

South Asia's Monsoonal Congeniality: India as a Senior Peer

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Abstract

The hegemonic designs on the part of India to dominate the smaller states in South Asia is a persistent challenge for regional security. Both kinetic and non-kinetic measures are canvassed by New Delhi to boast its landmass superiority, resulting in revulsion with all of its neighbours. This tendency acts as an inherent impediment and torpedoes efforts for regional amalgamation and prosperity, and SAARC is a victim of this policy. India's undiminished quest for primacy has disturbed the balance of power in its extended neighbourhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. This is where India tries to embed itself with extra-regional powers to retain an upper hand in the region at the cost of congeniality. This paper analyses how India has treated its neighbours and dented the prospects of regional cooperation for the sake of its egocentric approach in inter-state relations. Notwithstanding a common denominator in terms of culture and history, as well as shared challenges in the environmental spheres, India has furthered a sense of otherness and disparity.

Keywords: South Asia, India, Kashmir, Hegemony, SAARC, Geopolitics, Territorial Imbalance.

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Introduction

An interesting tweet last summer in the year 2024, from a friend in Kathmandu said: “Monsoon has arrived in Dhaka, Colombo, Kathmandu, Delhi and Lahore. Monsoonal unity of South Asia is impressive (and) needs to transfer to geopolitics.”¹ To me, it was a curious juxtaposition of romanticism and geopolitics that called for dispassionate introspection. Someone sitting in Kathmandu, with Himalayan overview of monsoonal rainbows, could not have come up with a more romantic theme for the resuscitation of erstwhile South Asian charm. One could understand why my Nepalese friend was agonising over this region’s persistently unpalatable geopolitics. He genuinely felt that once we get past the hurdle of rolling South Asia around on our tongues and brains, other matters and issues will fall into place, including peace and stability in this region. And then he abruptly asked: “Are we sure about India?”

Any discussion on peace and stability in this part of the world would remain incomplete without looking at India’s unique geographic location and undeniable hegemonic ambitions. India’s expansive territorial centrality in South Asia creates many problems, including the fear of domination among its smaller neighbours² and a host of territorial, ethnic, and water-related issues which, without any exception involves every other South Asian state. Additionally, all the SAARC countries share a border with India but not with each other except Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.³ Delhi’s efforts to seek an alternative interface with Kabul remains undiminished. This unique geographic feature hinging on territorial imbalance possibly limits the scope of any genuine regional cooperation. The very first question that again comes to mind before anything else is about India’s performance.

¹ Shamshad Ahmad, “Monsoon and geopolitics,” *The Express Tribune*, June 21, 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/566430/monsoon-and-geopolitics>.

² C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003), 42–44.

³ “BIMSTEC vs SAARC,” *IASGoogle*, accessed September 8, 2025, https://iasgoogle.com/editorial_detail/bimstec-vs-saarc.

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South Asia Severed

South Asia remains one of the poorest regions in the world engendering hosts of challenges. Five of the eight SAARC members — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Nepal — belong to UN's category of Least Developed Countries (LDCs).⁴ The erroneous policies of the regional governments in South Asia have institutionalised poverty and made it pervasive with deep and profound effects. South Asia is “a region with 22% of the global population, 2% of Global GDP and 1.3% of world trade.”⁵ It “accounts for 44% of the poverty stricken segment of the world.”⁶ Similarly, with rare exceptions, these countries also lag behind in genuine democratic tradition and good governance.

While this region remains mired in its unbroken miasma of poverty and conflict, the world at large has moved ahead at an accelerated rate of economic growth and affluence. One has seen the world transform itself and come together rapidly through the marvels of technology and communications. One knows the major regional organisations, especially the EU and ASEAN that came into existence with common external challenges facing them,⁷ other than securing peace and multidimensional cooperation. They have successfully inducted prosperity and greater relief to millions of their inhabitants.

The main reason for the success of Southeast Asia and the EU is that those had the advantage of geopolitical harmony, affording them the needed impulse to pursue their common socio-economic goals. On the other hand, SAARC never had any such cohesive regional impulse⁸ and thus remained

⁴ United Nations, *List of Least Developed Countries (as of December 2020)*, UN Committee for Development Policy, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category.html>.

⁵ M. Irfan, “Poverty in South Asia,” *The Pakistan Development Review* 39: 4 Part II (Winter 2000) pp. 1141–1151 <https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpdr/2000/1141-1151.pdf>.

⁶ M. Irfan, “Poverty in South ...”

⁷ European Union, “The History of the European Union,” *Europa.eu*, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu_en.

⁸ S. D. Muni, *The Emerging Dimensions of SAARC* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1993), 15–18.

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unstable. South Asia's collective desire for socio-economic uplift remains a charade.

The SAARC as a regional cooperation organisation has not moved beyond declaratory pronouncements, and has no tangible achievement to its credit.⁹ It has delivered neither on its promise, nor on its potential.¹⁰ An ostrich-like approach has only had a dampening effect on this vast region's collective will to develop economically while living in peace and harmony. Certainly, South Asia is not held back by some inherent kowtowing to poverty and backwardness; but is a hostage to a unique geopolitical deformity that keeps it blocked from developing a genuine unity of purpose.¹¹

It, therefore, remains "the most dangerous place on earth,"¹² where peace is a hostage to a chance miscalculation. This reality itself, as a poignant reminder of the region's critical importance for peace and stability, brings us face to face with three key conflict areas or flashpoints, namely, the Afghan turmoil, India-Pakistan gridlock, and the post-9/11 power imbalances within the region. India, because of its sheer size and centrality, has in fact sought to remain the '*primus inter pares*' (first among the equals) without having to be identified in tandem with the rest of sovereign states.¹³ Given the territorial incongruities and their attendant security ramifications, South Asia is indeed an enigmatic region. Home to one-fifth of humanity, this vast region is potentially rich in everything while offering much to the

⁹ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The Future of SAARC: Prospects and Challenges," *South Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2013): 345–358.

¹⁰ Saman Kelegama, *SAARC at Crossroads: The Fate of Regional Cooperation in South Asia* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2012), 22–25.

¹¹ Mahendra P. Lama, "SAARC: The Search for a Regional Identity," in *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 67–69.

¹² "Clinton in South Asia: Most Dangerous Place," *BBC News*, March 23, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/688664.stm.

¹³ Varun Sahni, "India and the South Asian Balance of Power," *International Studies* 40, no. 1 (2003): 1–18.

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world; yet it is held back by perennial conflicts and poverty.¹⁴ One may also look at several other regional factors for prolonged underdevelopment and lack of regional amity in this part of the world. For instance, as long as Afghanistan is in turmoil, there is no prospect of any genuine economic integration in this part of Asia.¹⁵ What seemed to be disturbing my friend in Kathmandu was the unbridgeable geopolitical fault-line that cuts across the region of South Asia, leaving it with little or no “regional impulse” for political or economic integration. It is this peculiar geopolitical situation that also keeps this region hostage to external influences playing their own power games. With an energy and gas-driven ‘great game’ already on, South Asia has never been in a greater need to come out of its geopolitical logjam.¹⁶ At the last SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did acknowledge the region’s dilemma by admitting: “When we speak of SAARC, we usually hear two reactions: cynicism and scepticism.”¹⁷ “This, sadly, is in a region throbbing with the optimism of our youth. Let us work to change cynicism into optimism,” he said, adding “as SAARC, we have failed to move with the speed that our people expect and want. Nowhere in the world is collective effort more urgent than in South Asia; and nowhere else is it so modest.”¹⁸ Speaking from a prepared text in English, Prime Minister Modi suddenly broke into Hindi: “*Hum paas paas hain par saath saath nahin. Saath saath honey se taqat kai guna barh jaati hai*” (We are neighbours but we are not together. By staying together, our strength can increase manifold).” He admitted: “India, too, has its share of responsibility because of its size and location. I

¹⁴ World Bank, *South Asia Development Update: Toward Faster, Cleaner Growth*, April 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/south-asia-development-update>.

¹⁵ World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update: Navigating Crises*, April 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/afghanistan-development-update>.

¹⁶ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), 233–240.

¹⁷ SAARC Secretariat, “Eighteenth SAARC Summit, Kathmandu, 26–27 November 2014: Declaration,” <https://www.saarc-sec.org/18th-summit-declaration>.

¹⁸ Narendra Modi, “Statement at the 18th SAARC Summit, Kathmandu,” *Prime Minister’s Office, Government of India*, November 26, 2014, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-statement-at-18th-saarc-summit-kathmandu/.

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know India has to lead, and we will do our part. I hope each of you will, too.”

India’s Hegemonic Ambitions

India’s longstanding ambitions for a dominant position not only in South Asia but even beyond are too well-known.¹⁹ Its size and clout generate many problems in the region, including the fear of domination among its smaller neighbours.²⁰ That fear occasionally experiences a Monroe Doctrine kind of *fait accompli*. Ironically, six SAARC states share borders with India but not with one another.²¹ This unique geographic feature seriously limits the scope of any regional integration making trans-regional trade almost impossible with no room for bypassing the Indian borders. Afghanistan’s admission into the SAARC in the 2007 New Delhi Summit was in itself an attempt at deepening SAARC’s fault-lines,²² although Pakistan welcomed this move at that time. The then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shaukat Aziz declared Afghanistan “a natural and indispensable member”²³ of the South Asian community. For the sake of the people of India, as well as of South Asia, whose future is defined to such a large extent by India, no doubt, my friend in Kathmandu, a committed bearer of South Asia’s weather beaten flag, had a reason to ask: “Are we sure about India as it is constructed or is it time to consider reformatting it?” What he meant was that India in its present physical form will remain a hegemonic power. It has its ambitions not only to dominate the periphery of the Indian Ocean but also the vast areas from Iran to the Straits of Malacca. Its claim to protect the Indus Valley Civilisation from obscurity by meeting the same

¹⁹ Kanti Bajpai, “India’s Grand Strategy: Ambition and Capacity,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2009): 801–818.

²⁰ C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003), 42–44.

²¹ “Member States,” SAARC Secretariat, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/member-states>.

²² SAARC Secretariat, “Fourteenth SAARC Summit, New Delhi, 3–4 April 2007: Declaration,” <http://saarc-sec.org/14th-summit-declaration>.

²³ “India inducted as 8th member: 14th SAARC Summit Begins,” *DAWN*, April 4, 2007, <https://www.dawn.com/news/240651/afghanistan-inducted-as-8th-member14th-saarc-summit-begins>.

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fate of Roman and Egyptian civilisations is also in the same thread. The American strategist and National Security Adviser during President Jimmy Carter's era Zbigniew Brzezinski confirms this dreary phenomenon, when he noted: "India's positioning itself to control the Indian Ocean militarily; its naval and air power programmes point clearly in that direction — as do politically guided efforts to establish India's hegemony in adjoining Bangladesh and Burma."²⁴

An eminent Indian security analyst, C. Raja Mohan also admits this reality by claiming that India's grand strategy divides the world into three concentric circles. "In its immediate neighbourhood, India seeks primacy and a veto over the actions of outside powers. In its extended neighbourhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, India seeks to balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undermining its interests. At the global stage, India seeks to take its place as one of the great powers, a key player in world peace and security."²⁵ Within this backdrop, all the regional states remain concerned over India's extraterritorial designs. In Pakistan's case, India not only refuses to resolve its problems but also keeps igniting new issues to keep Islamabad under unmitigated pressure.

At work in Delhi is the Chanakya mindset that is rooted in the dictum: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."²⁶ India has also been using Afghanistan to destabilise Pakistan.²⁷ A ruling BJP leader was blunt enough to suggest

²⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 38–39.

²⁵ Modern Diplomacy, "India: USA's South Asian bulwark against rising China," quoting C. Raja Mohan's concentric circles framework, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/02/15/india-usas-south-asian-bulwark-against-rising-china>.

²⁶ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *The Arthashastra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Book VI, where Chanakya outlines the principle "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

²⁷ Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188–190.

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that “India cannot make progress unless Pakistan is finished off.”²⁸ Claiming that war between India and Pakistan has become inevitable, he advised the Government of India to join hands with Afghanistan and destroy Pakistan as soon as possible. Obviously for Pakistan, India’s continued belligerence remains a perennial threat to its security and survival, apart from a major destabilising factor in the region. Pakistan has been confronted with serious challenges that perhaps no other country in the world has experienced ever since the beginning of its independent statehood. Serious economic and social challenges are further compounded by intra-regional tensions.

Modi’s Juxtaposition of Romanticism and Geopolitics in South Asia

Prime Minister Modi at the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu said: “Surely, in order to come together, ‘connectivity’ — physical and economic, is needed.”²⁹ What Modi meant was that South Asia is out-of-step with other regions of the world, which have been able to transcend their differences and disputes, moving on a steady course to economic growth and regional integration.³⁰ Modi knew the problem. He also knew the remedy that is why he said that India has to lead in the remedial effort. It is a ‘collective effort’ that he admitted was lacking in South Asia. One expected Modi to act with statesmanship in eliminating the root causes of long-standing disputes in the region. Instead, he opted to deepen them. For instance, he orchestrated the last-minute cancellation of the 19th SAARC Summit which was to be held in Islamabad in November 2016.”³¹

²⁸ “BJP leader Subramanian Swamy says India must finish Pakistan to progress,” *The Hindu*, June 11, 2015. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bjp-leader-swamy-on-pakistan/article7289145.ece>.

²⁹ Narendra Modi, Statement at the 18th SAARC Summit.

³⁰ Rahul Mukherji, “Regionalism and Globalization: Theory and Practice in South Asia,” *Pacific Affairs* 84, no. 1 (2011): 75–93.

³¹ “19th SAARC Summit called off after India, three others pull out,” *The Hindu*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/19th-saarc-summit-called-off-after-india-three-others-pull-out/article14400518.ece>.

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Earlier in 2008, Modi declared 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy'³² to bolster relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The groundwork of this policy was originally laid down during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It was considered imperative for India to cultivate a cooperative and friendly periphery, counterbalance external influences, especially China and ensure India's effective influence within the region. India also claimed to have embraced regionalism, thereafter, and strengthened cross-border relations. Nonetheless, despite laying new pipelines, building electricity networks, upgrading ports, railways, and airport infrastructure, reinvigorating people-to-people exchanges, the regional activism has caused more damage. Prime Minister Modi's own unilateral step brought SAARC to an ignoble stalemate. In fact, since 2014, due to its contradiction, structural weaknesses and lack of dynamism in its foreign policy, India under Modi has contradicted its "autonomous foreign policy." India has shifted her allegiance to major powers with consistency. In October 2020, India signed a landmark defense agreement with the US while allowing sharing of high-end military technology, classified satellite data and critical information between the two countries. It came in the backdrop of India's tense border standoff with China in eastern Ladakh. Modi took a trip to China in August 2025, years after an aggressive melee between the two countries on the Himalayan borders in 2020. Modi gleamingly rekindled his relationship with both China and Russia just before the SCO Summit to demonstrate his ambitious commitment to a multipolar world. This intrusive behaviour adds more to incredibility and erodes trust on the regional and global levels.

A Perpetual threat to Regional Cohesion

No other region in the world today is as volatile and unstable as South Asia with its longstanding India-Pakistan hostility, as was once again evident in May 2025. After nuclearisation, South Asia's problems are no longer an

³² Ashok Behuria, "India's Neighbourhood First Policy: Navigating Power, Trust and Rivalry in South Asia," *Strategic Analysis*, September 9, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09700161.2025.2545143?src=exp-la>.

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exclusive concern of the region itself.³³ It now has a worrisome global dimension raising the stakes of all major powers in the issues of peace and security in this region. The security challenges confronted by South Asia often assume ominous dimensions with India and Pakistan perennially remaining in a confrontational mode. By using a well-considered long-term view, Modi may still rise above his known limitations by expanding and even reinforcing cooperation among all the South Asian partners. To achieve this, Modi's foremost priority ideally may warrant elimination of the root causes of long-standing disputes in the region, especially the core issue of Kashmir³⁴ and a just distribution of water resources, besides easing the visa restrictions. Instead, he chooses to remain in a narrowly-based, hatred-driven RSS-led policy cocoon by prioritising a dubious 'hit-and-miss' strategy.

Since he came to power, he has spared no opportunity to bring Pakistan under pressure. During his visit to Dhaka in 2014, he gloated over the role his country played in Pakistan's 1971 dismemberment.³⁵ Modi should see his own image in the mirror whenever he accuses Pakistan of 'cross-border' terrorism.³⁶

Turbulent incidents are being engineered by India to deflect global attention from the brutalities being perpetrated by India's security forces in the Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.³⁷ If anything, this episode makes one

³³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2023: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

³⁴ Sumantra Bose, *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³⁵ "Modi recalls India's role in 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War," *The Indian Express*, June 7, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/modi-recalls-indias-role-in-1971-bangladesh-liberation-war/>.

³⁶ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "India's Response to Cross-Border Terrorism," official press release, September 29, 2016, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm>.

³⁷ Amnesty International, "Losing Sight in Kashmir: The Impact of Pellet-Firing Shotguns," September 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa20/6776/2017/en/>.

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thing clear. The future of SAARC as a regional cooperation bloc remains hostage to the troubled India-Pakistani discord.³⁸ Without a solution to the Kashmir problem, in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people, there is no prospect of an early breakthrough towards any meaningful regional cooperation. So far, SAARC is the only regional institution in which regional actors have not responded collectively to the effects of the main macro-structural political process of the last decades. What we need in this region is to fix the unbridgeable geopolitical fault-line that cuts across the *body politic* of South Asia, leaving it with little or no “regional impulse” for genuine political or economic integration.³⁹

Way Forward

The situation is further compounded by the world’s ever-changing regional and global dynamics as has been noted in West Asia in the wake of turbulent developments in Palestine and Ukraine. Given the unique political history of South Asia, and the particular social and cultural proclivities of its inhabitants, this region needs peace and economic development, and not conflicts and confrontation.⁴⁰ No regional linkages can be built in an environment of mutual mistrust and apprehension. The trust deficit within the region will not go away unless India, as a larger country in the region, inspires confidence among its neighbours by removing fears of its hegemonic ambitions in the region.

South Asia today poses a colossal challenge of managing the magnitude of its current problems through the promotion of peace and socio-economic growth. South Asia must free itself of tensions and distrust for which the onus rests solely with India being the largest of all its neighbours. The tragic events of 9/11 should have served as a catalyst in bringing South Asian

³⁸ P. R. Chari, “The Kashmir Dispute and SAARC: A Retrospective,” *South Asian Survey* 9, no. 2 (2002): 203–218.

³⁹ S. D. Muni, *South Asia: Conflict, Cooperation and Change* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2003), 45–67.

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development in South Asia 2020: Towards Equitable Development*, Islamabad: Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, 2020.

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nations together in their fight against terrorism. Instead, India has been fueling separatism in Pakistan's Balochistan province along with creating problems for other neighbours as well.⁴¹ India remains obsessed to keep Pakistan under relentless pressure by blaming it for everything that goes wrong on its own side of the border or even across the Line of Control in Kashmir.⁴² It is time South Asia, so rich in history, culture and resources, rediscovered its well-deserved strength and identity. Only then we may build on South Asia's shared potentials, civilisational assets, cultural affluence and pristine values and dynamics. Tragically, for the sake of the people of South Asia, whose future is defined to such a large extent by India, as my Nepalese friend and, indeed, all committed bearers of South Asia's flags have reason to ask: "Are we sure about India as it is constructed or is it time to consider reformatting it?"

Conclusion

So far, the social, political and economic development of South Asia as a region has been seriously stalled by deeply entrenched hostilities. It is increasingly overwhelmed by both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Their interdependence is disproportionately costing the smaller states of the region, be it India-Bangladesh, India-Nepal, India-Sri Lanka or with Pakistan.

The people of South Asia are entrapped in a distrustful atmosphere. They have little control over decision-making or influence over those who can reduce violence. South Asia is profoundly impacted by internal conflicts and interference in the absence of an empathetic role of a geo-politically bigger state like India, of which one could never be sure. Indeed, there is not a single country in the region today, except perhaps for Maldives and Bhutan that is unaffected by national strife and violence.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan's Statement on Indian Interference in Balochistan," press release, August 15, 2016, <https://mofa.gov.pk>.

⁴² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India's Response to Cross-Border Terrorism," press release, September 29, 2016, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.html>.

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Moreover, the internal conflicts in the region have been defining the state-to-state relations as well. For instance, the current government of Bangladesh is struggling to restrain its anger against Sheikh Hasina Wajid, who oversaw her regimes' strongest alliance with India in the region since 2009. Bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka have also been fluctuating in response to internal dynamics and external considerations. Similarly, India has always had strong ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links with Maldives. Yet, China's increasing engagement through large scale infrastructural investments is challenging India's diplomatic clout.

The three wars between India and Pakistan have always been closely linked to unresolved internal conflicts within the region. The accusations and counter-accusations of the 1948, 1965 and 1970, which led to the breakup of Pakistan, cast a petrifying and defiant shadow of India's role in the region. With its bigger geopolitical status in the region, India needs to realise that asymmetric relationships are by definition unequal, but those are far from constituting a simple pecking order of domination. The widespread assumption is that the global international system and its regional subsystems are formed primarily by interactions among greater states. They pursue their national interests, while smaller states have to accept the resulting balance of power and imposed rules of the game. This postulation faces a counter-intuitive narrative. The power asymmetry does not necessarily lead to absolute subjection of the weaker side. There is plenty of scholarship in the history of the last 50 years which demonstrates the ability of resisting the great power pressure, as was seen in the India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025, uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and for that matter in Nepal against China.■

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