



Paving The Path As Vishvaguru: The Indian Experiment In South Asia

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ABSTRACT

India is a major player in South Asia and plays a crucial role in shaping global issues. Indian leadership has far-reaching implications for enhancing intra-regional trade, investment flows, regional transport, and communication links with South Asia. India has also contributed to shaping global and South Asian issues through the lens of educational leadership and administration. This paper, however, argues that India shares common interests with other South Asian countries, including cultural roots, regional challenges such as high inflation and declining foreign exchange reserves, and domestic unrest, among other shared concerns. Given these similarities with the region, India has long faced several challenges there; what accounts for this chaos in India? Is this a Big Brother conspiracy? Or is India a big elephant in the region? The paper examines how India, as the largest and most responsible democratic country in South Asia, could play a crucial role in the region's development. As well as the emerging organisation in South Asia, BIMSTEC, which could surpass SAARC. The paper also examines how India, as a big country in the region, can leverage and enhance regional trade and economic growth, galvanize economic energies, provide an ecological blueprint, highlight the need for regional security, strengthen existing associations, and promote sub-regional initiatives such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation. Stepping to BIMSTEC how it could be a platform somewhere India could make trilateral friendship along with South Asian nations! The paper will examine how India could strengthen its position in the region and achieve both economic and strategic depth vis-a-vis China and towards self-reliant South Asia, India which may be the voice of South Asia not as a big brother but as a significant partner in South Asia. It will also examine and assess the effectiveness of India's regional diplomacy in fostering cooperation and resolving conflicts. Further, it recognises schools and universities as agents of social change and examines educational environments that promote equity and social justice for students and faculty, for instance South Asian University in New Delhi (India). The findings of this study will provide insights into the challenges and opportunities India faces in maintaining its regional leadership and shaping global issues.

Methodology: This is a multidisciplinary paper on international security, economic challenges, and regional issues in South Asia. For this reason, the paper employs normative research to describe regional security challenges and India's role in normative terms, and then supplements this analysis with theories of realism and liberalism in international relations, viewed through the lens of Constructivist theory. This theory emphasises that international relations are constructed through social processes and cooperation.

Keywords- South Asia, India, BIMSTEC, Regional Stability, Multilateralism

Introduction-

The global landscape is undergoing significant changes, with complex interdependencies, multipolarity, and strategic realignments at their peak. The world is transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. The American hegemony established after the Cold War has loosened, and new Asian powers have emerged. Perhaps this is the era when the West cannot ignore or diminish the importance of the rest of the world, a key factor in efforts to change the world order. The ever-loosening chains of unipolar hegemony have given rise to a changing multipolar world, one that is increasingly contentious and fraught with complex challenges. This change is prevalent throughout the global system, from the West to the East. Various examples demonstrate the loss of Western hegemony in the world, such as strategic and economic competition, even multi-dimensional rivalries between the United States and China, the war between Russia and Ukraine, the war between Israel and Palestine, disturbances in Iran, Venezuela - all of which shows the shifting base of action. For the while, South Asia, including uncertainty in Afghanistan, economic crisis in Sri Lanka as well as political instability, since Pakistan got Independence, lack of a stable government and somehow a country that is harboring terrorism, dispute with Maldives, lots of political upheavals in Nepal, geopolitical rivalries with Bangladesh. Despite all these, China is a bigger challenge for India in the region that is rapidly approaching with the South Asian nations. Somehow it has pushed the world into a more contentious and challenging landscape, as it presents a larger part of the world. The world could not overlook this region. Foremost, COVID-19 has highlighted the fragility of global supply chains, public health systems, and economic inequities, necessitating new forms of collaboration and cooperation. It has exposed the reality of global power as well as the importance of South Asia. Additionally, non-traditional issues such as international terrorism, climate change, and food insecurity have emerged as constant threats to the world, and countries are willing to find solutions. Consequently, the geopolitical structure is becoming increasingly complex. In this context, South Asia holds unique significance globally.

This subcontinent, stretching from the Indian Ocean to Central Asia, is a crucial geopolitical arena, home to approximately 2 billion people, around 25% of the world's population (according to the United Nations, 2021). Intensifying rivalries among various countries, including India's volatile relations with Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, uneven development, the weakening of democratic forces, increasing Western interference, and emerging challenges posed by projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a main segment of the BRI continue to destabilise South Asia (Baruah, 2018). Despite these dilemmas, the region possesses immense potential, offering vast opportunities for economic, social, historical, cultural, technological, medical, and connectivity-related development, as well as for sustainable development.

Against this backdrop of South Asia being constantly clouded by instability, India is emerging as a key player capable of reshaping regional stability. With a population of over 1.4 billion, the fifth-largest economy, and a global footprint of USD 3.7 trillion, India is a rapidly emerging power with a distinct identity on the world stage. Amitabh Kant says, "India's swift and spectacular development from developing economy to global startup leader has positioned it as the world's third-largest hub for innovation and entrepreneurship". It is a central voice in forums in the leading platforms of Asia like SARRC, ASEAN, BIMTEC, BRICS, and SCO as well as in the Western world like G-20, QUAD, IMF, WTO and also the observer member of OAS (Organization of American States), and so on, more or less it all demonstrates a distinct identity on the world stage.

Theoretically, India's rise can be viewed through the lenses of balance of power and regional power dynamics (Walt, 1979). States react when they are under threat and endeavour to maintain stability in the region. For that, regions that were not a blessing for the rest of the world, Asia has more voices, well-being for itself, and is more potent than ever before. Soft power diplomacy (as outlined by Nye, 1990s), in which a state uses not only material capabilities but also normative influence to shape others' preferences as well, it makes more closeness between the nations. India has civilizational roots across South Asia, which help Indian diplomacy flourish with the region, for instance with the Nepal "Roti Beti Ka Rishta". It builds connectivity and strategic wealth among nations. It also adopts a realist approach in South Asia, seeking to identify India's strong positions and working there as an equal partner, not a big brother.

India's approach to regional stability has shifted from bilateral to multilateral frameworks, demonstrating its commitment to restructuring organizations like BIMSTEC to make them more relevant. BIMSTEC offers an alternative to SAARC's weakening as a regional organization connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. It strengthens India's "Neighborhood First" policy and "Act East Policy." It also provides a common platform for addressing issues emerging across South Asia, such as disaster management, digital connectivity, and energy security. The present paper also examines how India is wielding platforms such as BIMSTEC to shape global and regional issues in South Asia, which is a positive step towards the region's progress and stability. This article analyzes South Asia's strategy and India's increasingly emerging power and stable position in the emerging global landscape. It considers both regional challenges and opportunities for India. As the largest country in the region, BIMSTEC provides

a considerable platform to enhance their position in South Asia. It seems to associate regional partners in the BIMSTEC, which could be a diplomatic victory for India.

India in the Contemporary World Order -

The twenty-first century has witnessed various global upheavals, including the continued erosion of a unipolar world. We are seeing the shifting contours of the international landscape, with emerging power dynamics such as those of China, India, and Brazil, as well as ASEAN, and the growing proliferation of regional blocs that appear to challenge the West's traditional dominance in many global matters. India's emergence as a significant power is both a reflection of and a key contributor to this dynamic and evolving international order. Nevertheless, this is a time of global challenges, including terrorism, violence, global injustice, trade wars, and geopolitical rivalries worldwide. Challenges are not merely for countries, it has to note that this is a question mark for humanity. Then concern is that in the rapidly changing world scenario is India on the right path? Bimstec could provide a floor to work together and eradicate the challenges.

Somehow, in contemporary geopolitical terms, India, a nation undergoing broad transformation, is a pivotal power hub in South Asia. Its demographic potential, sustained economic growth, geopolitical position, and diverse regulatory influence could alter the regional balance of power. World Bank data suggests that by 2030, India could become the world's third-largest economy, surpassing Germany and Japan, and by 2050, the UK (Mahbubani, 2013). After independence, India itself visualizes the expanding principles of the Third World and their impact on the region's political-economic structure. India provides a new approach to regions through development diplomacy. India believes that stability and peaceful coexistence in the South Asian region are paramount to achieving mutual goals and serving national interests. However,

India is caught up in the unrest of South Asia. India has unrest conditions, such as with Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Afghanistan and so on. These are the mix of historical experiences, regional experience, national priorities, and regional rivalries, but after all, India's potential provides a unique position for Indian leadership in South Asia. India's size, 15,106.7 km land boundaries and 7516.6 km coastal line, and population in the region, including 75% total population, 63% area of the region, 78% GDP (MEA, GOI, 2023) of the whole region, make it a natural hinge in the process of South Asian development. South Asia is experiencing a shifting balance as China assumes a significant role, like climate change and its massive impact on the region, geopolitical rivalries, and political instability, among other factors. All these upheavals play a crucial role in India's strategic leadership in the region, ensuring regional stability, peace, collaborative security, democratic values and sustainable development.

India's Regional Leadership in the Region

India's regional leadership has three key pillars for working in South Asia: Vision (political stability, economic stability, and sustainable development), Responsibility (such as the Nepal earthquake, the Sri Lanka economic crisis, humanitarian aid for the Afghanistan earthquake, Vaccine Maitri where India provide to South Asia 29.44 % of the total distribution across the world, Jaishankar, 2019) and Partnership and Cooperation such as South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), pharmaceutical products, technological advancement equipment's, developments aids, various infrastructure projects and so on,. Policy initiatives to strengthen relations within nations, such as Neighbourhood First and the Act East Policy, are not mere slogans for India; they are strategic doctrines. India has various collaborative security dynamics, such as the Dosti (India-Maldives-Sri Lanka) maritime exercise, the Trilateral Highway, and Chabahar Port, that provide trade connectivity and help to build a strong digital network in Bhutan. India is permitted to export an additional 251MW of electricity to Nepal, under a tripartite power trade agreement with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal signed in 2015. India is increasingly investing in Nepal's hydropower projects. India is creating a shared future based on trust and interdependence.

Additionally, India is a first responder in many ways in South Asia's crisis, consistently demonstrating its considerable potential. However, as noted above, India provided 200 million doses of life-saving COVID-19 vaccines in Asia and, in addition, various forms of humanitarian aid. India's leadership emphasises that strategic culture is acknowledged in South Asia; peace and security cannot be established through ascendancy, but through connectivity and dialogue among each other. Amelioration of SAARC and BIMSTEC cross-border energy grids and maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean indicate India's allegiance to collective security and shared prosperity in the region—additionally, the courage to acknowledge the region's challenges. As far as cross-border terrorism, which is a vast challenge across the South Asia region, day by day, China's growing footprint and many economic disparities threaten the region's unity (Jaishankar, 2020). India's leadership in the region is guided by harmony, not hegemony. India's prime minister Narendra Modi often says that, "India's growth is an instrument for the global good". India's strategic foresight effectively influences South Asia's stability and progress. Barry Buzan describes the security complex in the region as interlinked and deeply conflicted, shaped by historical animosities, asymmetrical power balances, and external influences. Nevertheless, India fosters a cooperative environment in South Asia, making it a more responsible and trusted partner in the region. These India's initiatives for the regional stability and prosperity, demonstrate the willingness of

India. Mentioning these to understand that regional countries should change their notion regarding India. It should not be neglected that India is a big power in the region but we acknowledge the neighbors. Somehow, India faces geopolitical complexities in the region, including the Indo-Pak rivalry, which has fought four wars with each other; additional deterrence instability; and border disputes beyond it. Such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and the BRI, all these strategic infrastructure projects triggered and recalibrated regional alignments. In South Asia, against India, there is a counterpart, China, which is bringing imbalance in the region.

There are various transnational challenges, such as several terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, ISIS-K and so on, even though state-sponsored terrorism mainly emanates from Pakistan, which remains a sticking point for regional diplomacy. South Asia is a climate-vulnerable region, and Climate Change and environmental vulnerabilities threaten the Maldives and Bangladesh, while erratic monsoons and glacial retreat affect Bhutan, Nepal, and India. Moreover, poor intraregional connectivity, infrastructure deficits, regional trust-building, discouraging investment, and other factors are causing upheaval in the region. These are significant challenges for India in how to, to some extent, tackle provocations in the region.

India and the Role of BIMSTEC in South Asia

South Asia is a region of great promise and profound complexity. It is home to ancient civilisations, vibrant culture, and fast-growing economies, yet it also remains vulnerable to political divisions, security challenges and uneven development. BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), formed in 1997, serves as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia and is a cornerstone of regional cooperation, (Cook & Chen, 2021). It connects more than seven nations: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, which the Bay of Bengal unites. BIMSTEC was founded with key objectives, including trade, connectivity, energy, disaster management, and counter-terrorism. However, India has made a pivotal contribution to BIMSTEC since 2016. In South Asia, through BIMSTEC, India engages more closely and cooperatively with the region through various initiatives, such as capacity-building programs with ICRER and ADB, the BIMSTEC Nalanda Scholarship Schemes, and the BIMSTEC-India Marine Research Network, along the agricultural products chain. All these endeavours make India's position in South Asia more engaging politically, in maritime security, and economically. India also proposed various projects to enhance connectivity and prosperity in the region, including UPI integration to ease cross-border payments (Kumar, 2019). India also maintains intra-BIMTEC trade, which increases regional trade potential and road, rail, and maritime connectivity. India is trying to institutionalise cooperation through shaping the regional agenda. Under its Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, India views BIMSTEC as the vital link that binds the Bay of Bengal community into a coherent economic and strategic space. Somewhere India cooperates closely with their immediate land and maritime partners. Besides all, as noted earlier that BIMSTEC is a significant platform for India, It required India to engage further along with regional powers with this floor, to be a trusted partner and look forward ahead.

To improve commercial and interpersonal interactions across the region, India has supported initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project (MEA, GOI, 2023). They are more than just infrastructure projects; they are conduits for prosperity and peace that reduce isolation and foster connectivity and trade, the cornerstones of regional stability. It is not just a shared water body, even though it has shared responsibility.

BIMSTEC appears to be an alternative to SAARC during periods of political gridlock, avoiding political roadblocks and focusing on positive collaboration. People, wealth, and peace are more important to South Asia's stability than borders and governments, but we cannot deny that these factors also play a role. The goal of BIMSTEC is to transform the Bay of Bengal into an area of collaboration rather than rivalry, and of connection rather than confrontation across the whole of South Asia. In this sense, India's leadership illuminates the way for a stable and unified South Asia through regional cooperation that goes beyond conventional organisation. India is looking forward to a strategic roadmap with the region, along with cooperation in BIMSTEC.

India Leadership: Quest for Regional Stability in South Asia

In the present world scenario, with various ups and downs in relations with nations, it seems India stands at a turning point in this world order. Geopolitical, economic, peace and security, climate change, food security, education, and terrorism are all crucial global issues. The world needs to acknowledge these key dimensions to work together. The world is not unipolar in the 21st century; many emerging powers make it a multipolar world. There is also multilateralism, where states work together through collective institutions, which is indispensable. It is very accurate that various institutions operate in a global context, such as the UNO, WTO, IMF, G-7, G-20 and WHO, and that India is part of them, except the G-7. Nevertheless, they did not focus on the Third World or any Asian problem, and, for their concern, it is all about Western conspiracy theories, which work for Western concerns. South Asia needs to get it that the West is not for Asia. Asia could rise to work together. However, conflicts and economic nationalism in recent years, as well as the rise of some unilateral actions, have somehow

eroded the spirit of cooperation. Recently, COVID-19 exposed the fragility and necessity of multilateral institutions in the global world.

Regional organizations like ASEAN, the African Union, the G-20, and BRICS seem to be reshaping the global order, even though they are emerging world powers in flux. Somewhere, India along with all regional organizations, played a key role among all the organizations that the world has seen at the 2023 G-20 summit, which was held in New Delhi, India (MEA, GOI, 2023). Somehow, it is strong leadership, the largest democracy, an emerging economy, and political stability that make India a different place. India is a strong voice for South Asia, raising concerns across the region, even as initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance, Vaccine Maitri, and the Voice for Global Summit demonstrate that India's leadership is not about controlling the region but about contributing to it.

There is a massive divide between developed and developing countries worldwide, frequently characterised by imbalance and inequality. Nevertheless, it is not true for South Asia; somehow, India has become more than just a voice; it has become a link between goals, encouraging collaboration and creating a more inclusive South Asia. India's leadership has repeatedly stressed that the Global South is a key component of the international policy architecture rather than a peripheral player (Kathuria, 2018). Therefore, equitable, sustainable, and participatory regional development is required for South Asia, as it plays a significant role in the contemporary world order. Even though it is not a charity that India provides to the region, it is a partnership that accompanies South Asia as a centre of trade, tourism, stability, and sustainable development. Through various mechanisms such as BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and IORA, they advance the strategic and economic architecture of South Asia. Nevertheless, there is a lack of counter terrorism mechanisms in the region. After lots of similarities like languages, societies, religion, culture and civilisation, SAARC has failed to find this necessity for the peace and security of the region. Consequently, BIMSTEC emerged as the more pertinent way for India.

Challenges for India in South Asia

In South Asia, there are lots of mismanagement and social imbalance within the societies, corruption, China's interference, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiatives, terrorism in various forms and so on. Rhetorically, these problems are consistently becoming more prominent in front of India. In recent years, India has realized that China has softened its policies and established a vast number of bilateral relations with South Asian nations. BRI, which is economically and trade-wise a corridor for China, and, through this, China wants to take advantage of Sri Lanka and Pakistan because it knows the rivalries among India and other South Asian countries, which made India apprehensive (Blah, 2018). China make a huge trade market in South Asia, such as

China's Bilateral Trade with South Asia



source <https://tradingeconomics.com/indicators>

These are demonstrations of how China has captured the region through their trade capacity and economic power. India itself is facing a trade deficit with China. Hambantota port, which China has taken from Sri Lanka for a 99-year lease and the causes of the economy, and, on the other hand, Gwadar port in Pakistan, for which China is investing heavily and influencing Pakistan (Ahmed & Haque Sheikh, 2021). Afterwards, the strings of pearls, which are part of China's BRI projects, and CPEC, which is a significant source of tension for India, are discussed.

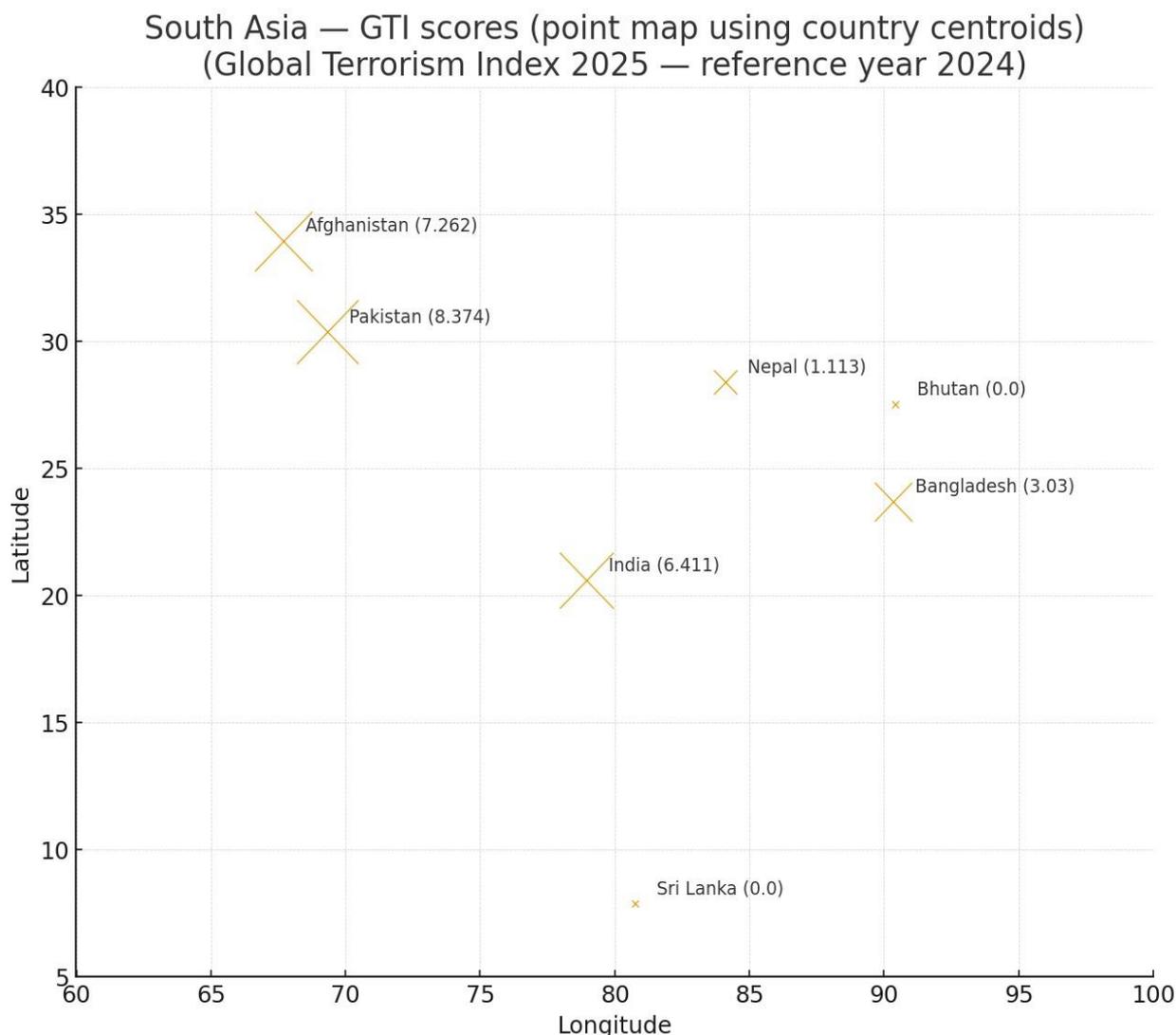
CPEC development going through the POK (Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir) is creating tension for India, which is a big challenge for the region, even though Pakistan is openly supporting all these projects. As for Bangladesh, China is preparing to provide many infrastructure projects and financial aid (Rahaman, 2020). Somehow, China is not stopping on land; it is also making more engagement in the sea (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). Recently, I visited Nepal and observed that several large and small Chinese projects are underway. As training for traffic police officers, railways, the Madeiran language centre, roads, and many more projects, looking at the roots (Rai, 2022). Among South Asian nations, politically turbulent relations also make partnership and cooperation challenging. So, India needs to strengthen its position in trade and the economy to support regional partnership, since it is not going well, as I mentioned below with the data. In the trade sector, India is stepping far away from China.

India's Trade with South Asia

Country	Exports (2022-23)	Imports (2022-23)	Total Trade
Bangladesh	12,203.93	2,021.24	≈ 14,225.2 M USD
Nepal	8,015.99	639.62	≈ 8,655.6 M USD
Sri Lanka	5,111.59	1,078.14	≈ 6,189.7 M USD
Pakistan	627.10	20.11	≈ 647.2 M USD
Afghanistan	437.05	452.81	≈ 889.9 M USD
Bhutan	1,070.37	535.61	≈ 1,605.98 M USD
Maldives	476.75	496.62	≈ 973.37 M USD

Source- <https://www.commerce.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/Annual-Report-English-Lower-Resolution-1>

As mentioned, despite extensive development and cooperation in the region, India indeed lacks strong trade partnerships and economic prosperity with its neighbours. It is a significant factor that India accounts for more than 80% of its trade with countries outside South Asia. As well as terrorism, which is a big headache for the region and somehow sponsored terrorism, which is making the environment across the region and beyond more tense. It is a big barrier to regional development and integration. India raises its voice on every global platform for this essential issue; indeed, the world humanity is willing for a solution. Nevertheless, India has more drastic and challenging problems, such as terrorism. In the whole region, data show a more challenging and scary face of terrorism. Such as



Sources-<https://www.visionofhumanity.org>

When we see the data, we realize that regional organizations are not working for mutual trust, peace and security; they look paralysed, as exemplified by SAARC. India also faces geopolitical rivalries in the region along with China. India has fought four wars with Pakistan (1947-8, 1965, 1971, 1998), with lots of tiny conflicts, like those that happened in the Indian parliament attack in 2001, the Uri attack in 2016, the Pulwama attack in 2019 and many more. India suffers the most in the region from terrorism. On the other hand, what is going on in the region, such as the Sri Lankan economic crisis, Nepal's political abruption, political upheavals in Bangladesh, the lack of democratic values in Afghanistan, the Maldives' relations with India, and so on (J., & Pauli, M., 2023). There is so much unpredictability in the region, which is making the situation more difficult for India. India shares borders with all South Asian countries. In such a complex scenario, there may be political upheavals and migration issues, particularly with border-sharing countries, as mentioned above, creating humanitarian and administrative burdens.

Way Forward and Conclusions -

After many challenges, South Asia is a region of shared growth, prosperity, and connectivity. The region shared cultural and civilizational history, fostering reciprocity that strengthens their cooperation and togetherness. In many ways, including infrastructure, hydropower, textiles, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, digital connectivity, and corridors, India is enduring its position across the region. India also welcomed the establishment of SAFTA in 2006, which was created to facilitate more frequent trade between the nations (Kumar & Tripathi, 2019). Indian leadership consistently strives to connect more and more with South Asian nations. Indian leadership has always tried to build strong bonds with neighbouring countries and firmly believes that South Asia is not a region of conflict; it is a region of stability, cooperation, teamwork, and shared progress. India's leadership has initiated many times, such as in 1999, when the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced the "Delhi-Lahore Bus Seva" to foster friendly relations with Pakistan and make people-to-people connectivity easier. The Manmohan Singh

government constructed the Salma dam and the Ziranj-Delaram highway project in Afghanistan, the 2011 Land Boundaries Agreement with Bangladesh, which was a long-disputed issue, and the Teesta water-sharing agreements. Since 1990, the Neighbourhood First policy has aimed to prioritise cooperation, collaboration, and mutual progress across the whole region. Surprising to see in 2014, when Modi took the oath, swearing to have invited all South Asian leaders, which was a demonstration of Neighbourhood First Policy. Even though he chose to visit Bhutan and then Nepal first in 2015, a historic agreement was reached with Bangladesh, which involved the exchange of 111 enclaves to Bangladesh and 51 to India, along with the provision of bus service to various cities across the region. In 2015, PM Modi visited Sri Lanka and sought to improve bilateral relations, including announcing economic grants and assistance for various projects in the country; nevertheless, the Ramayan and Buddhist circuit between Nepal and India, which connects cross-border routes. These are the roots that trace the roots of Ramayana and Buddha pilgrims; all these religious pilgrimage ways connect countries more closely. Free visa facilities between Nepal and Bhutan on arrival, and Visa-on-Arrival with various countries, demonstrate connectivity efforts across the region.

In 2019, the Indian Prime Minister took the oath ceremony twice, inviting BIMSTEC leaders. India's strategic shift reveals its policy towards Southeast Asia. India pushed up the BIMSTEC and renewed it, as seen after the Uri attack, when New Delhi called for a boycott of the SAARC summit in 2016, which was fixed in Islamabad; these countries collectively boycotted the summit. It is an alternative regional platform for the region, where five South Asian countries come together following the SAARC's failure. They could discuss sub-regional issues and come together through this platform. However, in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Modi addressed the SAARC summit, demonstrating that "Opportunities must be realized through SAARC or outside it and among us all or some of us" It was an immense signal for the neighbouring countries. It is also the result of Pakistan's Obstructionist approach in South Asia. The Bay of Bengal, a significant trade route accounting for more than 25% of global trade, with a combined GDP of around \$2.7 trillion, could offer untapped resources. One-fourth of the world's trade goods cross the Bay each year. It is a comprehensive and strategic solution not only for the development of the blue economy across the region, but also for addressing problems such as irregular migration, drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime accidents. BIMSTEC is associated with the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiatives, which focus on the Bay of Bengal countries. It also fulfills India's Neighbourhood First policy objective. However, China's engagement in the Bay of Bengal region is growing rapidly and is driven by massive economic development, submarine movements, and, indeed, India's interest in consolidating its natural engagement with BIMSTEC countries. India needs lots of policy and infrastructure initiatives to move forward.

In the 21st century, as the world order changes rapidly, India cannot blame Pakistan for all the uncertainty in SAARC, nor for the regional grouping against India. India needs a trilateral grouping within the region to strengthen relations, along with a comprehensive roadmap for working together, including bilateral free trade agreements, improved digital connectivity, the construction of a new economic corridor, and other ways forward. They should not repeat the same problem with BIMSTEC that happened with SAARC. India also needs innovative solutions, institutional mechanisms to activate more economic forums, and peaceful coexistence, which India always follows but needs to encourage among nations. For instance, educational institutions in India function as agents of social change by promoting critical thinking, civic values, and opportunities of material wellbeing. Thought leadership through universities, like South Asian University, support exchange of ideals and go a long way in ensuring melodious people-to-people relationships, and shapes institutional cultures that encourage inclusion, dialogue and community engagement. Through regional collaborations and cross-border educational initiatives, Indian institutions could contribute to peacebuilding in South Asia. This region stands at a critical juncture where it can remain fragmented or move towards collectively on the path to progress within the countries. India has a crystal-clear path that its leadership must be rooted in mutual respect, cooperative security for the region, and shared development for all. Nevertheless, India's leadership in the region is becoming more influential than in the past decades and consistently growing within the nation.

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