South Asia as a Political and Economic Region: Present Scenario

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ABSTRACT
South Asia is simply not an expression of geographical proximity. Some specific indicators those confirm regions separate existence have missed in South Asia such as common national interest, inter-state cooperation etc. So there is contention that South Asia is still in the process of evolving as a region. South Asia is neither neat nor precise: all South Asian nations have connections with neighboring regions. In present scenario, South Asia’s economic and political geography needs to be reimagined. The present South Asia is ‘over’ politicized rather geographical entity. As SAARC has done very little to cooperation in the subcontinent, the countries of region are finding alternatives in nature of other regional organizations such as BBIN, BIMSTEC. The rise of China in the subcontinent has also altering its economic and political geography.

Keywords: South Asia, Geography, Region, Indian Subcontinent.

Introduction
The expression ‘South Asia’ usually includes the following countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. But the boundaries of the region are not as clear in the east and the west, as they are in the north and the south. Myanmar is often included in discussions of the region as a whole. China is an important player but is not considered to be a part of the region. South Asian regionalism is largely dependent on geographical contiguity among the South Asian countries. It is still in the process of evolving as a region. South Asia and the Indian subcontinent are same. The area was usually referred to as Britain’s Indian Empire or Raj prior to 1947. Most geographers, such as Sir Dudley Stamp, called it the Indian subcontinent because of its separation from the rest of the Asian landmass by a continuous barrier of mountains in the north (Malhotra, 2009). It has been only in 1960’s that military strategists and policy planning experts have viewed India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal as constituting a separate region. Previously the general tendency was to view these countries with those of South-East Asia (Hasan, 1964). South Asia is a macro-geographical region wherein various countries in close geographical proximity share certain commonality of interests. These interests could incorporate a whole gamut of historical, geographical, economic, political, social and cultural aspects. In fact it is a region where geography, history, politics and culture are truly linked. There were strong empires in its history that straddles the subcontinent and the experience of colonialism, more recently, and reinforced the legacy of interconnectedness and affinity. Later came the trauma of partition, the growth of assertive nationalism, the drift away from democratic freedoms in some countries of the neighbourhood and the impact of global strategic and ideological rivalries, turning the subcontinent into a region of division and conflict. The subcontinent is now home to several independent and sovereign states and this is a compelling political reality ((Malhotra, 2009).

A number of common factors override the great diversity that exists between the countries of South Asia, so that they can be marked off as a separate region. The most important single factor other than the geographical, which has contributed to its regionalization, is the common influence of 200 years of British colonialism. While the Indian sub-continent, Burma and Ceylon experienced direct British rule, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan had to surrender many of their powers to the British Government in India. As a result we find common political, legal and administrative institutions in India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon. However, the British were also responsible for creating a number of problems in the area. Thus some of the political differences between India and Pakistan (such as the Kashmir and the Indus Waters disputes), Ceylon's differences with India about the nationality of the Tamil plantation workers, and India’s frictions with Burma and the Himalayan States are legacies of the British period (Hasan, 1964).

Basically, a region can be defined on the basis of certain specific indicators that confirm its existence. A set of countries in close geographical proximity with each other can be categorized as a 'region' when, first and foremost, they share a certain commonality of (national) interests. These interests could incorporate a whole gamut of social, economic, political, cultural, historical, and other factors. Secondly, this set of countries should be sufficiently enlightened so as to understand the significance of placing cooperation
above conflict in the conduct of inter-state relations. This should also be bolstered by a collective desire to come together on a common platform to create some lasting mechanism for regional cooperation. These sentiments are more or less lacking among the South Asian states, as is evident in years of lacklustre performance by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Following the conception of the SAARC in 1983, very little has been actually done to promote this sole existing mechanism for collective cooperation in the subcontinent.

Therefore, there is a lack of cooperation in South Asia in terms of its shortcomings as a region. The main contention is that South Asia is still in the process of evolving as a 'region' due to two basic factors: an adequate degree of complementarity of interests has not yet been achieved among the South Asian states and the almost perpetual preoccupation with intra-state conflicts and crises leaves individual states with scarce time or resources to work towards regional solutions. Such lack of 'regionness' in South Asia can also be understood in terms of another related phenomenon, that is, the persistence of many social, economic and political problems in practically each and every South Asian state. Such intra-state problems are often either the cause or consequence of inter-state disputes and misperceptions as well (Malhotra, 2009).

South Asia is neither neat nor precise: all South Asian nations have connections with neighboring regions. Afghanistan straddles Central Asia and Southwest Asia, plus it has a connection with Northeast Asia via a short border with China. Bhutan, India and Nepal have connections with Northeast Asia by virtue of their common borders with Chinese-controlled Tibet (Xizang). The Maldives is actually located in the Indian Ocean, with whose small island nations, such as Mauritius and Seychelles, the Maldives seemingly has more in common. Similarly, Sri Lanka is located in the Indian Ocean, although the submerged Adam's Bridge physically links this island to the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan has a physical connection with Southwest Asia via its border with Iran. Finally, India and Bangladesh have connections with Southeast Asia as a result of their land borders with Myanmar (which the United States officially calls "Burma"). Furthermore, India could well be considered part of Southeast Asia because of its possession of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which offshore territory is located significantly closer to Myanmar and Thailand than to India (Snedden, 2016).

The Indo-centric nature of the region has been a major source of dissonance. Indo-centricity, along with asymmetry in size, resources and capabilities, has given rise to feelings of insecurity among the smaller states of the region. They feel themselves overshadowed by India. Because of its vastness, India has a natural sphere of influence, which has often caused suspicion among the smaller states. India's initiatives are not only misunderstood but often characterized as 'hegemonic', meant to serve its own vested interests. The smaller states, therefore, tend to develop their own distinct identities and, in this process, affinities with India are being ignored and points of diversity are being stressed repeatedly. India straddles the whole of the South Asian subcontinent, touching all its neighbours, who fear domination. There is constant fear among the nations of South Asia since last many decades about India's Supremacy because of this fear some South Asian nations have made agreements with America and European countries' (Chunakara, 2014).

The ever growing bitterness of India-Pakistan relations is also stumbling block in the region. Fundamentally, neither nation trusts the other, a situation fostered by their bitter, ongoing dispute since 1947 over which should possess the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This mistrust pervades the region, if only because, diplomatically, both nations have competed relentlessly internationally, as well as in, or over, SAARC. India seeks to ensure that this body does India's bidding - or to prevent the other members influence on it. Pakistan, and other nations, resists India's sometimes heavy-handed attempts to dominate, with Pakistan's ability to withstand India increasingly based around it possessing more and more nuclear weapons. India's situation is enhanced by a significant geo-strategic advantage: India is at the center of South Asia, with Indian land and maritime borders separating all South Asians nations from each other, except for Afghanistan and Pakistan. This geo-strategic reality means that South Asia is essentially "India-locked:" for non-Indians to access each other, they must either cross Indian territory or meet in third locations away from South Asia. This circumstance is difficult for landlocked nations (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal), which partially explains the often dysfunctional Afghanistan - Pakistan relationship and why Afghanistan is politically closer to India than Pakistan. Equally, however, because of the distances involved or because of their own weak capabilities and traditions, India's maritime neighbors (Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) also have limited contacts with each other (Ahmed and Bhatnagar, 2007).

In contemporary South Asian scenario, India-Pakistan relations still remain a major irritant. India-Pakistan tensions on cross-border shelling and the cancellation of the foreign secretary talks in August 2014 after the Pakistani high commissioner in India met with Kashmiri separatist leaders reflect ongoing hostility.
In the 18th SAARC summit, only the pact on energy cooperation could be signed, the agreements for cross-border movement of trains and motor vehicles could not be signed because of Pakistan reason. Later incidents such as Dinanagar police station attack, Pathankot airbase attack, Indian prime minister recent statement on balochistan and gilgit baltistan etc. creates more tensions in India – Pakistan relations (The Indian Express, 16 August, 2016). In October 2017, militants attacked an Indian paramilitary camp near Srinagar, and then in February 2018 attacked in Indian army base in the Jammu region and more recent incidents, Amritsar terror attack and cancelation of respective foreign ministers meeting at the UN General Assembly bitter their relations. Pakistan will continue to pursue strong relations with China, for example, joined China’s projects BRI and CPEC, because this gives Pakistan some feeling of security in relation to India, with which China also has some unresolved issues and a difficult relationship. These ramifications are not a recipe for enduring and enduring India-Pakistan relations. Nor will they further South Asia as a region (https://www.cfr.org/).

India, of course, is not the only one having problems with Pakistan. Its other South Asian neighbour, Afghanistan, like India, had entertained hopes for a fresh beginning in the ties with Pakistan. Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan also have deteriorated over terrorism and refugees. Kabul’s hopes that Imran, often called “Taliban Khan”, can quickly deliver on peace, have been tempered. Pakistan’s relations with Bangladesh have been cool for such a long time that no one expects a reversal of fortunes any time soon (Raja Mohan, 2018).

On the other side, China’s economic strength has been transforming its position in the world in different ways and this is more evident in South Asia too. China’s sphere of influence is growing in South Asian countries in different ways, by way of extending its development and economic supports, expansion of business interests, strategic and security influences. China has been enlarging its strategic footprints in Indian backyards like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives (Chunakara, 2014). Chinese goods flooded Nepali markets as Nepal diversified its imports and lessened its dependence on India. China displaced many Indian goods in Bangladesh, offering cheaper Chinese products (especially cotton and other fabrics central to the garment industry) without the visa, transport, and customs challenges that had limited trade between India and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka also features prominently in China’s Maritime Silk Road project. Beijing’s focus on deep seaport development played on New Delhi’s fears of a Chinese “string of pearls” encircling India. The Colombo port of call of two Chinese submarines in late 2014 and reports that Sri Lanka granted Chinese state-owned enterprises operating rights at the Hambantota port aggravated Indian concerns (Anderson and Ayres, 2015). In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan, China holds strategic real estate, which could also be fortified militarily in the future. At present, it means China has a stake in the internal politics of those countries. While China’s growing presence in infrastructure and connectivity projects has been well-documented, its new interest in political mediation must be watched more carefully as a result. When China stepped in to negotiate a Rohingya refugee return agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh, or host a meeting of Afghanistan and Pakistan’s foreign ministers to help calm tensions and bring both on board with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) connection between them, or offer to mediate between the Maldivian government and the opposition, it wasn’t just breaking with its past policy of ignoring political dynamics in countries it invests in. Therefore, China’s rise has begun to irrevocably alter the economic geography of the Subcontinent. China’s Belt and Road Initiative is connecting different parts of South Asia to the adjoining provinces of China, Pakistan with Xinjiang, Nepal and Bhutan with Tibet, and Bangladesh with Yunnan. Beijing also seeks to integrate Maldives and Sri Lanka into its maritime strategy (Raja Mohan, 2018).

In fact, South Asia has a dangerously misunderstood geography. Understanding that geography delivers one to the core of South Asia’s political dilemma, which is about borders that can never be perfect or even acceptable to all sides, so that the map of South Asia resembles that of war-torn, early-modern Europe, made worse by nuclear weapons (Kaplan, 2010). Therefore, geographies are not static; they evolve, sometimes slowly and quickly at others. How we imagine and construct regions changes according to circumstances. The British Raj extended from Aden to Malacca at its peak. “South East Asia” did not exist until the Second World War. The “Asia-Pacific” came into usage only in the late 1980s. The “Indo-Pacific” was a novelty a decade ago (Raja Mohan, 2018). As Robert Kaplan in his article ‘Rearranging the Sub-continent’ (published in Forbes on Dec 24,2014), rightly argues: “South Asia’s current political situation may not be permanent, saying that the division of the Indian sub-continent between two major states, India and Pakistan (as well as a minor one, Bangladesh) may not be history’s last word in political geography there” (Kaplan, 2014). Change is the only enduring fact of life. SAARC project has now lost all steam. That does not mean the region is in mourning. All countries are finding alternatives. Sri Lanka has begun to describe itself as an Indian Ocean country, Colombo is by no means betraying South Asian regionalism. It is merely
rediscovering its geographic centrality in the Indian Ocean and celebrating it. Maldives, too, has so much to gain by leveraging its Indian Ocean location rather than pin its hopes on the dystopian SAARC. India also moved to focus on the so-called BBIN forum that brings together four countries of South Asia — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal — for sub-regional cooperation in the eastern Subcontinent. The Indian government has also sought to reactivate the BIMSTEC forum that brings the BBIN countries as well as Sri Lanka with Myanmar and Thailand. The idea of a Bay of Bengal community is gaining footing by the day (Raja Mohan, 2018).

Conclusion
It can be concluded that South Asia cannot be said to have evolved into a complete region because the propensity toward conflict has always prevailed over the desire for peace and stability among the states comprising this geographical area. South Asian sub-continent, which is home to one sixth of world population, is one of the conflict-ridden regions in the world. The roots of conflicts among the countries of South Asia sub-continent are deep in the soil of this region. Number of problems have been traced which are at the base of conflicts. Among them geopolitical factors are also most important concerns. On the one side there is China’s rise, and the other side India’s position of big brother, disputes with Pakistan and major and minor border conflicts with other neighbouring countries are matters of concern. No doubt, these conflicts with neighbouring countries can go in favour of China. China emerged as the key issue for SAARC as it trying hard to influence the long trend of the group by giving aids to nations that had so far been dependent on all kinds of aids and assistance. Examples are there with Sri Lanka, Nepal and even Maldives, where China tried to play economics. It must still be hoped that, however complex, such solutions will ultimately be implemented in order to build an economically stronger and socio-politically more cohesive region called South Asia.

References
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