

THE IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SAARC and India

The government has shown its commitment to its strategy of “Neighbourhood First” by inviting the leaders of neighbouring countries for the second time to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s swearing-in ceremony on May 30. . The focus will continue this week when he makes his first visit in this tenure to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, something that has become tradition for all Indian Prime Ministers.

The obvious difference between Mr. Modi’s invitations to his taking office the first and second time is that in 2014 they went to the leaders of the eight-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), while in 2019 they went to leaders of the seven-member Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC includes five SAARC members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka), and Myanmar and Thailand, while leaving SAARC members Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives out, due to the geographical location of the Bay of Bengal.

However, to extrapolate from this that BIMSTEC has replaced SAARC, or that the Modi government is in effect building the foundations of BIMSTEC over the grave of SAARC is both illogical and contrary to the founding principles of these organisations. SAARC, as an organisation, reflects the South Asian identity of the countries, historically and contemporarily. This is a naturally made geographical identity. Equally, there is a cultural, linguistic, religious and culinary affinity that defines South Asia. Therefore, just as rivers, climatic conditions flow naturally from one South Asian country to the other, so do the films, poetry, humour, entertainment and food.

As a result, since 1985 when the SAARC charter was signed, the organisation has developed common cause in several fields: agriculture, education, health, climate change, science and technology, transport and environment. Each area has seen modest but sustainable growth in cooperation. For example, from 2010, when the South Asian University began in Delhi, the number of applicants for about 170 seats has more than doubled. SAARC’s biggest failure, however, comes from the political sphere, where mainly due to India-Pakistan tensions, heads of state have met only 18 times in 34 years; it has been five years since the last summit in Kathmandu.

BIMSTEC, on the other hand, is not moored in the identity of the nations that are members. It is essentially a grouping of countries situated around the Bay of Bengal, and began in 1997 (Bhutan and Nepal joined in 2004), a decade after SAARC. The organisation did not even have a secretariat until 2014. While it has made some progress in technical areas, leaders of BIMSTEC nations have held summits just four times in 22 years. With India’s growing frustration over cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, it hopes to build more on BIMSTEC’s potential. But the organisation is unlikely to supplant SAARC for a specific reason.

One of BIMSTEC’s two founding principles is: “Cooperation within BIMSTEC will constitute an addition to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States.” Its official literature describes it as “a bridge between South and South East Asia” and a “platform for intra-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] members.” It is significant that two of the leaders at Mr. Modi’s swearing-in on Thursday — Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena — have also emphasised that BIMSTEC would not replace SAARC.

What explains the deep resistance to SAARC in India? Terrorism emanating from Pakistan is clearly the biggest stumbling block cited by the government. Mr. Modi cancelled his attendance at the last planned SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016, after the attack on the Indian Army's brigade headquarters in Uri. Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan followed suit.

This principled stand by India, however, doesn't extend to other organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), into which India and Pakistan were inducted in 2017. Unlike SAARC, which has never presumed to resolve bilateral issues of its members, the SCO is a security-based regional organisation that is keen to work on conflict resolution in the region; it even organises military exercises between members. It is difficult to reconcile the staunch opposition to attending a SAARC summit where India is at least the largest country, with the acquiescence to the SCO, where Russia and China take the lead. Both Moscow and Beijing have made no secret of their desire to facilitate talks between India and Pakistan, and it remains to be seen how successful they will be when Mr. Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan attend the SCO summit in Bishkek (June 13-14). The SCO summit is hosted by rotation, and is likely to be in either India or Pakistan next year, which would mean that Mr. Modi would either be required to host Mr. Khan, or the other way around, something the government has refused to do at SAARC.

Another reason offered by those declaring SAARC becoming defunct is the logjam because of Pakistan's opposition to connectivity projects such as the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), energy sharing proposals and others such as the South Asia Satellite offered by Mr. Modi. However, such agreements have not made progress in other groupings either: the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping has failed to implement the MVA due to opposition from Bhutan, and India has held up for years cross-border power-exchanges that would allow Bhutan and Nepal to freely sell electricity to third countries such as Bangladesh. India has rightfully held Pakistan responsible for holding up the South Asia Free Trade Area agreement and refusing to reciprocate 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status to India. After the Pulwama attack this February, India also withdrew MFN status to Pakistan, but New Delhi must admit that in other regional groupings such as the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), it too is accused of stonewalling free trade regimes. In BIMSTEC, one can imagine similar logjams.

Going forward, SAARC could adopt the "ASEAN minus X" formula — members who are unwilling to join the consensus can be allowed to join at a future date, while members who wish to go ahead with connectivity, trade or technology cooperation agreements are not impeded.

Some of the resistance to SAARC has to do with the organisation's history: Bangladesh's former military dictator Ziaur Rahman, who was known to be inimical to India, conceived it, and was suspected of trying to constrain India by tying it to its smaller and much less developed neighbours. In the 1990s, when India was beginning to see its role as an economic leader and an Asian power with a claim to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, the SAARC identity may have seemed irrelevant. Even Pakistan's elite establishment, which often looks to West Asia, was less than enthusiastic about the SAARC grouping where India would be "big brother".

However, over time, India began to see the benefits of leading SAARC, where neighbours became force multipliers for India's power projections. Some such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka even outstripped India on growth and human development indicators, leading to more opportunities for engagement with them.

There remain other possibilities. In a region increasingly targeted by Chinese investment and loans, SAARC could be a common platform to demand more sustainable alternatives for development, or to oppose trade tariffs together, or to demand better terms for South Asian

labour around the world. This potential has not yet been explored, nor will it be till SAARC is allowed to progress naturally and the people of South Asia, who make up a quarter of the world's population, are enabled to fulfil their destiny together.

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