

South Asia: Regionalism, SAARC & BIMSTEC

Day 43. The neighbourhood policy, the eastward turn, and the two institutions that were built to hold South Asia together. **Revise → write a little → don't break the chain.**

Exam load on this unit (UPSC 2016–2024): 8 × 10-markers · 3 × 15-markers · 2 × 20-markers.

PART A THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE EASTWARD TURN

1 The South Asian Paradox

"We cannot change history, but we cannot change geography either." — Atal Bihari Vajpayee

- South Asia is the one region where India's power is unquestioned and its influence least secure.
- India holds **over 75%** of the region's GDP and **over 70%** of its population → an **asymmetry** that produces dependence and resentment together.
- Muchkund Dubey**: a country's foreign policy can be judged by its relations with its neighbours.
- Shyam Saran** (*How India Sees the World: From Kautilya to the 21st Century*) → friendly relations with neighbours reduce India's security dilemmas; the logic of geography is unrelenting.
- Kautilya's** formulation treats immediate neighbours as natural enemies. In an age of **complex interdependence** that premise has to be reworked — not discarded.
- The region is described as an **"arc of instability"** — three unsettled boundaries, two nuclear rivals, several fragile democracies, and a rising extra-regional power with money and patience.

2 Neighbourhood First — design and purpose

Background

- Neighbourhood policy has always been central to India's foreign relations; fresh momentum after **2014**, roots much earlier.
- Rests on three legs — civilisational thought (**Kautilya's raja-mandala**), the **Gujral Doctrine** of non-reciprocity, and post-liberalisation economic logic.

The policy

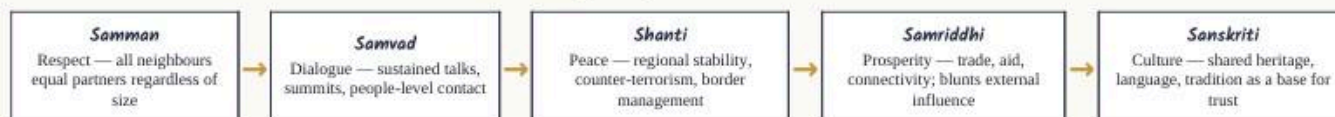
- Took shape around **2008** → strong neighbourhood relations on a **consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented** approach.
- Deliverables: connectivity, infrastructure, energy, security cooperation, disaster response.
- The maritime extension is **MAHASAGAR** — Modi, Malé, July 2025: the Maldives "holds an important place in India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and 'MAHASAGAR' vision."
- Has **no formal institutional structure** → precisely what makes it a convenient instrument for India to work across South Asia while bypassing Pakistan.

Significance — seven heads

Head	Content
Strategic	Regional integration to counter China and to hold India's own vision of the region.
Global South	Credibility in demanding reform of global governance (UNSC, IMF) depends on standing in one's own region.
Multilateralism	Working through SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN, IORA.
Soft power	Cultural and historical ties as an instrument of influence.
Security	Counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, transnational organised crime.
Economic & energy	Regional trade, investment, cross-border infrastructure; Nepal and Bhutan's hydropower potential.
Northeast	Kaladan project; Akhaura–Agartala rail link.

3 The Five Principles

Influence through cooperation rather than coercion



- Samman** carries forward the **Gujral Doctrine** of non-reciprocity — India offers without expecting immediate return.

- Samvad → **Shyam Saran**: geographical closeness is not by itself enough.

4 Concerns in the Neighbourhood Policy

Concern	Scholar	The reading
Domestic instability next door	Nitin Pai	Myanmar, Afghanistan, Nepal often convert internal difficulty into bargaining power against India.
Neglect of neighbours' aspirations	—	The 'big brother' attitude leaves a strategic gap that China fills.
Historical narrative & identity	S.D. Muni	The subcontinent's historical narrative encourages a <i>non-Indian</i> identity among neighbours, which feeds anti-India sentiment.
Strategic unpredictability	Suhasini Haidar	Ad-hoc decisions damage India's image; compared to Nixon's 'Madman Theory'.
Rising Chinese influence	Happymon Jacob	India stays focused on regional matters while China extends influence through infrastructure and military power, shrinking India's strategic space.
Labels for the posture	Suhasini Haidar · Zorawar Daulat Singh	"Equidistance"; the second urges a "dual-track foreign policy".
Security-centric policy	P. Stobdan	A zero-sum, security-first approach benefits China and over-securitises terrorism.
Limited engagement capacity	Shyam Saran	Absence of sustained, multi-level engagement.
Global-power focus	Shashi Tharoor	Preoccupation with the United States, China and Pakistan diverts attention from other neighbours.
Stalemate & connectivity	—	The India–Pakistan deadlock and poor connectivity damage both trade and people-to-people contact.

5 Strategies for Strengthening Relations

Scholar	Prescription
C. Raja Mohan	Greater attention to bilateral, sub-regional and trans-regional groupings — BIMSTEC, SASEC.
P. Stobdan	A top-down approach on the Chinese and Russian model.
Suhasini Haidar	Regain prominence in SAARC; play a constructive role without interfering in domestic politics.
Zorawar Daulat Singh	Strategically shape relationships and define clear redlines.
Vivek Katju	A comprehensive neighbourhood doctrine with strategic redlines.
Sharat Sabharwal	Turn India's growth into shared prosperity; engage Indian border states, fulfil commitments, expedite projects.
Pramit Pal Chaudhary	Partner countries such as Japan with strong project-implementation records.
Harsh V. Pant	Address neighbours' grievances to earn reciprocity; widen engagement into a broader Indo-Pacific frame.
S.D. Muni	Study China's approach to ASEAN before defining India's role in SAARC.

6 Views of Scholars — the differentiated approach

- **Shyam Saran** — the Indian subcontinent is a cohesive geopolitical and ecological space, marked by shared history, cultural bonds and economic interdependence.
- **C. Raja Mohan** — India's challenge is not to compete with China in South Asia but to manage **complex interdependence** with its neighbours; strategic vision must be joined to tactical finesse.
- **Constantino Xavier** — the region is poorly connected and the India–Nepal border is open "mostly on paper". India must move from a "**right of first refusal**" to a "**capacity of first delivery**"; there are no permanent pro-India factions, only leaders balancing several powers at once.

Rajiv Sikri — one size does not fit all

Category	Handling
Small vulnerable neighbours Bhutan, Maldives	Extra care for their sensitivities; reduce dependence while keeping friendship.
Middle-sized neighbours Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Myanmar	Subtle and sophisticated handling; respect as sovereign states; economic ties without expecting reciprocity.
Pakistan and China	Distinct historical and geopolitical complexities; a tailored approach.

A peaceful neighbourhood is the precondition for India to concentrate on its global ascent.

7 Origin and Architecture

- India's eastward orientation came to the fore in the early 1990s after the Cold War ended. The collapse of the USSR — an Indian ally — forced India to look for new partners and to reassess emerging power structures and its own place in them. The **Look East Policy** was formulated in **1991**.
- Since then: strong economic and commercial ties, investment possibilities, strategic alliances, and cultural and historical links with the eastern neighbours.
- The **India-ASEAN** relationship and **BIMSTEC** are both motivated by the LEP. Originally aimed at Southeast and East Asia, the policy was reworked to include **Bangladesh** — energy, transport, security.
- Under **Act East**, India also looks to Southeast Asia and, through the **India-Central Asia Dialogue**, westward to Central Asia.

The forums that let India engage its wider neighbourhood while marginalising Pakistan



The strategic point

The eastern orientation was one instrument of India's distancing from SAARC. Each new forum widened the circle of engagement while leaving Pakistan outside it.

8 The Northeast Dimension

- Bangladesh** is vital to India's communication with its own northeastern states — therefore the gateway to the eastward reorientation. India's development assistance and commercial engagement are driven by three considerations: access to energy supplies and commercial markets for a growing economy, domestic security, and India's rising importance as a regional and global power.
- Focus on re-linking the Northeast with Bangladesh by road, rail, water and air — which explains the rise in the expenditure budget of the **Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region**, from **₹562.78 crore in 2014-15** to **₹2,657.87 crore in 2019-20**.
- The Northeast is the gateway to Southeast Asia. Linkages benefit Bangladesh too — markets for its jute, garment and leather industries, and development of its economically backward eastern districts. Bangladesh has expressed eagerness to partner in the **India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway**.
- Strategically, the linkages bring India closer to Southeast Asia and raise its influence there. With the **QUAD** and the Indo-Pacific becoming the new theatre of world politics, the Bay of Bengal gains importance and Bangladesh becomes a key partner in India's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Bangladesh is not only a key part of 'Neighbourhood First' but central to 'Act East': "We see Bangladesh as a key neighbour and a valued partner not only in South Asia but also in the broader Indo-Pacific region." — S. Jaishankar

Connectivity under Act East

- The **India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway**; the **Kaladan Multimodal Corridor**; **Sittwe Port**; the **Feni bridge**; restored rail links; inland waterways between **Sonamura and Munshiganj**.

UPSC 2016 · 15m What are the hopes and aspirations of 'Look East Policy' of India?

UPSC 2018 · 10m Analyse the significance of India's Look East Policy in the light of concerns of the indigenous peoples of North-east India.

UPSC 2021 · 10m Discuss the strategic implications of India's 'Look East Policy' transforming into 'Act East Policy'.

UPSC 2022 · 15m What are the implications of 'Look-East' Policy on the north-eastern region of India?

PART B SAARC

9 Foundations, Objectives, Principles

- Interdependence Theory** holds that economic and political connections between states reduce the likelihood of conflict; **Communication Theory** stresses dialogue and mutual understanding in resolving disputes and improving regional cohesion. SAARC embodies both.
- Established with the signing of the **SAARC Charter in Dhaka, 1985**; **Secretariat at Kathmandu**. It operates in a conflict-prone region often called the "arc of instability".
- Seven founding members** — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. **Afghanistan** joined as the eighth in **2007**.
- Objectives** → promote peace and prosperity in South Asia; raise living standards by encouraging self-sufficiency and mutual assistance; strengthen cooperation with other regional and global organisations.
- Foundational principles** → **Panchsheel** — mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence; and the principle of **consensus**, ensuring collective and unanimous decision-making.

"I dream of a day when, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, and dinner in Kabul. That is how my forefathers lived, and that is how I want our grandchildren to live." — Manmohan Singh

10 Issues with SAARC Functionality

- South Asia often lacks a cohesive identity; effectiveness is impeded by **structural asymmetry** and **geopolitical tensions**.
- Structural asymmetry stems from a **“negative mindset”** that contests India’s regional pre-eminence rather than cooperating with it.
- India is perceived as a **“bullying big brother”** and an **“imperialist power”**, producing the **“big brother, small brother” syndrome**. Smaller members fear that closer integration means Indian dominance — a perception fuelled by the integration of Sikkim, the formation of Bangladesh, the IPKF mission in Sri Lanka, and blockades in Nepal and Bhutan. India in turn fears that smaller countries might collectively “gang up” against it.
- **Bimal Prasad**: smaller states show interest in friendly relations with India yet view it as the “main source of threat to their security”. India sees its neighbours as essential components of its security framework while they see it as a danger to theirs — a perception that has let outside powers such as China and the United States establish a presence.
- **Geopolitically**, SAARC is caught in the **India–China rivalry**, which worsens tensions and undermines cohesive integration.
- **Economic asymmetry** and **inward-looking policies** — preference for self-reliance, reluctance to engage in meaningful interdependence; **SAFTA** continues to languish in implementation.
- **Soft power** → India is often seen to lack soft power projection commensurate with its regional weight, while China’s emergence as a counterweight introduces a new dimension requiring recalibrated responses.
- **Consensus requirement** → any decision needs agreement from all, which prevailing mistrust makes hard to achieve. **Joyeeta Bhattacharjee**: at the 18th Summit in Kathmandu (2014) the signing of the **SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement** was stalled because Pakistan declined.
- **Afghanistan** — absence of consensus on recognising the Taliban makes convening a summit itself difficult.
- **International alignments** compel developing countries to maintain strong affiliations with developed powers; Pakistan’s need for good relations with the United States does not allow mutual trust to grow.
- In **39 years**, SAARC has held only **18 summits**, and could not advance beyond **SAPTA (1995)** and **SAFTA (2004)** despite an international environment favourable to regionalism.
- **Charter constraint** — SAARC’s mandate expressly forbids it from taking up bilateral disputes, which removes precisely the issues that matter most.
- **Institutional weakness** — a feeble secretariat and inadequate funding.

SAARC is a “jammed vehicle”. — S. Jaishankar

Its central dysfunction is the inability to convene regular summits — none since 2014 — which reflects institutional paralysis and erodes confidence in its capacity.

“SAARC was established to strengthen cooperation between the South Asian countries and to act as a mechanism for regional integration in South Asia. However, SAARC has always been hostage to the India-Pakistan conflict.” — Niranjan Marjani

Thirty-nine years, eighteen summits



11 The India–Pakistan Question in SAARC

- **C. Raja Mohan** calls Pakistan the **“camel in the caravan of SAARC”** — a vivid metaphor for its role as a hindrance to the region’s progress.
- Pakistan’s socio-political condition is often described as an **“identity crisis”** — the struggle to reconcile competing narratives and historical legacies within its national consciousness.
- The notion that the fruition of SAARC’s objectives would imply a **de facto nullification of the partition** explains Pakistan’s apprehension towards initiatives that could dilute its national identity and historical narrative.
- The **2016 Islamabad summit** was cancelled after India refused to attend in the wake of the **Uri** attack, with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan also withdrawing.
- **2025** — a **SAARC instrument itself withdrawn**. After the **Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025**, the CCS held the **Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance** and cancelled **SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme (SVES)** entry for Pakistani nationals. **Amal Chandra** reads the treaty move as **coercive treaty retaliation**; **Medha Bisht** as coercive diplomacy displacing strategic idealism; **Masha Tokas** applies **securitization theory** — water recast from a technical matter into a security question.

Counterpoint — informal contact has delivered

Informal talks between the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers at the **second SAARC Summit, Bangalore, November 1986**, diffused tension over India’s military exercise **Operation Brasstacks**. India–Sri Lanka talks at the **1987 SAARC foreign ministers’ meeting** led to the accord on the Tamil problem.

UPSC 2016 · 10m “Sometimes we visualize that SAARC’s efforts come to halt because of various impediments to regional cooperation.” Elaborate with reasonable examples of impediments.

12 SAARC as an Economically Integrated Area — the numbers

South Asia covers about 3.5% of the world’s land surface but holds a fourth of its population. Despite proximity and common socio-cultural bonds, it is among the world’s least integrated regions.

Indicator	Position
Intra-regional trade	A meagre 5% of total trade — against 25% for ASEAN.
Intra-regional investment	Less than 1%.
Cost of intra-regional trade	114% of the value of goods exported — trade with neighbours costs more than trade with distant partners, which discourages regional value chains despite contiguity.
Comparative cost	It is 20% cheaper for India to trade with Brazil than with its neighbours.
Hub-and-spoke pattern	For Bangladesh, trade with India is 90% of its regional trade; trade with Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka together is just 2%.

Why it stays low

- **SAFTA's poor implementation** → SAARC's main instrument for improving intra-regional trade has failed largely because of **Non-Tariff Barriers**, while the focus remained on tariff reduction alone.
- **Poor connectivity and infrastructure deficit** → women, the poor and marginalised groups are worst affected by the infrastructure gap.
- **High informal border trade** → recorded figures understate reality. **UNESCAP** analysis shows formal intraregional trade vastly underestimates actual trade, since official data misses informal exchanges by entrepreneurial communities at the frontiers, helped by porous borders and shared history, language and culture.
- **Poor supply capabilities in LDCs** → trade imbalances with India persist because of limited capacity to supply products of interest to India; productive capacities of South Asian LDCs have actually declined in technical complexity and product variety compared with other countries.
- **Poor trade facilitation** → excessive delays, high costs and uncertainty at borders.

The upside estimate

Philippe Le Houérou points to prospects in regional commerce, connectivity and energy cooperation; a **World Bank** study finds goods trade within South Asia could be **three times** current levels, with even higher potential in services.

13 India as a Driving Force of Economic Integration

India is central to SAARC by geography, economy, international stature and commitment. The region has an acute asymmetrical balance, so India carries a special responsibility — taking the region along in its own march is both an economic and a demographic imperative.

Instrument	What India has done
Trade share	India's trade with South Asia is around 5.5% of its global trade; India has pressed for expedited negotiation and implementation of agreements on three themes — trade, connectivity and people-to-people contact .
SAFTA concessions	Unilateral duty-free access on all items to SAARC LDCs; Phase II commitments met for non-LDCs; zero tariff for goods from LDCs.
Currency swap	A base fund of US\$ 2 billion from India for short-term foreign exchange liquidity.
SAARC Development Fund	The only country to have paid its assessed contribution for the entire five-year period — US\$ 89.9 million — plus a voluntary US\$ 100 million .
Bilateral trade openings	Historic FTAs with Bhutan and Nepal, expanded to an FTA with Sri Lanka and significant liberalisation for Bangladesh's principal exports, notably textiles.
Afghanistan	US\$ 2 billion allocated to infrastructure projects in energy and highways.

Limited success — reasons

- The **"Big Brother Syndrome"** among smaller members; India's size makes it the most striking culprit in their eyes.
- India's economic strength and scientific and technological development create suspicion of domination.
- The Pakistan factor — the boycott and eventual scrapping of the **19th Summit** in Islamabad after Uri.
- China's intervention across South Asian countries, containing India's influence — contracts for **Hambantota** and the expansion of **Colombo port**.
- Smaller members such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka consider India the main source of threat to their security and have welcomed, directly or indirectly, the role of extra-regional powers.

The debt-trap thesis and its rebuttal

The **'String of Pearls'** and **debt-trap** readings treat Hambantota as a Chinese strategic foothold. **Lee Jones** and **Shahar Hameiri** (Chatham House) reject this on the evidence — Hambantota was a Rajapaksa white elephant, Sri Lanka's debt crisis came mainly from Western-market borrowing, and the 2017 deal was a commercial lease, not a seizure. The port now hosts Sri Lanka's own southern naval command.

UPSC 2017 · 10m What are the impediments in the development of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)?

UPSC 2020 · 10m Outline the reasons for the low volume of trade in the SAARC region.

UPSC 2021 · 20m Why South Asia is considered as the world's politically and economically least integrated region? Explain.

UPSC 2022 · 10m Discuss the ways and means to realise greater economic co-operation among the Member States of South Asia.

14 Achievements — the institutional record

SAFTA — tariff reduction	SAPTA — preferential trade	SATIS — services	SAARC Development Fund	SAARC University	SAARC Arbitration Council	
SARSO — standards	Food Bank	Film Festival	Milk Grid	Agency for Disasters	Federation Games	SAARC satellite

- **Trade architecture** — SAFTA reducing tariffs; SAPTA instituting preferential trade; SATIS liberalising trade in services.
- **Development and knowledge** — the SAARC Development Fund supporting regional development initiatives; the SAARC University as a nexus for academic collaboration.
- **Dispute and standards** — the SAARC Arbitration Council for peaceful dispute resolution; SARSO standardising technical regulations to improve trade efficiency.
- **Public goods** — the Food Bank for food security; the Film Festival for cultural exchange; the Milk Grid optimising dairy distribution; the Agency for Disasters coordinating responses to natural calamities.
- **Sport and technology** — the Federation Games using sports diplomacy; the SAARC satellite improving communication infrastructure.

15 SAARC During COVID-19

Despite dormancy since 2014, SAARC played a role against the pandemic. A **COVID-19 Emergency Fund** was established.

Country	Pledge
India	USD 10 million
Sri Lanka	USD 5 million
Pakistan	USD 3 million
Bangladesh	USD 1.5 million
Nepal · Afghanistan	USD 1 million each
Maldives	USD 200,000
Bhutan	USD 100,000

- Partner countries issued and followed specific guidelines, drawing praise from the **World Bank** for responding quickly and effectively.
- **Member proposals** — Afghanistan: a shared telemedicine framework; Maldives: long-term cooperation in health and economic sectors; Pakistan: video conferences of health ministers, experts and national authorities for information sharing; Sri Lanka: awareness through a single authority for exchange of information.
- The **SAARC Disaster Management Centre, Gandhinagar**, created a dedicated website to facilitate interaction between SAARC health and trade officials.
- **India's leadership** — holding the conference despite open reservations about talking to Pakistan reflected the attitude of a leader-nation rising above bilateral animosity. India sent army teams and medical health workers to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan; dispatched a **14-member medical team to the Maldives**, the first ever Indian medical team sent to another country; proposed a **Rapid Response Team** for Nepal; and evacuated more than **50 citizens of other countries** — Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, the United States, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, South Africa, Peru — amid its own evacuations.
- **Vivek Mishra** reads this period as **SAARC's Resurrection**.

16 Revival of SAARC — the functional case

- The organisation's *raison d'être* persists and is likely to be reanimated in propitious circumstances — the video conference of SAARC leaders convened at the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 illustrates this.
- The **environmental crisis** strengthens the case. Ecological interdependence in the subcontinent requires regionally structured responses to the retreat of Himalayan glaciers and the spread of extreme weather.
- Almost **800 million people** in South Asia could face a sharp decline in living conditions from rising greenhouse gas emissions; climate refugees could produce a humanitarian tragedy — challenges requiring collective action.
- The evidence has hardened: the Indus basin lost about **24.8%** of perennial snow and ice cover between 2001 and 2021. **Medha Bisht** holds that climate stress leaves no real alternative to cooperation, whatever a treaty's legal standing.
- **Hydropower** → Nepal has a potential of at least **40 GW** against current capacity of a little over 1 GW; Northeast India has installed about **1.5 GW** of over **58 GW** of potential. This can be realised only through cross-border power exports.
- Despite widespread dissatisfaction, **no member state has withdrawn**. BIMSTEC and BBIN offer avenues for economic collaboration but cannot supplant SAARC.

17 Measures Needed & Way Forward

Measures needed

- Cultivate a **sense of common values** and acknowledge **shared historical perceptions**, which requires addressing intrinsic political disparities. Member states must move beyond conventional notions of sovereignty, security and national identity towards a **transnational, multi-layered and multi-dimensional** conception of nationhood and regional affiliation.
- **Transparency in bilateral engagement** — no country should act as a dominant power or obstruct progress.
- **India must exhibit proactive leadership** and go the extra mile, given its demographic and geographic weight.

- **No member should internationalise bilateral issues** beyond the SAARC forum — which keeps disputes within a framework conducive to resolution and prevents external actors from worsening tension.
- **Expedite SAFTA** and expand its ambit; develop hard infrastructure, streamline freight movement facilitation, augment investment opportunities.
- **Integrate the energy sector** through a unified electric power grid, pooling technical and financial resources.
- **Facilitate freer legal movement of people** for economic and cultural tourism; streamline immigration procedures to build a sense of shared identity.
- **Combat transnational threats** — cross-border illegal migration, terrorism, narcotics trafficking — through intelligence sharing, border security and law enforcement cooperation.

Way forward

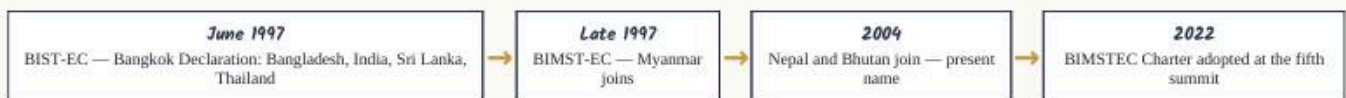
- The pandemic underlined the need for a unified approach — collaboration over confusion, preparation over panic.
- **Redefining the SAARC Charter** is essential — removing excessive safeguards and incorporating the '**SAARC Minus**' concept for greater flexibility in decision-making. Priority to trade facilitation, energy trade connectivity and other avenues of integration.
- **Deeper regional cooperation** to reduce the trust deficit reflected partly in defence expenditure; **regional connectivity** is a necessary condition for landlocked Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan, and for India's virtually landlocked Northeast, to reach world markets.
- **Change in production patterns** → voluntary shifts towards areas of competitive advantage would avoid the present clash of economic interests.
- **Reducing trade barriers, promoting collectivism** in multilateral negotiations and at the WTO, and insulating the regional economy against external shocks.
- **Confidence-building measures** — easing travel and visa restrictions to promote contact between business communities.
- Drawing on **Kautilya's** strategic wisdom: a country cannot thrive while neglecting the challenges faced by its neighbours. A revival of the Kautilyan approach — pragmatic and consequential decision-making — is essential.

PART C BIMSTEC & BBIN

18 Background and Working Mechanism

- The **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation** promotes collaboration and shared growth among littoral and neighbouring nations of the Bay of Bengal.
- **Seven members** — five South Asian (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian (Myanmar, Thailand).

From BIST-EC to BIMSTEC



Working mechanism

- The **BIMSTEC Charter**, adopted at the fifth summit, supplied the formal charter and organisational design, along with a functional framework for operational objectives and policy making.
- Policy is made through two kinds of meetings — annual **ministerial meetings** of foreign and commerce ministers on trade and economic matters, and **summits every two years**. Senior officials meet twice a year to oversee operations.
- Before its first Secretary General, the Sri Lankan diplomat **Sumith Nakandala**, and the establishment of headquarters at **Dhaka** — 2011 and 2014 — BIMSTEC had neither a formal headquarters nor a secretariat. The **BIMSTEC Working Group** is the coordinating body, chaired by a member nation on rotation.

The Bay of Bengal region was among the most interconnected in the world until the early twentieth century, but “the region’s sense of community has almost completely eroded” after the 1940s, when members gained independence and pursued different objectives and alliance structures. — Constantino Xavier & Riya Sinha

19 Significance — what the Bay delivers

- **1.68 billion people**, or 22% of the world’s population, live in the BIMSTEC region, whose members generate **US\$ 3.697 trillion** in GDP annually.
- India’s **Act East** policy aligns with BIMSTEC, which also serves India’s objective of becoming a significant player in trade and security in the Indian Ocean region, and serves the Quad countries’ focus on the “Indo-Pacific” idea.
- A **2021 research series by the Observer Research Foundation** → Sri Lanka sees the objective of becoming a shipping hub in the Indo-Pacific, while Bangladesh may use BIMSTEC to support much-needed economic development.
- The two land-locked mountainous members, **Nepal and Bhutan**, use it as a route to the sea; **Thailand and Myanmar** may view it as a means of lowering excessive reliance on China and as a gateway to a sizeable consumer market.
- **China’s gradual expansion** in the Indian Ocean has helped India establish itself as a major player in the Bay and preserve peace and security. China has BRI projects in every BIMSTEC member except India and Bhutan.

Indian foreign policy objectives realised through BIMSTEC

Objective	Content
Strategic	The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay in the world, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans and connecting to the Strait of Malacca.
Trade	Carrying a quarter of global trade, it is an access point for resources including natural gas reserves; securing it matters for enlarging India's export market.
Blue economy	Regional integration and maritime security allow India to realise its blue economy ambitions.
Connectivity	BIMSTEC enables projects under SAGAR — economic, maritime and security cooperation through information sharing, surveillance and improved capabilities.
Ideational	Allows India to present the idea of <i>Multipolar Asia</i> and the <i>Gujral Doctrine</i> , and to curb the sphere of influence China has expanded.

India hosted the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat in Goa in 2016 and the BRICS–BIMSTEC Summit the same year; the first meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs was held in New Delhi on 21 March 2017, emphasising maritime security cooperation and the Bay of Bengal as a common security space.

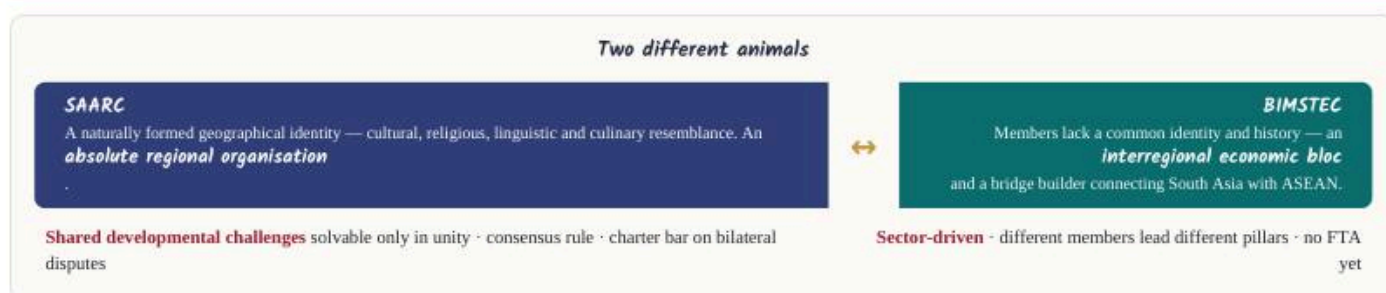
20 Challenges and Way Forward

- India's shifting focus from SAARC to BIMSTEC is primarily to diplomatically isolate Pakistan; since its formation in 1997, BIMSTEC has come to life mainly during periods of India–Pakistan tension.
- Lack of efficiency and a “**sluggish**” pace — the grouping produced its own charter only in 2022.
- The secretariat suffers from inadequate financial and manpower support.
- Poor transborder trade and connectivity — India's annual trade with BIMSTEC countries was just **4%** of its total foreign trade as of 2020.
- No **Free Trade Agreement** has been adopted; despite maritime trade and tourism potential, members have not built a shared and lucrative coastal shipment ecosystem.
- Progress has been undercut by Bangladesh–Myanmar relations over the **Rohingya refugee crisis**, the India–Nepal border issue, and the political situation in Myanmar after the military takeover.

Way forward

- A comprehensive **BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement** would help businesses join global supply chains and lower trade and investment barriers, eventually producing a rules-based multilateral trading system. This requires political will and the fulfilment of “**convergence criteria**” — the elements tying member objectives together, to be determined over time.
- Removal of regulatory obstacles to **foreign direct investment** would help expansion and integration of regional and global supply chains.

21 Can BIMSTEC Replace SAARC?



Similarities	Dissimilarities
Both regions have a diverse economic setup and a demographic dividend.	Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC is a sector-driven institution , focused on economic and technical cooperation between South and Southeast Asia.
Both are closely tied in socio-political condition, facing similar threats and challenges.	As a trade bloc BIMSTEC offers wider opportunity and greater trade potential than SAARC.
Both aim at promoting welfare, accelerating economic growth, social progress and cultural development, and strengthening collective self-reliance.	South Asia is a naturally formed geographical identity, so SAARC is far more reasonably termed an absolute regional organisation; BIMSTEC is more an interregional bloc.
Both suffer an absence of a conducive regional environment .	All SAARC countries share similar developmental challenges solvable only in unity; BIMSTEC connects South Asia with ASEAN economies as an inter-regional organisation.
Both aspire to a Neighbourhood First approach in their individual settings.	BIMSTEC works on different pillars , with different member countries leading particular domains — a design absent in SAARC.

Assessment

BIMSTEC is a complementing body to SAARC and vice versa; despite overlapping geography and priority areas, they are not equal alternatives. Insofar as their regions of interest overlap, the two complement each other in function and goal. BIMSTEC gives SAARC countries a unique opportunity to connect with ASEAN. Its success does not render SAARC pointless — it adds a new chapter to regional cooperation in South Asia. BIMSTEC has considerable potential to promote integration across South and Southeast Asia, giving India a strategic platform to interact with its neighbours, build economic development, increase connectivity and address shared issues such as disaster relief and energy security. It may become a major force behind regional stability and prosperity by fortifying its institutional structure and broadening its areas of collaboration.

22 Prospects for Sub-Regional Integration

- Regional integration in South Asia is being reimagined through sub-regional platforms as SAARC remains stalled by interstate friction and weak enforcement.
- Prakriti Bhattarai** records that even signature schemes left “intra-SAARC trade... below 5%”, and that unanimity rules slow decisions — conditions that push states towards nimbler forums.
- Misu Kim** → new regionalism in India’s neighbourhood draws on political-economy drivers — connectivity, market access and flexible coalitions — more than on classic neo-functional ‘spillovers’. She shows SAARC’s stagnation and the rise of sub-regional ventures such as SASEC and BBIN as pragmatic responses to power politics and to limited regional identity.

Two enablers

- Bay of Bengal economic geography** → BIMSTEC links South and Southeast Asia and widens India’s cooperation circle beyond SAARC’s constraints; sub-regionalism lets states sidestep political tension while deepening trade and infrastructure ties.
- Concrete connectivity** → projects under Act East — the **India–Myanmar–Thailand Highway** and the **Kaladan Multimodal Corridor** — are meant to cut cost and time, though delays in Myanmar and staggered execution persist. The **BIMSTEC FTA** is not yet functional, with negotiations continuing, which leaves the economic rules unfinished.

BBIN — promise and constraint together

- A significant leap forward in transport and energy cooperation, but vulnerable to geopolitical rivalry and resource constraints.
- Bhutan’s parliament **rejected the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement in November 2016**; the agreement moved forward in **March 2022** when members met in New Delhi to finalise the MoU.
- Domestic conditions** affect feasibility. India’s Northeast, critical for BIMSTEC and BBIN corridors, faces security and social hurdles; armed conflict, mobility restrictions and policy silos still obstruct a real ‘gateway’ role.

Assessment

Near-term realignment is feasible only in sectoral, project-based modes — transport, energy, customs facilitation, selective value chains. BIMSTEC and BBIN can deliver incremental integration where politics allows and infrastructure exists. Without operational trade rules and steadier Northeast connectivity, sweeping region-wide integration in the immediate future is unlikely.

UPSC 2024 - 20m

Discuss the future of SAARC in the light of India’s increased focus on other regional groupings like ASEAN and BIMSTEC.

PART D WHY THE REGION DOES NOT COHERE

23 Regional Integration and the Question of ‘Regionness’

- South Asia could not advance the notion of regionalism despite a common history and shared cultural traditions. The nature and circumstances of **state formation during decolonisation**, and the effects of the **Cold War**, were significant in impeding the growth of regionalism.
- The primary obstacles were the division of British India into India and Pakistan, Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan, and the wars fought during these events.
- China’s** expanding geopolitical and economic commitments across South Asia have rendered a large part of the notion of regional integration obsolete; regional institutions play a smaller role as China widens its sphere of influence.
- India’s own trajectory** → after initial hesitation India was positive about SAARC’s potential, gradually concluded the organisation might not be useful in accomplishing its declared objectives, and began to distance itself. Its policies after 2014 indicate a lack of interest in SAARC and a preference for two other fronts — bilateral engagement under Neighbourhood First, and bilateral and multilateral engagement beyond South Asia.
- Niranjan Marjani** → India has actively sought to isolate Pakistan in the region and has stepped up engagement with other groupings such as BBIN and BIMSTEC.
- Under Neighbourhood First, India has engaged Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka while circumventing Pakistan — stress on mutually beneficial economic engagement and humanitarian assistance, most visibly during the pandemic through **Vaccine Maitri**, which prioritised the neighbourhood.
- Outside South Asia India has increased engagement with BIMSTEC, BRICS and the G-20, and is expanding outreach through the Act East Policy and the India–Central Asia Dialogue.

Regional integration in South Asia would go ahead “through SAARC or outside it, among all of us or some of us.” — **India’s position, 18th SAARC Summit, Kathmandu, 2014**

24 Where the Argument Stands Now — 2024 to 2026

Three smaller neighbours passed through sharp political change, and each tested the claim that Neighbourhood First converts asymmetry into influence.

Country	The reset
Sri Lanka	Anura Kumara Dissanayake elected; his JVP had led two insurrections, the second against the IPKF. First foreign trip to Delhi, December 2024 — both sides gave “ primacy to each other’s security concerns ”. Modi’s Colombo visit, April 2025: the first-ever India–Sri Lanka defence-cooperation MoU , the India–UAE–Sri Lanka Trincomalee energy hub, the Sampur solar project. After Cyclone Ditwah (Nov 2025) India ran Operation Sagar Bandhu and offered USD 450 million.
Maldives	Mohamed Muizzu won on an “ India Out ” platform; India withdrew about 80 military personnel by May 2024. A reserves crisis reversed the calculus — October 2024 Vision Document, a twin currency swap, and in July 2025 a USD 565 million line of credit , India’s first denominated in rupees, cutting annual debt repayments about 40 per cent .
Nepal	Gen Z protests of September 2025 forced K.P. Sharma Oli out; on 5 March 2026 the Rastriya Swatantra Party took 182 of 275 seats and Balen Shah became prime minister. From 19 April 2026 Nepal enforced stricter tariffs on Indian goods; the Lipulekh dispute and the drawn-out fight over BRI financing frame a more transactional phase.

The pattern: hedging, not alignment

Cheng-Chwee Kuik — hedging

“Insurance-seeking behavior under situations of high uncertainty and high stakes, where a rational state avoids taking sides and pursues opposite measures vis-à-vis competing powers to have a fallback position.”

- **Harsh V. Pant** and **Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy** (ORF) — pragmatism would prevail; “Sri Lanka will continue to balance between India and China.” A year on, Shivamurthy noted a weakening government, cancelled energy projects and criticism of the defence MoU itself.
- **Gulbin Sultana** (MP-IDSA) — Muizzu’s turn is a shift from an “India first” to a “**Maldives first**” policy aimed at cutting dependence; the recalibration “should not be seen as a zero-sum game for India”, but it is no return to the old line either.
- **Nihar R. Nayak** (MP-IDSA) — Nepal is a small, landlocked **semi-buffer state** between two Asian powers that have fought a war; its tactics have been mostly hedging in the post-Cold War period. India ties Nepal’s stability to border security and democracy, China to the One China Principle and Tibet.
- **Nilanthi Samaranayake** (USIP) — small-state agency is real, but it shrinks as great-power competition intensifies.
- **Connectivity and sovereignty** — India stayed outside the Belt and Road paragraph of the Tianjin Declaration at the SCO, September 2025. Modi there: “Connectivity that by-passes sovereignty, ultimately loses both trust and meaning.”

Read against the chapter’s own argument: asymmetry has not gone, but the smaller states now price Indian and Chinese offers against each other rather than choosing between them.

25 Ethnicity, Insurgency and Nation-Building

Background

- Territorial, religious and ethnic disputes in South Asia are rooted in the years before and after the end of almost three centuries of British colonisation. At the end of the colonial period in **1947**, the subcontinent was divided along religious lines into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority East and West Pakistan.
- Since the formation of nation-states, the religious and ethnic dynamics of the tragedies of **1947 and 1971** have been exploited by ultra-nationalistic politicians, some media outlets and extremist groups to undermine regional cooperation.
- South Asia has **multi-ethnic, plural societies** which have faced challenges of varying degree and intensity to their national integrity; legacies of colonial rule have made nation-building harder.
- **Instances** → the tribal problems of the **Chakmas in Bangladesh**, the **Northeast in India**, the **Baloch in southwest Pakistan**; the **Kashmir issue**; organisations such as the **LTTE** in Sri Lanka.

Basis of ethno-nationalism

- Attributable to the nature of pre-colonial societies and the impact of colonial rule upon them. The historical legacy and structure of pre-colonial South Asian societies shaped the demands and struggles of ethnic groups — the claim of pre-colonial Tamil separatists in northern Sri Lanka lends legitimacy to their claim for a **Tamil Eelam** in what they term their traditional homeland. Similar claims to a historical ethnic homeland appear among the Sikhs in India, the Baloch and Pashtuns in Pakistan, the Chakmas in Bangladesh.
- After independence the post-colonial state encroached on the traditional autonomy and privileges of groups which even the colonial powers had not disturbed, producing demands for autonomy or independence in northeastern India and in Balochistan.

“The post-colonial state is actually the colonial state with new rulers.” — **Ross Mallick**

The post-colonial state has centralised pre-colonial states into a political and administrative straitjacket regardless of ethnic and religious identity, mobilising separatist ambitions. Bangladesh, founded on a strong linguistic identity, tried to integrate the Buddhist, non-Bengali-speaking tribal minority into Muslim Bengali culture, leading to violent clashes between tribal guerrillas and the Bangladesh army in 1976.

“It all depends on how a state manages its developmental problems. Depending upon the state’s capability to accommodate the grievances of ethnic groups, these assertions fluctuate from dormancy to militancy.” — **Ghoshal**

Impact on nation-building

- Nation-building is complicated by the task of integrating heterogeneous ethnic groups into the mainstream of national politics; these states have had to establish political, social and economic institutions while forging a cohesive nationalism across diverse populations.
- The issue challenges the sovereignty of South Asian states — Tamil insurgency challenged Sri Lankan unity and integrity; in northeastern India the target of insurgency is the sovereignty of the state, its police, army and other institutions.
- Insurgency and autonomy movements often produce ethnic riots, especially between tribal and non-tribal groups or between tribes; all such developments get linked to state policy for the region.
- **Afghanistan**, among the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, has seen this diversity undermine nation-building — the Taliban takeover the latest instance. In **Nepal**, the **Madhesi** issue challenges the stability of the democratic transition.
- A major hurdle to socio-economic development: conflict-ridden regions cannot be accessed by governments for security reasons and trade is difficult, producing poor living standards which in turn create disaffection towards the state.
- **Urmila Phadnis** and **Rajat Ganguly** (*Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia*) → addressing ethnic movements across the subcontinent in a single volume requires dealing adequately with a diversity of groups, several national political systems, significant socio-political change, knotty issues of definition, conceptualisation and analytical scale, and an uneven literature.

Cross-border ethnic geography

- Tamils across the Palk Strait; **Madhesis** across the India–Nepal Terai; Bengalis across the India–Bangladesh border; **Naga** and **Chin-Kuki** communities across the India–Myanmar frontier — no ethnic conflict in the region stays domestic.
- **Bilateralisation in practice** — the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict drawing in the **IPKF** and shaping India's UNHRC votes; the Madhesi question producing the **2015 blockade**; illegal migration from Bangladesh entering Indian electoral politics; **ULFA** and **NDFB** camps in Bhutan and **NSCN-IM** activity from Myanmar.

UPSC 2023 · 10m Why do ethnic conflicts and insurgencies continue to remain major impediments to regional co-operation in South Asia?

26 Cross-Border Migration in South Asia

Definition

Illegal migration refers to movement across national borders in violation of the immigration laws of the destination country. It has become one of the most volatile and contentious issues in Indian politics because of the socio-political conflicts it has brought in its wake.

- India faces the problem along its northern and north-eastern borders, poorly connected to mainland India; open and porous borders have let communities move with ease.
- **The hardest challenge is nation-building** — the Northeast has approximately **220 ethnic groups** across the eight states and adjoining states, with regional ethnic demands ranging from greater autonomy to separate statehood and even independence.
- **Assam** illustrates the pattern — competition for scarce land, resources and jobs; the agitation by **AASU**; the **Assam Accord of 1985**; the **National Register of Citizens**.
- Migrants from Bangladesh have been used as political tools, with forged documents such as voter identity cards influencing elections.
- **Identity crisis** → similar linguistic and ethnic identities make migrants difficult to identify; conflict over scarce resources, economic opportunity and cultural dominance follows, along with political instability as elites mobilise popular perception against migrants to win power.
- **Security dimension** → Pakistan's ISI has been active in Bangladesh supporting militant movements in the Northeast; militants are alleged to enter among migrants; trafficking of women and human smuggling have become rampant across borders.
- **Structural driver** → when a country in the region grows faster and reaches higher living standards, maintaining border controls against illegal migration becomes increasingly difficult.
- **Myanmar** borders Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh; the porous frontier is a gateway for insurgents, and India holds that cooperation with Myanmar is necessary to solve insurgency at home. **Bhutan** has respected India's security concerns, though **ULFA** militants set up bases there and had to be evicted. **Bangladesh** appears cordial on the surface but is wary of India's dominant influence; India has raised the issue of illegal migrants at several political and diplomatic levels without response.
- **Institutional gap** → **SAARC**, the only platform for multilateral cooperation in the area, is at best a weak organisation with a mandate that expressly forbids involvement in bilateral disputes — which has pushed India towards bilateral and sub-regional channels such as **BIMSTEC**.
- **Remedies** → short term: fencing borders, even development of the states, augmentation of border-guarding manpower. Long term: legislative action, stronger intelligence infrastructure, diplomatic engagement with neighbouring nations.

27 Hydropolitics of South Asia and the China Factor

- Water flows dynamically and disregards state boundaries, which poses a particular challenge to simplistic notions of state sovereignty. Dams and river management can engineer new flows and affect downstream availability, making transboundary waters a geopolitical problem.
- Water is a strategic concern for **China**, a key stakeholder in South Asian water relations and in the **Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna Basin**. The glaciers feeding the Ganga lie in China, and the **Brahmaputra** — the **Yarlung Tsangpo** — is the lifeline of the region. China's growing reliance on water shared with neighbours may run counter to its diplomatic efforts to present a positive international image.
- China currently shares flood forecasting data with India and Bangladesh during the monsoon, though it briefly stopped the practice with India in **2017**, purportedly because of the **Doklam** standoff and India's boycott of the BRI. Such knowledge needs to be shared more frequently, to include other countries, and through mechanisms insulated from wider political tension and the whims of officials.
- **Beijing's differentiated behaviour** → reluctant to engage in meaningful basin-wide cooperation, and acts differently depending on the basin and the neighbour. To the north it shares rivers with Mongolia, North Korea and Russia, has more bilateral treaties with them than with any others, and typically

decides collectively — vastly different from its treatment of countries to the northwest, south and southeast.

- China is a signatory to several bilateral water agreements, but these are often non-binding memorandums on the selling of hydrological data, joint research, navigation and management of river islands. It denounced the **Mekong River Commission**, established in 1995 by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, yet established the **Lancang–Mekong Cooperation** in 2014 to coordinate sub-regional initiatives and advance connectivity through BRI-funded infrastructure.
- This shift does not necessarily indicate a preference for multilateral water cooperation across all basins; Beijing is unlikely to participate in basin-wide cooperation it has not initiated or does not control. Any dam building or diversion on the Tibetan Plateau or along the Yarlung Tsangpo will affect India, Nepal and Bangladesh alike, and both Dhaka and Kathmandu feature prominently in Beijing's regional ambitions.
- China has at times used dam building or the withholding of hydrological data as a **coercive tactic**, and could resort to both in the Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna Basin. Basin countries therefore need innovative policies for collective action that both initiate discussion and keep participants engaged.

The Sindoor spillover

David Michel (CSIS) warns that India's upper-riparian advantage could rebound — China sits above India on the same river system and may copy the tactic on the Brahmaputra. India's willingness to touch a settled water treaty may also unsettle smaller neighbours such as Bangladesh and Nepal.

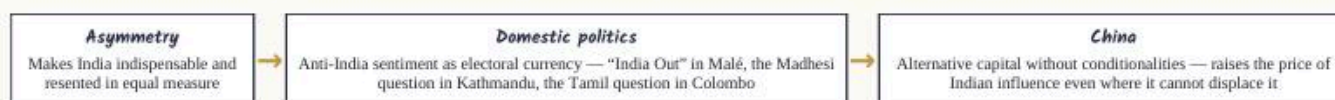
Ambika Vishwanath — the prescription

India should make common cause with Bangladesh and other basin countries as **equal partners**, so as to collectively initiate dialogue with China. India can engage China on issues that are not politically sensitive — improving water quality, agricultural water usage. The two already have institutional arrangements for data sharing on climate change; joint research on glaciers can be made part of such initiatives.

28 Conclusion — the political economy of separation

South Asia's central paradox: the region with the densest civilisational, linguistic and ecological connections is the least integrated political space in the world. Intra-regional trade at about 5%, no SAARC summit since 2014, and trading costs higher than with partners on the other side of the globe are symptoms of one cause.

Three variables shape every bilateral relationship in the region



- **The corrective is not louder assertion.** Where India has lost ground, it has lost it to delay rather than to Chinese finance — Hambantota, Trincomalee and Batticaloa were offered to India first; hydropower delays in Bhutan created the debt they were meant to retire; the Teesta remains unsettled after five decades of negotiation. Delivery is the variable India controls.
- **The intellectual line is consistent** — **Shyam Saran** on the unrelenting logic of geography, **C. Raja Mohan** on managing complex interdependence rather than competing with China, **S.D. Muni** on the cost of micro-management, **Rajiv Sikri** on differentiated approaches, and **Kanak Mani Dixit's** formulation that India must be **big and a brother**. All converge on one prescription: convert size into service rather than into a lever.
- **The 2024–26 record cuts both ways** — the island resets held and deepened, while Nepal's nationalist turn and China's steady economic presence mark the limits of Indian influence. **Constantino Xavier's** warning stands: "India is actually doing more than ever, but it is the neighbourhood that is losing India."
- **Atal Bihari Vajpayee's** proposition remains the frame. History cannot be changed and geography cannot be changed; what can be changed is whether proximity is treated as an inheritance to be managed or a resource to be built on.

PART E EXAM KIT

29 Power Quotes

"We cannot change history, but we cannot change geography either." — **Atal Bihari Vajpayee**

SAARC is a "jammed vehicle". — **S. Jaishankar**

Pakistan is the "camel in the caravan of SAARC". — **C. Raja Mohan**

"SAARC has always been hostage to the India-Pakistan conflict." — **Niranjan Marjani**

Smaller states view India as the "main source of threat to their security". — **Bimal Prasad**

"The post-colonial state is actually the colonial state with new rulers." — **Ross Mallick**

"The region's sense of community has almost completely eroded." — **Constantino Xavier & Riya Sinha**

"I dream of a day when, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, and dinner in Kabul." — **Manmohan Singh**

Regional integration would proceed "through SAARC or outside it, among all of us or some of us." — **India, 18th SAARC Summit, 2014**

India must be "big and a brother". — **Kanak Mani Dixit**

"Sri Lanka will continue to balance between India and China." — **Harsh V. Pant & Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy**

"Connectivity that by-passes sovereignty, ultimately loses both trust and meaning." — **Narendra Modi, SCO Summit, Tianjin, 2025**

"India is actually doing more than ever, but it is the neighbourhood that is losing India." — **Constantino Xavier**

30 Scholar Index

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy · Amal Chandra · Ambika Vishwanath · Atal Bihari Vajpayee · Bimal Prasad · C. Raja Mohan · Cheng-Chwee Kuik · Constantino Xavier · David Michel · Ghoshal · Gulbin Sultana · Happymon Jacob · Harsh V. Pant · Joyeeta Bhattacharjee · Kanak Mani Dixit · Kautilya · Lee Jones · Manmohan Singh · Masha Tokas · Medha Bisht · Misu Kim · Muchkund Dubey · Nihar R. Nayak · Nilanthi Samaranyake · Niranjan Marjani · Nitin Pai · P. Stobdan · Philippe Le Houérou · Prakriti Bhattarai · Pramit Pal Chaudhary · Rajat Ganguly · Rajiv Sikri · Riya Sinha · Ross Mallick · S. Jaishankar · S.D. Muni · Shahar Hameiri · Sharat Sabharwal · Shashi Tharoor · Shyam Saran · Suhasini Haidar · Sumith Nakandala · Urmila Phadnis · Vivek Katju · Vivek Mishra · Zorawar Daulat Singh

31 How UPSC Asks It

Theme	Years & marks
Look East / Act East — hopes, strategic implications	2016 / 15m · 2021 / 10m
Look East and the Northeast — indigenous peoples, regional impact	2018 / 10m · 2022 / 15m
Impediments to regional cooperation in SAARC	2016 / 10m
SAFTA — impediments to its development	2017 / 10m
Low volume of trade in the SAARC region	2020 / 10m
South Asia as the least integrated region	2021 / 20m
Ways and means of greater economic cooperation in South Asia	2022 / 10m
Lack of 'regionness' in South Asia	2023 / 10m
Ethnic conflicts and insurgencies as impediments	2023 / 10m
"West Asia Quad" and India's Look West policy	2023 / 15m
Future of SAARC against ASEAN and BIMSTEC	2024 / 20m

32 Today's Practice

1. Discuss the future of SAARC in the light of India's increased focus on other regional groupings like ASEAN and BIMSTEC. (UPSC 2024, 20m)
2. Why South Asia is considered as the world's politically and economically least integrated region? Explain. (UPSC 2021, 20m)
3. What are the reasons for lack of 'regionness' in South Asia? (UPSC 2023, 10m)

Model answers drop tonight on the Telegram channel — [@psirbyamitpratap](#). Write all three before you read them.

See you tomorrow with Day 44 — India & the Global South.