

# The Geopolitical Influence of India And Indonesia in SAARC and ASEAN

Written by Harsh Mahaseth

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SAARC was established in 1985 at the initiative of Bangladesh to create a regional forum aimed at promoting welfare, social progress, and economic growth in South Asian nations. India holds a pivotal role as one of the founding members of the organization. The other member states include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Of these, India is the only country with contiguous land boundaries with all the other member countries except Afghanistan. SAARC was envisioned with the foundational values of improving quality of life and accelerating economic growth in the region. After a series of meetings at the official and political levels, the first South Asian Foreign Ministers' Conference was held in New Delhi in 1983, where the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) (Lama 1998) was adopted. IPA laid the groundwork for cooperation between member states in areas like agriculture, rural development, and health. Broadly, the objectives aimed to foster active collaboration, mutual trust and assistance, and strengthen cooperation. Despite the South Asian nations' mixed records on collaboration, informal meetings alongside SAARC meetings have nudged the member states to resolve their differences. A notable example (Iqbal 2005) is India and Pakistan diffusing tensions arising from India's military exercise "Operation Brasstacks" along the Indo-Pak border. Heads of both member states met and engaged in informal talks during the 2nd SAARC Summit held in Bengaluru in 1986.

Subsequently, the SAARC Charter ("the Charter") was adopted on 8th December 1985. To further the collaborative efforts in the region, Article III of the Charter provided that the heads of state of member governments shall meet once a year or more as needed. However, the last SAARC summit was held in 2014 in Kathmandu, and no summit has been held thereafter due to India-Pakistan differences. These issues underscore the challenges facing SAARC, with India's concerns playing a pivotal role in the organization's stagnation. Therefore, India must assert its role as a pivotal power in SAARC, contrasting with Indonesia's role in ASEAN.

ASEAN, Southeast Asia's primary multilateral organization, was established in 1967. It is a 10-member organization consisting of Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEAN's foundational principles include informal consultations, consensual decision-making, and non-interference in internal affairs to maintain regional order. However, the key principle ensuring regional stability amid great power dynamics is "ASEAN Centrality", which allows relatively weaker ASEAN countries to secure themselves from anarchical great power politics or an imposed hierarchical hegemonic order within the region and externally. This principle is deeply ingrained in Indonesia's foreign policy. Historically, Indonesia has adhered to the principle of ASEAN Centrality, thereby benefiting the organization through its leadership and establishing itself as an integral member. This is an area where India falls short or fails to achieve within SAARC. The author examines India's challenges in SAARC, contrasting them with Indonesia's proactive role in ASEAN. Regional powers play a pivotal role in organizational growth and there is a need for increased engagement among SAARC members to revitalize the organization. The author concludes by providing policy recommendations, emphasizing the lessons India can learn from Indonesia's ASEAN efforts.

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## Regional Organization and the Role of the Pivotal Power

The creation of regional organizations is necessary to foster cooperation in both political and economic spheres while also simultaneously providing a platform for dialogue on regional issues. More often than not, regional organizations contain at least one pivotal power, possessing the size and influence to rein in the region's dynamics. Historian Paul Kennedy, in 1996, defined pivotal power as countries with disproportionate influence in a particular region. Pivotal powers are an essential variable in forming a regional organization, alongside shared values of states et al. As Mohammad Ayoob (1999) suggests, a consensus regarding the role of a pivotal power, with the concurrence of the pivotal power, segues into internal cohesiveness and establishes boundaries beyond which relations do not extend (Ayoob 1985). The presence of a pre-eminent regional power can aid in shaping regional cohesiveness by aligning it with its ambitions and capabilities. However, it can also misuse its inherent capabilities to clamp down on weaker members if its dominance is questioned. Therefore, gaining legitimacy from smaller member states is crucial to creating a united regional organization (Ayoob 1999). To supplement it, Realists underline the existence of a pivotal power that can aid international cooperation. In South Asia and Southeast Asia, both India and Indonesia have assumed the role of pivotal power considering their growth rate, economic size, and geographical features in SAARC and ASEAN respectively.

### Indonesia as a Pivotal Power

Indonesia's demography and resources, amongst other features, make it the pivotal power in ASEAN. Indonesia's effective use of power has further reinforced its leadership position within ASEAN. Indonesia emerged from *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia in 1964. During this period, the level of distrust among Southeast Asian nations was notably high. Despite these differences, Indonesia played a vital role by demonstrating its willingness to form a regional cooperative mechanism. Under Soeharto's 'New Order' regime, Indonesia extended significant goodwill and consequently became a founding member of ASEAN. The regime focused primarily on political reparations (as seen with Malaysia subsequently), regionalism, and a globalist approach. Notably, Indonesia ensured the adoption of regional resilience at the first summit held in Bali in 1976 (Desker 2017). The Indonesian foreign policy has premised its view of regional order on Inclusive Regionalism (Anwar 2018). This approach is evident in Indonesia's attempts to put ASEAN at the centre of all the engagements, be it the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ("RCEP") or the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994. In a similar vein, Indonesia has more often than not included the USA and China in ASEAN-related initiatives, thereby not offending the sparring goliaths of the world. Moreover, Indonesia has unfailingly put ASEAN unity at the forefront of its vision for regional order. Therefore, it can be reasonably inferred that ASEAN centrality has aided Indonesia in positing a less hostile appearance and encouraged active participation from other member countries. Hence, the Indonesian role as a pivotal state has not faced protest, owing to its low-profile approach in the bloc.

### India as a Pivotal Power

Meanwhile, in the Indian scenario, the distrust among the member nations emanates from the Indira doctrine (Ogden 2019; Aryal & Bharti 2023). Pertinently, the doctrine dissuades any external influence in the dynamics of the South Asian Region while promoting bilateral relations. The doctrine is usually termed India's Monroe Doctrine 'buttressed by the principles of Bilateralism'. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi viewed the South Asian Region as an exclusive zone of supremacy and dominance, thereby promoting India to be an uncontested regional hegemon. Further, the Indira Doctrine can also be considered as an extension of 'The Nehru Creed' Lal (2020), which justifies intervention by India in the neighbouring countries' internal affairs if the disorder has spillover effects beyond the country's boundaries. This is reflected in India's intervention as the deployment of peacekeeping forces in the Sri Lankan Civil War, which was not perceived well in the Region. Taking these aspects into consideration, it is easier to sense a pulse on why the countries developed mistrust about India.

India's initial response to the proposal to establish SAARC already indicated its disinclination towards the idea. Additionally, the then Bangladeshi President implicitly characterized India's role in SAARC by comparing it to Indonesia's accommodating role in ASEAN, suggesting that India should adopt a more modest role given regional asymmetry and economic disparities (Reza and M. 2016). However, neither India mollified its presence nor did other

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member states' perception of it change. Therefore, contrary to being acknowledged as a pivotal power state, India was perceived by all other member countries of SAARC as a regional hegemon. Unlike Indonesia, India failed to garner the requisite confidence and live up to the expectations, as emphasized by President Zia-Ul-Haq. Similarly, Mohammad Ayoob (1985) avers: "The divergence in the perception of SAARC members regarding the role of the pivotal regional power further detracts from the possibilities of meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia".

The trust deficit with Pakistan adds insult to injury, as it views such an Organization as a means for India to consolidate its economic and political dominance in South Asia. In light of this, several economic reforms in the form of the South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement ("SAPTA") and the South Asia Free Trade Agreement ("SAFTA") fell through. The agreements stood in great importance as their implementation aimed to reduce tariff duties and remove non-tariff barriers. India has long maintained economic cooperation to be integral, despite recognising security and political divergences. This is reflected in the then-Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran's (Sridharan 2008) statement, who approved of economic integration but expressed concern about other member states potentially using it to undermine Indian strategies in the South Asian region. The mutual mistrust has prompted India's aversion to undertaking its role as a pivotal power.

In this context, it is pertinent to understand Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory ("RSCT") which is:

defined by a durable pattern of amity and enmity in the form of regional or geographical patterns of security interdependence. The particular characteristic of the Regional Security Complex is shaped by historical factors such as longstanding enmity or cultural linkage to a specific geographical region (Ashraf & Akhi 2016)

Similarly, the historical context disenchant the SAARC members from achieving a substantial outcome. Additionally, the infrequent meetings among the Member States further diminish the probability of arriving at meaningful conclusions.

## **Comparing The Roles of India and Indonesia as Pivotal Powers in Regional Organizations**

The last SAARC summit was held in 2014, after which India refused to participate until Pakistan ceased its terror activities, leaving the organization in stagnation, as no informal diplomatic mechanism has been devised in SAARC to deal with issues. On the contrary, Indonesia pioneered the development of an informal conflict resolution mechanism in ASEAN. India's disinterest in SAARC is further highlighted by its efforts to establish the South Asia Growth Quadrangle with Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. This creation of sub-regional groups is permitted under Article VII of the SAARC Charter. Moreover, the rise of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as India's reliable alternative for countering Chinese influence has resulted in the neglect of SAARC and its role as a pivotal power.

The difference between the Indonesian and Indian approaches is evident: Indonesia actively participates in and steers ASEAN, while India's indifference has led to the stagnation of SAARC. Mutual distrust between India and other SAARC member countries is ever-present. India's perception of historic pre-eminence has led it to attempt to control other states' foreign policy and security options, which smaller nations perceive as dictatorial (Sahoo, 2017). Despite advocating for 'collective prosperity' in the 1990s, India's economic initiatives within SAARC have been fettered by political differences. Smaller counterparts view Indian policies as self-serving. To preclude ganging up, India has adhered to principles of unanimity in decision-making and the prohibition of bilateral discussions (Obino, 2009). However, smaller nations still feel threatened by India's dominance, resulting in lower rates of trade between India and other SAARC countries (Ray & Fernandez, 2019).

India has significant potential for trade with South Asian countries, but the lack of trust has hindered fostering trade relations. India's economic growth has prompted other countries to forge economic ties through regional organizations like BIMSTEC. Low levels of intra-SAARC trade with India reflect limited cooperation among member states, accounting for less than two per cent in 2011 (Ray & Fernandez, 2019). The deadlock between India and Pakistan, primarily over issues like Kashmir and terrorist attacks, has significantly deteriorated relations and contributed to the cancellation of the 19th SAARC summit. According to the SAARC Rules, if even a single member

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decides not to attend, the meeting will be deemed cancelled. This deadlock has prompted India to seek other arrangements, signifying its disinterest in SAARC. India's failure to instil confidence among other member states has prevented it from fulfilling its role as a pivotal power in the region. The perception of India as a "hegemonic power," owing to its geostrategic significance and strong economy relative to other nations, contributes to mistrust and a lack of cooperation. This distrust is further reinforced by the strained relations between India and Pakistan, which is a significant contributing factor (Yhome & Maini, 2017). Relations between the two countries have significantly deteriorated, primarily over issues such as Kashmir, and Terrorist attacks from Pakistan, e.g., the Uri Terror Attack and the 2016 Pathankot attack, which have pushed both countries to extreme ends. Furthermore, the 19th SAARC summit was cancelled in light of the Uri Terror attacks.

Trust issues with India and divergent aspirations among member states are reflected in minimal meetings, consequently diminishing the attainment of common regional goals. Such infrequent meetings have allowed member nations to externalize bilateral discussions, which has segued a spike of the Chinese influence in the Region, notably supported by Pakistan's alignment with China, evident in projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Similarly, Chinese footprints have also extended to Sri Lanka, over the latter's acute economic crises. Despite India's promotion of the Gujral Doctrine, the member states view India as permeating the landscape in establishing dominance. For a long time, countries have expected India to foster confidence among them. For instance, Sri Lanka hoped India would "by deeds and words create the confidence among us so necessary to make a beginning." However, India's disinterest and failure to instil confidence among other member states have resulted in its failure to fulfil its role as a "pivotal power" in the region (Muni, 2003).

Like SAARC, ASEAN was founded to further social and economic progress through joint efforts ensuring equality and partnership, primarily in Agricultural, Industrial, and other trade sectors. ASEAN has made significant strides in the economic sector, including the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) of 1992 and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), promoting economic integration through a joint production base and creating synergy of ASEAN member states with major global economies like China. Politically, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia has been commended as suitable guidelines for inter-state relations and has been endorsed by over forty countries outside Southeast Asia. However, it is difficult to assume ASEAN is devoid of challenges ahead. Myanmar has aroused scepticism around ASEAN's unity and centrality due to its refusal to chair the 2026 Summit. Besides, ASEAN's efforts have not been realized in curbing violence against Rohingyas in Myanmar due to a lack of consensus over engagement with the country's leadership. Meanwhile, Thailand's efforts in the form of informal talks with Myanmar draw criticism regarding ASEAN unity.

Indonesia, gifted with a strategic location and rich cultural heritage, has led ASEAN's regional integration efforts. For instance, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution reflects positively on Indonesian policies. Additionally, during its recent presidency over the G20, Indonesia tackled anxieties over the QUAD and AUKUS, incorporating an ASEAN G-20 Contact Group to deliberate policy stances ahead of G-20 meetings. Historically, Indonesia pursued a policy of self-restraint and active non-alignment (*bebas aktif*), aiming to harmonize interests and prevent perceptions of hegemony. Indonesia has often played a proactive role in ASEAN matters, such as mediating the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict. Indonesia's foreign policy, structured in concentric circles, places ASEAN at the center while focusing on the Asia Pacific and East Asia. Indonesia's concept of ASEAN Centricity has led to featuring ASEAN in G-20 and vice versa. Unlike India, Indonesia encounters extra-regional involvement, particularly from China in the South China Sea, but continues to work hand in hand with ASEAN. Consequently, member nations have reposed faith in Indonesia, entrusting it with formulating an Indo-Pacific concept for ASEAN (Agastia, 2020).

## Efforts of India

Despite its drawbacks, India's efforts in binding SAARC cannot be understated. India has often played a key role in developing SAARC and assisting the neighbouring countries in times of need. One of the most significant examples is India's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. India set up Covid-19 Emergency Fund to tackle the spread of the virus. During a videoconference led by Prime Minister Modi, he implored the SAARC nations to fight the pandemic "by coming together and not growing apart" and emphasizing "collaboration, not confusion". India also delivered vaccines to SAARC nations as grant assistance. Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi extended invitations to SAARC

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leaders during his swearing-in ceremony in 2014.

Moreover, India has contributed to maintaining this momentum by facilitating access to technological advancements in other SAARC nations. It notably extended the National Knowledge Network (“NKN”) to other South Asian Nations like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. In 2017, India launched the South Asian Satellite, with demonstration terminals established in Maldives, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Nepal, etc., signifying most of the SAARC nations except Pakistan. Similarly, the ‘Neighborhood First Policy’ elaborates on Indian engagement through collaborations and synergetic projects with South Asian Countries. This policy has been instrumental in re-establishing ties with the South Asian Countries. Despite the overarching mistrust, India has put forth sizeable steps to reduce the same and integrate the countries regionally. In light of these happenstances, the onus shifts to other member nations too to deconstruct mistrust and build meaningful ties.

## Learning from Indonesia: Comparative Analysis of India and Indonesia’s Regional Roles

Howsoever disproportionate, assumedly, India has to be responsible for leading the Organization. On turning several pages of history, it becomes evident that SAARC has not lived up to the objectives for which it was formed. More precisely, the persistent deadlock and severe mistrust have pushed the member countries to other arrangements. India remains no exception, for it has ardently pursued its interest in BIMSTEC to nip China and Pakistan in the bud. Consequently, SAARC stands close to being abandoned by its member states except for India’s recent vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19. However, considering the example of Indonesia, India has not been active enough to develop belief in its propriety and restraint of power.

Moreover, the untapped potential of trade within SAARC is a glaring contrast to Indonesia’s approach, which puts forth ASEAN interests in its Indo-Pacific outlook, while simultaneously concretising its position as an indispensable ‘middle power.’ Despite understanding the necessary efforts of pivotal power through the example of Indonesia in ASEAN, it is incorrect to hold India solely responsible for taking the initiative. For Instance, the primary reason for the lack of meetings in SAARC is the Indo-Pak relations. The accompanying events since 2014, terrorist acts are the underlying issue hampering meetings. Therefore, Pakistan must also take proactive steps to resolve these issues. Diplomatic channels should be utilized by both these countries to find common ground for regional unity and the promotion of SAARC. Situations like cross-border terrorism must be avoided at all costs to foster renewed ties. Considering the past circumstances, the unwillingness of Bangladesh and India to participate in the 2016 SAARC summit, owing to cross-border terrorism and intrusion into the internal affairs of Bangladesh, diminished the chances of reviving SAARC. Further, since the institutional cracks usually prevent institutional functioning effectively, a collaboration between private companies and organizations would foster meaningful relations and enhance cooperation. Though not diplomatically, it is a good start for filling the gaps (Reed 1997). SAARC was formed because of the commonalities between South Asian nations, which shall not be disrupted because of intra-regional differences. At best, the countries, not only India, must resolve the differences or at least grow to tolerate them to prevent SAARC from becoming entirely dysfunctional.

India and Indonesia exhibit distinct approaches and outcomes in their engagements within regional organizations, providing valuable insights for regional cooperation and leadership. India has historically faced persistent challenges within SAARC, including deadlock and mistrust among member states. These issues have often pushed member countries towards alternative regional arrangements, leaving SAARC in a state of flux. Despite India’s sporadic efforts, such as its recent vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19, SAARC remains on the brink of abandonment by its members. In contrast, Indonesia has exemplified proactive leadership within ASEAN, demonstrating a collective approach to regional integration and diplomacy. Indonesia’s ASEAN centrality model, underscored by engagements like the RCEP and negotiations with China, showcases its commitment to fostering unity and addressing regional issues collectively.

India’s approach to SAARC has been characterized by a proclivity towards establishing subregional alliances, such as the BBIN initiative (involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal), and promoting alternative regional structures like BIMSTEC. These initiatives reflect India’s strategic efforts to balance regional influences and mitigate challenges within SAARC. Conversely, Indonesia maintains a steadfast commitment to ASEAN unity through consistent

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engagement and dialogue. Emphasizing ASEAN's centrality in its foreign policy, Indonesia actively collaborates with member states to address shared challenges and promote collective initiatives. This inclusive approach is evident in Indonesia's participation in ASEAN summits and its proactive stance on regional issues such as the Rohingya crisis, reflecting a commitment to fostering cohesion and influence within Southeast Asia.

Despite challenges, both countries play crucial roles in their respective regional organizations, shaping regional agendas and influencing cooperative frameworks. Both nations' experiences highlight the complexities and opportunities inherent in regional leadership. While India navigates internal and external pressures within SAARC, Indonesia's approach to ASEAN underscores the benefits of collective engagement and strategic alignment. By drawing lessons from Indonesia's cooperative diplomacy and India's strategic manoeuvres, regional organizations can potentially overcome challenges and enhance effectiveness in promoting regional stability and development.

## Policy Recommendations

Considering SAARC's economic and political importance, preserving the regional organization is a must. The World Bank describes South Asia as one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. As Reserve Bank of India's Deputy Governor Patra recently aptly put it:

SAARC has great potential for economic expansion with abundant natural resources, human capital, and market access...We must rise up to this challenge and seize the window of opportunity even as we recover from the debilitating effects of the pandemic and geopolitical developments... The Roadmap of Regional Cooperation which was framed in 2016, needs to be revised to reflect the current realities and focus areas, with quantifiable milestones and timelines within the mandate of SAARCFINANCE. (Madhur2023)

Simultaneously, India's regional economic focus must not lose sight of SAFTA and the South Asian Economic Union (Bishwakarma & Hu 2022; Abeyagoonasekera n.d.) As highlighted above, it is dangerous to undervalue the importance of annual meetings between the member states. All the member countries must ensure these summits take place to establish proper communication channels and, needless to say, the sanctity of SAARC. Re-engagement is vital. Moreover, member states must support regional projects to inculcate strategic interdependence. Furthermore, considering the discourse around climate change policies and energy transitioning, energy can be an essential area for cooperation. This was notably recognized at the Islamabad summit (Rajan 2005, 15-16). Apart from that, the "New Delhi" Declaration, adopted at the fourteenth SAARC summit held in New Delhi, advocates for climate-resilient development in South Asia.

Awareness about SAARC has been restricted to only political and bureaucratic elites. While economic players are involved through the SAARC Chamber of Commerce, established in 1985, the general population is largely unaware of SAARC-specific news. The debate over SAARC-related issues is seldom heard in the Parliament or the State legislature. India and other member countries have also failed to foster meaningful discourse around SAARC. For instance, the Urdu media of Pakistan shows little interest in SAARC Summits as evidenced by their limited coverage within the country. (R. Kumar & Goyal 2016) To flourish, SAARC-related discourses must not be subdued. Instead, they must be given equal weightage as ASEAN or other regional organisations.

## Conclusion

Despite criticisms of SAARC as dysfunctional, it still holds the potential to lead South Asia as a region of strategic influence. The rise of India and Bangladesh as major economies highlights the growing importance of this region. However, SAARC has historically failed to achieve its foundational objectives due to distrust, regional rivalries, and a lack of proactive leadership. This stands in stark contrast to the increasing need for effective regional organizations in today's interconnected world.

The comparison between Indonesia's role in ASEAN and India's position in SAARC illustrates how Indonesia's proactive and cooperative strategies have strengthened ASEAN. Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN's collective goals, conflict resolution, and regional integration serves as a model for India. By adopting a more inclusive and

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collaborative approach, akin to Indonesia's, India can play a pivotal role in revitalizing SAARC. To achieve this, India must address the mistrust and rivalries that have plagued SAARC, particularly its strained relations with Pakistan. Diplomatic efforts should focus on resolving cross-border terrorism issues and fostering mutual trust. Additionally, India should work towards greater economic integration within SAARC, emphasizing regional projects and strategic interdependence, particularly in areas such as energy cooperation and climate-resilient development.

Enhancing awareness and discourse around SAARC is crucial. Engaging the general population, media, and economic players in SAARC-related discussions can foster a sense of regional unity and shared purpose. By taking these steps, India can emulate Indonesia's successful strategies in ASEAN and reinvigorate SAARC, transforming it into a robust and effective regional organization. In conclusion, while SAARC has faced significant challenges, it remains a vital platform for regional cooperation. India's leadership, inspired by Indonesia's example, can help unlock SAARC's full potential, fostering economic growth, stability, and unity in South Asia.

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