

## Book Review

# Exploring new avenues of regionalism in South Asia

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*Rethinking Regionalism in South Asia*  
Edited by: Adhuri Subramanyam Raju,  
Stuera Press: New Delhi, 2019

The concept of regionalism developed its roots in Europe and spread across other regions across the world. As mentioned in several chapters of this book the European Union (EU) served as the model to follow for other regional organizations for many years but has been increasingly challenged as a viable model post-Brexit period. Regionalism itself is under challenge in the Western world. The resurgence of nationalism in the countries of the global North has led to rising protectionism which in turn has challenged the significance of regionalism or regional organization. This is a very timely book when regionalism is undergoing significant evolution across the globe. The walking out of Britain from the EU has shaken the regional integration process to its core.

The book is a seamless read and the way the chapters are arranged makes the reading smooth. It begins by looking at the question of regional integration and regionalism through theoretical perspectives, briefly dives into the topic of sub regionalism and concludes with looking at the same topic through economic lenses. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has been suggested as an alternative to SAARC by many contributors. BIMSTEC as an alternative was also suggested by Rajiv Sikri in his book, *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy*. The major problem with SAARC has been Pakistan's obstructionism and the progress solely depends on India-Pakistan relations. Sikri had suggested BIMSTEC as an alternative as India's North-East Region (NER) lies at the centre of BIMSTEC. The strengthening of BIMSTEC has the potential to transform NER from economic backwardness and integrate India with its Eastern neighbours.

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The Chapters are divided into three sections. The first section engages with the question of regionalism through theoretical perspectives. In the second section, the contributors look at the possibility of sub-regionalism as a way forward for sustainable integration in the region. China's increasing influence and how it will be a security concern and a hindrance to the process of sub-regionalism is also discussed in the book. The final section examines regionalism and its challenges from a top-down method, i.e., from the perspectives of different states of South Asia. It analyses the avenues available to different states to foster regional ties and cope with the challenges before them.

The narration of the book is light and lucid and effectively explains the problems related to regionalism and the alternatives available. It also suggests the way forward to strengthen regionalism in South Asia. The book broadly talks about how the concept of 'regionalism' and 'regional integration' developed with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and traces its progress and present condition. A lot of contributors in the book have agreed that there is not much hope left in SAARC and the countries of South-Asia needs to look beyond it to foster a sustainable regional integration process. Several contributors have argued that in South-Asia the regionalism always seemed superimposed. Although the area is well connected in terms of geography and culture, there are fault lines and mistrust among the states that never allowed the formation of a substantive regional organization in the region.

In the first section, a detailed and comprehensive analysis of regionalism in South Asia has been undertaken, drawing upon the various functionalist and non-functionalist approaches. Challenges and problems related to regional integration have been discussed in great detail. Shaji S. argues in his chapter that applying these functionalist and non-functionalist approaches used in the West will not be of much help as every region is very different from the other. He makes the point that SAARC has been trying to emulate EU and this has acted as a hindrance to the development of regionalism. Rajamanickam Srinivasan in his chapter mentions the two faces of South Asia: dynamic and agricultural. Dynamic is the urban face of South Asia, where there are rapidly growing and economically flourishing cities as a consequence of globalization. The agricultural face, on the other hand, is largely dependent on farming for its survival, and is fairly poor and underdeveloped. He explains how the growing cleavages between these two dichotomies are fueling regional tensions within the various nations; leading to slow progress of regional integration. These two chapters raise a significant point that economic interdependence which has shown a positive result in the EU has not been of much help and a bottom-up approach is needed South-Asia.

SAARC and its lack of progress have been widely criticized. Although some contributors are still hopeful, the majority has given up on it and believe BIMSTEC is a more promising alternative. Due to the diversity of contributions, this part gives divergent views--sometimes even contradictory views -- on the way forward for regionalism in South Asia. It leaves it to the reader to decide what could be the way forward. The chapters cover the challenges to regional integration from all aspects which makes this part a very holistic read.

The second section is short, comprising just three chapters and focuses on sub-regionalism. However, the theme should have been given more space as only Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) and Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) have been analysed. It has been advocated in several chapters that India and China can together act as a driver for the sub-regional organization. However, that does not seem very likely. India considers itself as a net security provider in South-Asia and from its perspective, the rising Chinese influence in this region is perceived as a security threat. Therefore, the view of India-China facilitating sub-regionalism is a far-fetched idea and is unlikely to materialize.

P.K Ghosh, in his chapter explores sub-regionalism through maritime ties. The thinking about foreign policy or regional integration among South-Asian states has primarily been land-based. A more detailed analysis about this could have given new alternatives regarding sub-regionalism. This section ends very abruptly and the idea of sub-regionalism certainly needs to be explored more rigorously. This can be a new way of forging sustainable relations between like-minded countries of South Asia.

The final part of the book looks at regionalism through a top-down approach by examining the individual nation's perspectives on regionalism. SAARC is a central theme in this part and how it is viewed by different states. The topic which is given great emphasis is how several countries support China's inclusion in SAARC and the reason for their support. The contributors also discuss the evolution of India's foreign policy over the years vis-à-vis regionalism. China dominates this part of the book and all possible impact that China's inclusion in SAARC can have on the region and on India have been explored. The chapters in this part carry detailed research and are focused in their outlook.

## **Conclusion**

India, which is the major regional power, has given up on SAARC and is looking towards BIMSTEC for cooperation. BIMSTEC has gained prominence due to the recent policies of the Modi government such as 'Neighbourhood First' and Act East Policy (AEP) and has the potential to advance as it complement India's and its Eastern neighbours' desire for greater engagement with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The three

important priority areas for a successful regional organisation are connectivity, trade and people to people contact. With several ongoing projects under the BBIN, the Kaladan multi-modal project and BBIN-Motor Vehicles Agreement making progress, the growth of BIMSTEC looks promising.

While regionalism is being challenged across the globe, the story is a little different in this region. The countries of South-Asia are pushing towards regionalism. In this context, the book makes an important contribution to the literature. The book brings together divergent views and sometimes even contradictory views on the way forward for regionalism in South Asia. It leaves it to the readers to decide what could be the way forward. The chapters cover the challenges to regional integration from all aspects which makes this part a very holistic read.