers China a wide range of strategic domains. China is undertaking these initiatives to promote its Chinese model of politics and development in the Southeast Asian region, with these projects less about economic development and more about achieving political and strategic goals on a grand scale (Yu 2017). Former Eastern Naval Command Chief of the Indian Coast Guard, Vice Admiral Harish Chandra Singh Bisht admitted that such initiatives from China would serve the purpose of developing dependency among these nations (Business Standard 2017). Although most of BIMSTEC's member states are also part of China's BRI, it is unlikely that participating in the BRI would create an immediate dispute within BIMSTEC states. Small states have understood that any actions on China's part would have a spillover impact on BIMSTEC's functioning (Ramasamy et al. 2017). Hence, they are attempting to create a balance between BIMSTEC and the BRI through forming an institutional framework. Such strategies are common for small states as they are open to expanding their network with larger states, thus placing them in a better negotiating position. New Delhi sees China's significant levels of financial assistance for infrastructure development in different countries of the region (e.g., Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) as a great threat (Gong 2019). The reason is that in the process, this assistance creates dependency amongst receiver countries and leaves India in a position from which it cannot establish itself as a dominant actor. India is apprehensive about Beijing's vigorous initiatives in the region; hence, New Delhi must

undertake its own initiatives. India is eventually acknowledging the situation by offering diplomatic and financial assistance to bail out receiver countries (Hussain 2018).

India, along with Myanmar and Thailand, is working on an international road connectivity plan, with New Delhi funding two sections of this trilateral highway project (Mathew 2019). India's recent Kaladan transport project, which links the northeastern part of India with other parts of the country via Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal, will play a key role in fostering regionalism. India has revealed that it has spent US\$1 billion and US\$5 billion, respectively, on these projects to create manufacturing hubs to counter China's increasing influence. Historically, the northeastern region of India is marginalized due to local insurrections; however, these connectivity projects would eradicate remoteness and strengthen India's position as a leader in the region. The northeastern region of India is collectively endowed with various energy resources which are attracting India to develop an effective regional power grid. India has a wide range of interests in this region. Power interconnection would leverage a new market, thus allowing India to develop renewable energy and low carbon electricity. Additionally, it would reduce resilience on fossil fuels and intensify sustainable regional integration (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UN ESCAP] 2020). As mutual interdependency is fundamental to regional integration, India would be in a core position to operate trade connectivity, digital connectivity, transport connectivity, economic connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity among BIMSTEC member states.

In terms of solidifying security in the region through BIMSTEC, India is directly leading the counterterrorism and transnational crimes' sector. Under this sector, India hosted a joint military exercise with other member states in September 2018. Agreements on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and cooperation in fighting against international terrorism are on the discussion table and are expected to be passed within a year or two (Ramachandran 2019). Although India clearly intends to be a sole dominant force by establishing its regional agenda in Southeast Asia, India also knows that it will face intense opposition from both Pakistan and China. New Delhi also understands that, with Pakistan being a close ally of China, this provides China with multidimensional strategic advantages. Pakistan's geo-strategic location also offers China alternative access routes for fossil fuels from the Persian Gulf region (Javed and Ismail 2021). This simultaneously serves two purposes for China: first, it ensures China's strong presence in the region and, second, it counters India's dominance by expanding joint military vigilance. India also believes that China's nuclear and missile technology assistance to Pakistan is designed to halt India's regional supremacy (Ismail and Husnain 2022). Therefore, India, by slowly establishing its geopolitical agenda through BIMSTEC, has a perfect fit for its vision, as expressed through its Look East policy, and will simultaneously confront its two greatest rivals.

4.2 Economic Importance

Significant economic importance has been attached to BIMSTEC by India. Despite having economic limitations, BIMSTEC member states have done remarkably well in sustaining economic growth close to 7.5% in the last 5 years (Bhattacharjee

2018). Table 4 illustrates the positive compound growth rate of BIMSTEC member states in India's trade. The overall compound growth rate of BIMSTEC member states between 2005 and 2014 was 25.16%. During that period, the highest contributor to the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) was Thailand at 30.43%. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar were also major contributors. Statistics show the importance attached by India to other BIMSTEC states in relation to trade (Sharma and Rathore 2015).

In its report, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) states that, in 2016, the intra-regional trade between BIMSTEC members was US\$40.5 billion with India having a share of almost 50% (Dutta 2019). This statistic clearly illustrates how much importance India attaches to BIMSTEC in terms of economic cooperation. In terms of export and import statistics, FICCI reports that BIMSTEC is the most active trade-driven regional bloc in the world. This is not surprising as the Bay of Bengal route accounts for approximately 25% of global trade (Dutta 2019). India's objective is clear: if the country could establish itself as the sole dominant actor through BIMSTEC, it would be able to control one-quarter of global trade. In this era of globalization, India needs to explore additional foreign markets. This platform would allow BIMSTEC member states to scale up their production of tradable goods, while, at the same time, the increasing commercial activities would improve the economic conditions of an enormous number of people by creating new markets. Intergovernmental trades are fundamental to generating trust and regional cooperation. Through trust, member states are provided with encouragement to build greater harmonization of their trade policies, while decreasing tariff barriers. India's closeness to BIMSTEC would also promote economic activities by exploring unused natural resources in its underdeveloped eastern states including eastern Uttar Pradesh, eastern Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal. A multilateral platform would help India to generate hydroelectric power through water resources in these underdeveloped states (Yahya 2005). India's maritime security project is

Table 4 Compound growth rate of BIMSTEC countries in India's trade (in US\$ mil) (Sharma and Rathore 2015)

BIMSTEC	2005	2014	CAGR (in %)
Bangladesh	1823.49	6772.51	27.14
Myanmar	606.41	2261.29	27.29
Sri Lanka	2507.78	7026.95	18.02
Thailand	2255.86	9119.46	30.43
Nepal	1222.49	4754.16	28.89
Bhutan	195.19	344.71	7.66
BIMSTEC 6 ^a	8611.22	30,279.1	25.16
Share of BIMSTEC 6 in India's trade (in %)	3.57	3.9	

CAGR compound annual growth rate

^aBIMSTEC 6 comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (International Trade Centre [ITC] Trade Map August 2015)

also a good example of India's serious preference for BIMSTEC as the preferred platform for expanding economic cooperation. India's growing engagement with other BIMSTEC member states will not only boost the Blue Economy (improving economic growth and livelihood through sustainable use of ocean resources), but it will also provide a comprehensive solution for its maritime security (Cai 2017). Multilateral regional engagement will help to reduce problems such as transnational maritime crimes and illegal fishing. Piracy, and the transfer of drugs and weapons are quite common in the region. In addition, illegal fishing in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has become a security concern for India. India's maritime security project will help to reduce these problems. As a result, BIMSTEC member states from this region would be able to increase their economic activities without concerns about security.

India shares its border with five countries among the seven BIMSTEC member states. This includes the busiest land custom checkpoint in Asia—the Petrapole–Benapole border checkpoint between India and Bangladesh (Shrivastava 2005). The nature of shared borders would suggest that India has the motivation to improve intra-regional trade. Hence, improving connectivity in all sectors would help India to achieve its economic goal and establish geopolitical dominance. It is understandable why Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to BIMSTEC as a natural platform for implementing India's vision of 'Neighborhood First' and its Look East policy. Connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia and, more importantly, in the context of ecological connection, BIMSTEC also forms a bridge between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal (Kundu 2014). Therefore, it can be assumed that India is sensing a huge opportunity in BIMSTEC to secure its authority in the region while simultaneously achieving two goals. First, India could implement its vision of 'Neighborhood First' and its Look East policy and, second, India could establish itself as a dominant actor in the world. The ideas and interests of small states, to some extent, certainly matter in promoting regionalism. However, when a big actor really wants to establish something through BIMSTEC—in the case of India, the establishment of geopolitical dominance and countering Pakistan's and China's upsurge—this can easily trump small states' interests due to the big actor's superior positions in terms of economic and military strengths (Long 2017).

5 India's Different Interests Under the SAARC Banner

As an indigenous project, SAARC faces a menace that is not caused by an outside hegemonic power. However, India is playing this role in the South Asian region due to its vast size, population, military strength, and economic power (Batra 2010). Except for Afghanistan, India borders every land-based SAARC member. India shares the same geographical pattern in BIMSTEC, except for Thailand. However, India's different interests continue to persist in both organizations which is why SAARC has not been successful as a regional organization. The following subsections discuss this in detail.

5.1 India's Controversial Role and Its Foreign Policy Orientation Towards SAARC Members

In the contemporary global context, regionalism has great importance as regional platforms can reduce transaction costs. At the same time, both large and small states legitimize their ideas and enhance their capacity through such platforms (Kumar 2020a). Based on this principle, organizations, such as SAARC, constantly suffer from internal disputes and various other factors, including the controversial role played by India in the South Asian region. India's desire to take leadership in the decision-making process leads other states, particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, to think that India will challenge their sovereignty by interfering in their internal issues. More importantly, India's growing geopolitical influence and the large disparity between India and other SAARC member states, in terms of its economy, military strength, and geography, make these states feel vulnerable and concerned about India's hegemonic role in the region (Shaheen 2013). Having these types of dispute and the mistrust of Pakistan and other neighboring countries, India finds it difficult to implement its 'Neighborhood First' vision under the SAARC banner.

Mutual trust is a vital ingredient in developing regional cooperation. India holds a central position in terms of formulating economic and foreign policies with neighboring countries and is progressively driving towards bilateralism. Consequently, India's monopoly tarnishes the idea of establishing regional cooperation under the SAARC banner. Smaller countries in that region not only want to come out from under India's shadow, but they also want India to act in a liberal manner, so they can share some sort of equality through the regional SAARC platform (Wapmuk 2015). Even after almost 3 decades of SAARC's existence, the level of intra-regional trade is only 5% between SAARC member states (Bhattacharjee 2018). Another reason behind SAARC's failure is the lack of capability to make any sort of unanimous decision due to India's dominant and ambitious attitude. Thus, SAARC has become bilateral which was not the intention.

The core goal of an organization like SAARC shows this transition. Bilateralism decreases member states' dependency on SAARC to achieve their collective objectives, with SAARC member states already believing that any matter placed on the table will not see the light of day. The reason is mistrust, the tendency to establish dominance, and the egoistic relationship between the two big actors, India and Pakistan. This results in smaller states becoming disinterested in participation in activities at the regional level. The success or failure of an organization depends upon cooperation and trust between its member countries, with these elements currently absent between SAARC member states. India is the least interested in working through SAARC to foster intra-regional trade and reduce the trade gap with other member states. India's trade with SAARC members only accounts for between 1.7 and 3.8% of its global trade, which is the extent to which this trade aligns with India's economic benefit (Sinha and Sareen 2020). Figure 1 illustrates that intra-regional trade between SAARC member states has not been consistent, although with a slowly increasing trade surplus. Therefore, despite having potential, SAARC has not been successful in terms of expanding intra-regional trade. Unless

various trade barriers are addressed, trade agreements between SAARC member states would generate nothing. On the other hand, India can trade 20% cheaper with distant countries (e.g., Brazil), than with its neighbor Pakistan and other member states (Manik 2020).

Despite numerous types of institutional apparatus being set up under the SAARC banner, only a select few have been executed. One example is the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) which, although initiated in 2006, still has not been fully executed. Mistrust, animosity, tariff barriers, and strict visa rules are the main reasons why trade potential among member states is not substantial. As a major actor, India should have played a leading role by reducing bilateral disputes with other member states: this which would have allowed this region to expand the scope of its flows of commodities, capital, and ideas. However, India’s reluctance to promote regionalism through SAARC has resulted in the failure to strengthen its member states’ socio-economic conditions (Sen et al. 2019).

This indicates India’s design of a policy that the country itself is reluctant to use to reduce economic disparities and to increase cooperation with other SAARC member states. Unfortunately, this example and others create a trade imbalance under the SAARC banner, even though one of SAARC’s mission statements was to balance trade by establishing economic strength through regional cooperation.

India’s trade surplus with N8 has been increasing

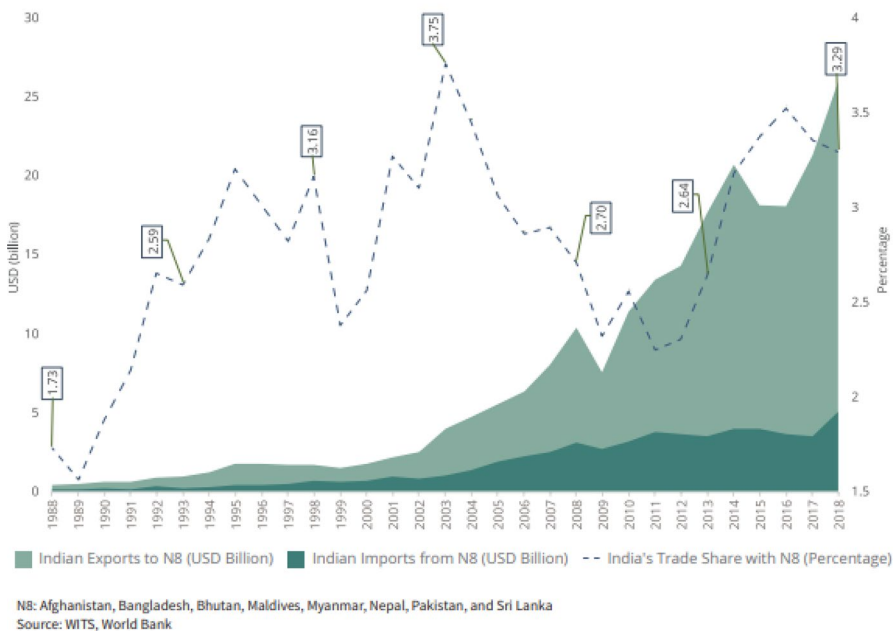


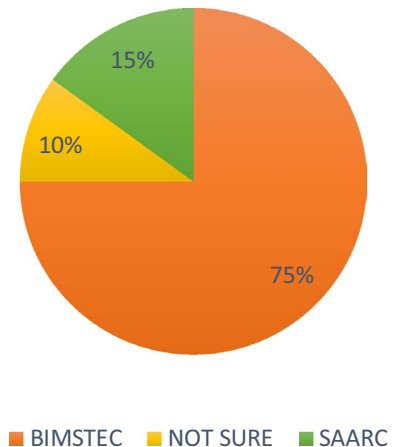
Fig. 1 India’s total trade with South Asia and regional share of global trade (N8) (Sinha and Sareen 2020)

In consideration of the history and the present scenario, stakeholders placed their preference for either SAARC or BIMSTEC as their preferred platform. The results are shown in Fig. 2. A senior fellow with Observer Research Foundation's (ORF) Neighborhood Regional Studies, Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, conducted the survey in 2016 for her article "SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The search for the ideal platform for regional cooperation," with 20 stakeholders interviewed and asked for their preferred platform for regional cooperation (Bhattacharjee 2018). Respondents to this survey were well-established academics, journalists, and former diplomats from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Seventy-five (75) percent ($n = 15$) of respondent stakeholders agreed that BIMSTEC is their preferred platform for active involvement to increase regional development and cooperation, whereas SAARC was preferred by only 15% (three stakeholders). Only 10% (two stakeholders) of those surveyed were unsure which platform they preferred to use for participation in regional cooperation. Taking all factors into consideration, it is not surprising that SAARC is sliding towards failure as member states have severe trust issues owing to India and Pakistan's bilateral dispute (Bhattacharjee 2018). However, it cannot be denied that India's ambition to establish geopolitical dominance in the region and to be a major actor in world politics is continuously hampering SAARC's functions as a solid regional cooperation platform. If India wants to fulfill its ambitious agendas, it needs to counter both Pakistan and China which obstructs SAARC from achieving its potential.

5.2 Bilateral Disputes with Pakistan and Other Member States

The series of Indo-Pakistan crises has negatively impacted on SAARC as tensions between India and Pakistan continue to hamper efforts for greater regional cooperation. The performance of SAARC is adversely affected by several bilateral disputes involving Kashmir, the Wullar Barrage, the Baglihar Dam, and the Siachen dispute (Majid 2017). Both countries are engaged in a never-ending arms race and both intend to lead the region, thus keeping the tension alive between them. The

Fig. 2 Preferred platform for regional cooperation (stakeholders' opinions) (Bhattacharjee 2018)



everlasting dispute has become a great obstacle to fostering growth and development. For example, the 19th SAARC summit was scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2016, but was suspended for an indefinite period. India was in the midst of an intense bilateral dispute with Pakistan: this was caused by an attack on an Indian military base in 2016, with India directly accusing Pakistan of the incident (Mathew 2019). Immediately after the attack, India forced other SAARC member states not to participate in the 19th SAARC summit (Mathew 2019). The SAARC member states declined to participate due to the absence of a friendly regional environment. As a result, four of the eight SAARC member states refused to participate in the summit and India claimed victory in isolating Pakistan. The suspension of the 19th SAARC summit through India's machinations is a clear indication how SAARC, as a regional organization, has paid the price for India's hierarchical design.

Although SAARC is intended to promote regional cooperation and economic growth, India's everlasting bilateral dispute with Pakistan and its constant tendency to influence other member states in their decision-making process have made SAARC fragile in terms of its aim of increasing regional cooperation. This has gradually created mistrust and suspicion between SAARC member states, affecting economic growth and development while, at the same time, making SAARC dysfunctional. As a regional cooperation group, SAARC has enormous potential, but this has diminished due to the lack of response from, and constant obstructions by, both India and Pakistan. For example, SAFTA, as a trade agreement, is not functional due to India's lack of cooperation (Shaheen 2013). The SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement also failed to fulfill its goal of increasing connectivity between member states as Pakistan opted out of the project (Dutta 2019). This hostile environment and suspicion in the bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan are slowing down SAARC's decision-making process.

India also has bilateral issues with other SAARC member states. For example, the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India is constantly referred to as a 'role model.' However, the real scenario is somewhat different. From a trade perspective, the deficit grew in favor of India at an astounding 164.4% over the last decade. The foreign direct investment (FDI) gap between these two countries is also mounting (Khasru 2020). Despite India's FDI in Bangladesh having reached a staggering US\$3.11 billion, India has placed Bangladesh in the same category as Pakistan which is disappointing and a clear sign of India's non-cooperative attitude (Khasru 2020). Despite the promise of adhering to the India–Bangladesh coordinated Border Management Plan, the border issue continues to be fragile. At least 50 Bangladeshi civilians have been killed by India's Border Security Force in the last year alone. In comparison, on the notorious US–Mexico border, infamous for the cross-border narcotics trade, 111 people have been killed by the US Border Patrol Force since 2010 (Anik 2020). In another example, despite a series of promises made by the Indian Prime Minister to resolve the water issue, India has done very little. In particular, the Teesta water sharing issue, a sensitive matter for Bangladesh, has not yet been resolved. India's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens (NRC) has also placed a question mark on the 'role model' relationship between Bangladesh and India. Although India has described this as an internal issue, the truth is that 1.9 million

Muslims are excluded from Assam through the NRC which is bound to exert pressure on Bangladesh (Khasru 2020). India is constantly exerting pressure on Bangladesh and, unfortunately, has done very little for this bilateral relationship to be considered a unique role model.

Several accusations against India have been made by Sri Lanka and Nepal. Assisted by the Indian government, India's intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) interferes in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka and Nepal. The Tamil revolt in Sri Lanka and the Maoist rebellion in Nepal are prime examples of RAW's interference and meddling (Idrees et al. 2017). New Delhi and Kathmandu continue to experience tension over their sharing of common rivers, with India's controversial role playing creating mistrust in the Nepali government in terms of proper water distribution.

The problem is that India, through SAARC, constantly denies Pakistan a share of the center stage to promote regionalism. India's reason for doing so is to deny Pakistan equal benefit from SAARC as this would contradict India's vision of establishing geopolitical dominance. Therefore, any program emerging through the SAARC banner fails to offer meaningful change due to India's non-cooperative attitude. At the same time, BIMSTEC is better at serving India's interests of establishing geopolitical dominance and economic solidarity through taking full advantage of ocean resources. Through BIMSTEC, India fulfills two major purposes: isolating Pakistan in the development process and, at the same time, putting China on the back foot in terms of accessing the full advantages of the Blue Economy. However, if India wants to play an effective 'big actor' role through establishing a dispute resolution policy and economic cooperation, it must accommodate other SAARC member states to a greater extent and enable them to contribute from their respective positions.

6 Conclusion

The pursuit of a big actor's interests can be magnified in a different global context. The term 'interests' is referred to as a contest involving the choice of a rational principle, with this explaining the behavior and interactions of a big actor in a given context. Without interventions from its arch-rival, Pakistan, India has established a regional agenda and other initiatives with the other BIMSTEC member states. India is thus more interested in fulfilling its geopolitical agenda under the BIMSTEC banner rather than the SAARC banner. Moreover, SAARC does not fit India's 'Neighborhood First' vision as it constantly faces obstructionist approaches from Pakistan politically, economically and, in some cases, geographically. The agenda and policy of any social group or organization are often formed around the ideas and interests of its members. The ideas and interests of major actors or members shape an organization's fate as their choices have the ability to drive power and to exercise individuals' skill and capability as well as influencing other members. India's roles in SAARC and BIMSTEC are completely different due to India's ideas and interests, with this standing as a perfect example of how a dominant actor's different interests can bring two different outcomes.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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