

Great Power Rivalries and South Asian Regionalism

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Abstract:

This research examines the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and its struggle to achieve regional integration, collective power and hegemony in the region to countervail the machinations of US and China politicking. Despite a promising 2014 summit, political tensions, notably between India and Pakistan, have stalled progress. Key events, such as the 2016 summit cancellation and the 2021 Afghanistan representation issue, highlight missed opportunities for cooperation. Using the concept of regionalism the study analyzes SAARC's challenges and deficiencies in its approach. Comparisons with other regional bodies like ASEAN reveal the importance of resolving conflicts to foster stability and economic growth. The paper argues that overcoming internal disputes is essential for SAARC to fulfill its goals of regional cooperation, development and sovereignty.

Keywords: SAARC, Regionalism, political conflict, cooperation

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SAARC: A House of Cards

Following a remarkably strong finish to the 2014 SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), the gathered heads of state released a 36-point declaration which reaffirmed their collective aspiration for holistic regional cooperation, growth, and development. The first and perhaps the most fervent declaration of determination, aspiration and ambition was encapsulated by the first pronouncement:

The Heads of State or stability expressed their strong determination to deepen regional integration for peace, stability and prosperity in South Asia by intensifying cooperation, inter alia, in trade, investment, finance, energy, security, infrastructure, connectivity and culture; and implementing projects, programs and activities in a prioritized, result-oriented and time-bound manner (18th SAARC Summit).

In 2016, however, tensions escalated between the India- Pakistan border following a cross-border terrorist attack in the small town of Uri on Indian territory. In a show of protest and disappointment, India formally withdrew its attendance from the 19th SAARC Summit due to be held in November in Islamabad. The remaining SAARC states— Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka— toed the line and in accordance with India's lead, they too withdrew from the summit. In 2021, due to being unable to decide whom to call as Afghanistan's representative following the country's takeover by the Taliban, the fate of the SAARC was officially left in the lurch.

According to observers, the forum forfeited prime opportunities, including the above two, to structure itself into a forum to facilitate negotiation and broker peace on contentious political issues between member states. Biting the bullet at such integral moments would have enabled the organization and the region to circumvent the hesitancy and aversion to discussing and potentially coming to a compromise on several contentious issues that plague relations, interactions and cooperative arrangements in the region. The necessity for redressal is stressed due to the violent forms that disputes in South Asia have taken – warfare

(between India and Pakistan), low-intensity conflicts (between Bangladesh and India over a border dispute), cross-border terrorism (in Kashmir endorsed by Pakistan, and the revival of militancy in the North East of India by China), transgression via excessive political-military intervention and encroachment (India and Sri Lanka) and an occasional bout of an arms race between the stronger players (Sridharan, 2008, 9).

Far from its aim to promote social cohesion, economic and cultural cooperation to imbue the spirit of self-reliance, mutual assistance and collaboration within the region, the ultimate fate of the organization and its principles has been left in the lurch since its last summit in 2014 (Poudel 2022).

Regionalism And More: An Overview of Theories

The conceptual stimulus underlying a collective state organization such as SAARC is Regionalism. Majumdar (2019, p. 5) defines regionalism as a “*scale of significant coordination of policies of states within a definite geographical area for certain mutual benefits....a process through which states in close proximity within a geographical region form a framework of collective strength with the predominant purposes of ensuring security and promotion of economic interests*”. It is premised on functional cooperation and a promise of mutual benefits for all the parties or states involved. The accumulation of mutual benefits and visible benefits can encourage the development of security and peacemaking arrangements within the existing structure. While it may seem to be a by-product of integration, it is actually an imperative since a greater degree of integration increases the vulnerability of the states engaged and simultaneously decreases their capacity to defend against those within the arrangement that pose a threat to them (ibid., 17-20).

Furthermore, there is a circular logic associated with the formation of regional organizations, that later expands into either security arrangements or economic cooperative arrangements. They can be inspired by a necessity for stimulating intraregional economic development and/or developing a collective security apparatus or mechanism to amicably address security issues of concern. With reference to security arrangements, Karl Wolfgang

Deutsch (1968) in his book *Political Community and the North American Area* elaborated on the prototypical theory and model of a 'Security Community' employing the North Atlantic area as the basis of his empirical and analytical work. Deutsch explains a security community is a grouping wherein the probability of war among constituent units is significant owing to a battery of shared interests, aspirations and practices (the prototype proposed by Deutsch would eventually be further developed and later published by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in their dual-authored book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* in 2003.)

This blend of economic, and security (and by extension social development issues) in regional organizations is especially prevalent in the post-cold war era of globalization wherein strengthening economic development and clout is just as essential as ensuring security against neighbors or external power. An example would be the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) formed under the ambit of ASEAN in 1994 as a platform for a security dialogue that came about as a result of post-cold war shifts in 'security paradigms', namely, the rise of China and decreased involvement of the USA in regional security.

For the purpose of the this policy brief, the variables informing their formation, as elaborated by the various theories, will be taken as the groundwork for regional unity.

High Potential, Low Turn Over: South Asia

Characteristics Stimulating the Formation of Regional Communities/Organizations:

As per the prototypical model put forward by Karl Deutsch, for a security community to form, 14 features should 'necessarily' be present, but he warns that there is little proof for any specific combination or fusion of features that 'sufficiently' guarantees integration (Deutsch, 1968, pp.123-157). These features are:

- **Compatibility of Major Values:** They are "main" values of major importance in the domestic politics of the concerned units and the interactions between said units.
- **Mutual Responsiveness:** The sense of community or at least a partial feeling of identification vis-a-vis 'self-images and interests' which generates "responsiveness" to the needs of the units involved ultimately prompting 'appropriate political and economic action'.
- **Distinctive Way of Life:** Unique institutions, procedures, and habits which constitute a 'way of life' which is distinctly separate from that of proximate units.
- **Core Areas and their Capabilities:** The presence of a strong core which had the capacity to act; primarily determined by size, power, economic strength, administrative efficiency, the ability to respond to the other units involved, and its potential for aggregate growth facilitated integration.
- **Superior Economic Growth:** This need not be a feature of all the units, but ought to be present in the core area.
- **The expectation of Joint Economic Reward:** This refers to the expectation of economic gains in exchange for the commitment to integration.
- **Wide Range of Mutual Transactions:** A considerable degree of mutual exchanges, agreements, and communication should precede the formation of the community.
- **Broadening of Elites:** This implies the recruitment of the political brass— elected and permanent- from wider and diverse strata of society.
- **Greater Mobility of Persons:** the flexibility of movement of persons among units.
- **Reluctance to Wage Fratricidal War:** A reluctance to go to war with units on the cusp of integration.
- **Outside Military Threat:** While it is possible to 'amalgamate' in the absence of an external threat, it is found that the presence of one give impetus to form temporary unions that may potentially become more permanent and organic collective set-ups.
- **Strong Economic Ties:** They are not essential, but considerably beneficial in affecting the decision to integrate and grow from within.

Out of these 14 features, the South Asian region has (to varying strength) the following: Mutual responsiveness, a distinctive way of life due to a vibrancy of cultures (Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist etc.), a core area with considerable economic growth (e.g. India), a wide range of mutual transactions between units, and mobility of persons (e.g. the open international border between India and Nepal).

Moreover, South Asia also has an essential structure of a Regional Security Complex (RSC) composed of geographical proximity and boundaries (India shares a common boundary with all South Asian nations, with the exception of Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka), anarchic structure (has more than 5 constituent units), polarity (two poles of power in the form of India and Pakistan) and a social structure of interactions characterized by enmity and amity (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 53).

Another set of conditions for the success of regional institutions includes not only geographical proximity but also a battery of other conditions such as similar political systems, supportive political opinion and leadership, cultural homogeneity, similar historical experience, compatible forms of governments and economic systems, perception of a common threat and similar levels of military preparedness of the members (Majumdar, 2019, p.19). South Asia possesses leaders supportive towards the idea of regional cooperation; a common historical experience marked by the rule of Islamic dynasties (and the assimilation of their culture into everyday life) and colonialism; and a shared cultural-religious heritage (Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism etc.).

The logical conclusion of these assets ought to have been a program of holistic integration, that would inculcate and deepening of a sense of community supported by shared institutions, processes and procedures that facilitate a predictable pattern of behavior and actions regarding dealing with issues and contentions with the broad goal of promoting peace, progress and development within the said region (Onditi et al, 2021, pp.11-12). But it was not to be. Today, South Asia is one of the least

integrated regions in the world, and is a textbook case of high potential, low turnover.

High Potential, Low Turnover: Why?

The lack of tangible returns on an otherwise sound and promising initiative is perplexing, leaving those invested in its development stumped and scrambling to explain this baffling turn of events.

Consequently, scholars have researched extensively into the possible causes of discord within the region. The most prominent (and the most popularly cited) of these are:

- The role of 'India' as the big brother of South Asia, the polarizing figure within the narrative of South Asia, is simultaneously trying to hold South Asia together and unravelling it.
- Insufficient development among the members leads to differential and uneven payloads being handled by different countries, essentially an unequal partnership.
- Intractable acrimony and frequent conflicts between India and Pakistan

Expanding upon these popular causes and establishing their veracity is not the goal of the paper; this has already been done by numerous scholars, think tanks, political theorists and observers located within and more familiar with the workings of the organization and the region.

The goal of this paper is to place these within the structural and explanatory framework of the great power rivalry of the past and present. Despite great power rivalries being part and parcel of the South Asian realpolitik is not given as much consideration vis-a-vis shaping the South Asian political and diplomatic locale. This paper aims to place the great power rivalry and conflict at the front-and-center of the theorizing and expand thereafter into the popular narrative revolving around India's divisive role, peculiar position and role in the region and great power conflict and conflicts with the states in the south Asian region. The impact of the great power rivalry and competition on South Asia will be

explored in the context of the Cold War rivalry between the USA and the USSR/Soviet Union) and the present-day global rivalry between the USA and China.

Great Power Conflict and South Asia

Cold War: USSR vs USA

The Cold War (1947-1991) was an extended period of heightened geopolitical tensions between ideological rivals and superpowers— the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union/ the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and their allies, separated into the western bloc and eastern bloc respectively.

Though it was said to have engulfed the entirety of the world, the third-world countries, to keep themselves independent of the political machinations of the ideological competition, organized themselves under the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). It had the explicit objective of keeping the fledgling decolonized sovereign countries distant and independent from the great game that was raging between the two superpowers (Evans, 2007). The NAM was formally established in 1961 with the Belgrade Conference in Yugoslavia. It boasted members from across the developing world, and those members also included the states of South Asia that are currently a part of SAARC— India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan. Then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, had been acknowledged as one of the foremost leaders of this movement (and the face of it too).

Pandit Nehru's international renown, coupled with the praise of India's swift development and limitless potential enabled him to vigorously promote non-alignment, Third-Worldism, development and a new international economic order that would not asymmetrically favor the superpowers and the countries they led. While it was not an exclusive South Asian forum, it was an intellectual precursor of a collective state organization addressing the specific contextual concerns of economy, security, and socio-cultural progress. The front was united, their goals and aspirations were in alignment, and the stance was that of

neutrality and equal distance from both the powers and their ideological, social and political conflict.

Alliances with the Superpowers

Concurrent with the growth of NAM, a paradoxical development was taking place in the relationship between the USA and Pakistan. Pakistan, following the partition, was acknowledged as a direct competitor to India's trajectory of growth and soon thereafter, began to cultivate a partnership with the USA in the latter's bid to contain the USSR and its communist ideology. India had disappointed the USA with its neutral stance and inability to act as an effective deterrent against communism having adopted elements of Soviet planning to facilitate economic growth and social advancement. The process of the USA-Pakistan was initiated in the 1950s, beginning with Pakistan joining the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact (later called the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO) in 1955. In 1959 a cooperation agreement was officialized between the two states with the condition that the U.S. would be required to assist Pakistan if it became the victim of aggression from any other country, particularly countries in the region, that it felt threatened by, namely, India and China (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). A superpower had thus made inroads, albeit, indirectly, into South Asia.

In the 1970s, a partnership arose between the USSR and India following Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assumption of the Prime Ministerial office. Under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership, the stance of remaining independent from and neutral to the superpowers underwent a change. Compared to Prime Minister Nehru, she was more inclined towards the socialist policies of the Soviet Union and was in favour of a partnership with it. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971 while at war against Pakistan projected the dilution of the neutrality and independence that had been exercised previously (Rauch, 2008). Additionally, she adopted a more assertive bearing towards wanting to attain regional domination within the region, the outcomes of this will be touched upon later.

The Consequences

What these hard decisions of realpolitik gave rise to was superpower penetration into the region. India and Pakistan were at par with one another, that is, the strongest of powers in the region. The two of them entering into formalized agreements with the USA and USSR signaled external penetration which fostered an image of political dependence and subordination, which, adversely impacted regional integration (Vayrynen, 1984, p. 338). A 'Penetration' is said to be afoot when external powers make consequential security alignments with states within a regional complex and have an influence on the balance of power within the penetrated region (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp. 46-62). It differs from the other form of external intervention 'Overlay' wherein a great power or superpower dominates so thoroughly that local patterns of security relations cease to operate. An example of an overlay would be the European colonization of Africa and Asia where the armed forces of Europe were stationed and decisions were made per its own alliances and interests at the global level than that of the dominated states. It is important to note that despite her strong association with the USSR, Mrs. Gandhi categorically condoned a Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean and successfully rebuffed the pressure for the establishment of Soviet military facilities in India (Mastny, 2010, p. 75), preventing the penetration into an outright overlay.

Nevertheless, the disassociation of the core states from regional considerations (in this case both India and Pakistan) is liable to leave the region(s), especially those with preexisting rivalries at risk of intensification due to the intervention of superpowers which can and have inflated the destructive potential and the stakes of skirmishes that happen (Vayrynen, 1984, pp. 338-346). An example of such an intensification occurred during the 1971 India-Pakistan war which eventually led to the formation of Bangladesh. The confrontation between the two pulled their 'allies' the Soviet Union and the USA into the fray and brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war. The USA deployed Task Force 74 to the Bay of Bengal to intimidate the Indian forces, while the Soviet Union dispatched a flotilla from Vladivostok under the command of Admiral Vladimir Kruglyakov, the Commander of the 10th Operative Battle Group of the Pacific Fleet.

These developments, as necessary they were for India and Pakistan in their political manoeuvres, recast the region into a proxy front for superpower conflict, and had, despite the insistence of otherwise, into the emissaries/bearers/agents of the superpowers in their own conflict. This was perhaps best apparent when the USSR invaded Afghanistan. The Mujahideen leading the fight against the troops of the USSR were provided support by the USA, Pakistan, Iran, and China; while India supported the USSR's move to invade Afghanistan. Journalist Michael J. Berlin (1980) stated "It represented a departure in policy not only for India but for Prime Minister Gandhi herself. During her election campaign, Gandhi had criticized the Soviet move." Later, in what can be considered a payment or compensation, Moscow extended a 1.6 billion dollars' worth 15-year credit for the purpose of making military purchases, which invariably made India the largest importer of arms in the world, with 85 percent of its haul being of Soviet make and design (Mastny, 2010, p.75).

Moreover, the alliance with the superpowers intensified the conflict between India and Pakistan. The consequent instability left the other South Asian states to navigate themselves individually and assertively with good reason. In this environment of instability, India's repeated attempts to dominate the region (with support from the USSR) injected a strand of suspicion, especially as India moved to dominate the region under its proverbial thumb rather than integrate it into a cohesive regional unit. The wariness towards India would not persist but intensify as India grew more and more forceful in its attempt to emerge as the regional power it believed it deserved to be.

The Cold War came to an end with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The vacuum in the wake of the collapse made the USA the sole superpower of the world, but that left the countries bereft of Soviet support jockeying for allies and support. India was no exception. While courting a favorable and profitable relationship with the USSR, India relinquished a number of opportunities to establish ties with other republics of Central Asia and those in its near neighborhood (Majumdar, 2019). The acclaimed 'Look East' policy inaugurated in 1992 was stated to be much overdue, one

that came a little too late. India struggled to establish a relationship with ASEAN and the Asian 'Tiger' economies due to being unable to demonstrate its own economic prowess after having been stripped of soviet beneficence. As India played catch-up with its contemporaries, it introduced yet another change in its policy towards its neighbors: viewing and treating them as equal partners rather than vassals in its own quest for status in the realm of international politics.

Pakistan, on the other hand, was reeling from the fallout of supporting the USA in its effort to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan. The Pakistani Intelligence Agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, better known as ISI, was the manager of this war, which was supported by the then Pakistani military dictator, Zia-Ul Haq, out of fear of a threat being posed to Pakistan's security by a Soviet-ruled Afghanistan and a Soviet-aligned India (Riedel, 2008, p. 33). At the end of the war, Pakistan, as relayed by Mohammad Yousaf, the former head of ISI's Afghanistan branch during that time, had been betrayed by the USA which imposed sanctions on it for its 'Nuclear Program' and used that as a pretense to end military assistance to Pakistan. Left to deal with the Frankenstein's monster created by the USA, Islamabad gave refuge to nearly two million Afghan refugees which generated violence and extremism, and eventually, a civil war between the Mujahideen that took residence there. Pakistan's dalliance with the Taliban began with the assumption that it would help end the civil war and consolidate its hold in Afghanistan. Since then, Pakistan is known as a major hub and sponsor of terrorism and its associations with major terror groups, within its neighborhood, particularly India and Afghanistan, in doing so, has solidified its status as a pariah state in the neighborhood.

The Interlude

Prior to the period when the competition between the USA and China (the Eagle vs. the Dragon) became obvious. A number of developments were happening within South Asia (though some had been initiated much earlier), none too positive if one might add.

India, at this time, ratcheted its attempt to consolidate its influence and status as THE regional and rising power of South

Asia by making overtures in the image of the USA and the USSR by actively intruding in the domestic affairs of its neighbors. This was done in order to tilt the political machinery of the other countries to its benefit in its greater goal to establish itself as the great big power with its own court of like-minded leaders but has only succeeded in being branded as a 'strongman.' Countries criticize India's 'Hidden Hand' for throwing a wrench in democratic rule and frustrating attempts at processes that do not align with its interests for the region and for that reason the image of India the 'Big Brother' remains a popular reference in foreign policy writing to India's approach in South Asia and towards its neighbors. For instance, India is accused of having micromanaged politics in Bhutan and Nepal. In the latter, India played its hand to ensure that leaders with a pro-India agenda made it to the office. In the former, on the other hand, by virtue of treaties and the provisions of the same, India virtually manages instrumental aspects of the foreign relations of Bhutan. This has made Bhutan the only sovereign nation in the world to not have any diplomatic relations with any of the P-5 countries due to India's disapproval; when Japan did attempt to foster closer ties with Bhutan and build an embassy in Thimphu, the plans were discarded due to India (Chengliang, 2017). India, having equated responsibility to projecting an air superiority has negated/invalidated any possibility of friendship and has instead transformed the potential for regional cooperation into a typical quid-pro-quo relationship interspersed with a healthy dose of suspicion and skepticism (Sharma, 2020).

The common consensus is that such practices are counter-intuitive; in an attempt to wrench the countries together, it has only made them look for avenues to circumvent and subvert/diminish India's reputation and influence within the region, paving the way for China's increasing sway among the lesser countries in the area (Ganguly, 2017). In a similar vein, Majumdar (2019) states that a bigger power's relations (skeptical in this case) with its smaller neighbors may compel them to either *"band together or bring an external power into the region to establish balance."* He contends that in either case regionalism will suffer and can potentially transform it into an unstable repository of explosive elements.

It is, therefore, a likely argument that the instability introduced by India and Pakistan's alliances with the USSR and the USA respectively broke a piece of delicate China, which, in this case, is South Asian regional unity; one that India has been attempting to fix, but its heavy-handed approach is not doing anything to fix the damage but is only aggravating it.

The Eagle vs The Dragon

The power rivalry that is all the rage today is that which is ensuing between the USA and China. National Security Advisor of the Biden-Harris administration, Jake Sullivan, commented, "(China) is the only competitor with both the intent and to reshape the international order and the growing capacity to do it." China has been accepted by the USA as one of the greatest geo-political competitors; both of them being locked in a contest of great powers to shape what is coming next in the decades to come. The administration under former President, Donald Trump too had embraced the challenge that China posed (and continues to pose to) the USA and its security interests. As a means of limiting China's ever-expanding power and clout, the USA has since adopted a policy of containment towards China. This 'Containment Realism' as Motin (2022) explains, hinges itself on the view that should China not be contained to the Asian hemisphere, it will make aggressive overtures to the USA's hegemony in the Western hemisphere. By locking it to the politics of the Asian hemisphere, China will thus be unable to focus elsewhere; therefore the USA ought to interfere only to the extent to keep the balance of power in the region in a manner that China is effectively balanced by the other major countries present there and not give it the latitude to project power around the world as the US does (ibid., 5-6). The USA has done so through instituting the AUKUS, revitalizing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, spearheading the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) etc. (Scobell, 2022, p. 334).

South Asia comes into play here as it too is referred to as China's neighbor owing to geographical proximity. The region continues to lack unity, a drawback that China has benefitted from immensely as India has been unable to unite the region (Pakistan has been eliminated from consideration as it has been actively getting aid

from China); as a matter of fact, its heavy-handed strategies and excessive political interference have driven South Asian countries to seek cooperative agreements with China to hedge India and vice-versa (Lim & Mukherjee, 2019, p. 502). The USA has been actively buffing India's alliances with its partners and in 2017 bequeathed it a near NATO status to facilitate effective defense and military technology R&D and exchange among other assistance to ensure it can attain some level of symmetry with China. Albeit bolstering combat capacity may be counterintuitive given that China has gradually made its way into the region via economic projects.

The most prominent of these economic projects is Xi Jinping's flagship initiative in South Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative or the BRI. India (and by extension, Bhutan) is the only country in the region that has declined to participate in the initiative (Scobell, 2022; Sacks, 2021). Another equally significant economic strategy entails the procurement of trading ports and securing maritime trade routes. China has done so by enacting a 'debt-trap' economic diplomacy model first seen when it took over operations of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, the Gwadar port in Pakistan, and is also funding the construction of a deep-sea port in Kyaukpyu on Myanmar's west coast. The combination of the plans under the BRI and the takeover of commercial ports has been dubbed by US political researchers as the 'String of Pearls', which threatens to encircle India by areas under Chinese influence along sea routes of trade and communication.

South Asia, in this great game of great power rivalry and politics has become a means to an end or simply, the board where the game is being played out. There is much to say about how India can act as a counter to China as an equally competent rising power, however, its potential at best is 'awkward'. It is certainly true that by conventional metrics of military expenditure, population size and demographics, and economy, India qualifies as a great power. Yet, Kavalski and Harshaw (2022; 2021) argue, it is precisely this data that reveals the awkwardness of India's claim. Despite allocating a high proportion of its budget to military expenditure, it lacks blue water capacity which undercuts its capacity to strike and its nuclear program which has produced about 150 warheads as compared to Pakistan's 160 and China's

320. Moreover, despite having a high population, a significant portion remains illiterate, and the demographic dividend bulge has turned 'toxic' due to rising unemployment (Bhattacharya, 2021). Further, India's GDP per capita, according to World Bank measures from 2022, stood at approximately USD 2,277 in 2021, lower than Bangladesh's USD 2,503 and considerably below the Maldives USD 8,994, and China that stands at the front at about USD 12,556 (World Bank, 2022); providing further evidence of India's persistent economic lag.

Vayrynen (1984) contends that regional integration is a precondition for the exercise of autonomy against the force of the stronger 'external powers'. Notwithstanding nascent attempts, the countries in the region have been holding their own individually and it is not implausible to consider that despite being a part and the front of the great power dynamic of rivalry and competition, they are working to use it for ensuring their well-being. The USA is a distant player (not as intrusive as it was during the Cold War since the USA too is gradually coming to terms with its limited capabilities) when it comes to the matter of China annexing South Asia, and therefore, hopes that India acts in its stead to contain it. This time around, the great power penetration lies in favor of revisionist China than the status-quo(ist) USA.

Conclusion

SAARC had promise, it had a lot of things right, but the prima facie features of excellence did not reveal the discord that had been simmering underneath the truisms of cooperation and unity. Framing this discord within the framework of the great power conflict is a difficult exercise since there are a multitude of moving elements of domestic relations, ambitions, security interests, great power rivalries etc. along with those that change just as quickly— alliances, motives, intents — the game is a fickle one. But as one puts these together piece-by-piece, the impact of great power ambitions and rivalries becomes visible. The region today is trapped in a vicious circle of dependence and subordination, ostensibly for securing themselves, but is playing into the great power rivalry between the USA and China— for the USA, it's to contain China and maintain its status, for China it is expanding its reach within and beyond Asia and the Indo-Pacific, both

economically and politically. All the countries are divided, and though still able to cooperate bilaterally, they will repel each other if they try to unite into a collective.

It would be interesting to see whether a theory of regionalism or regional security will be able to answer or at the very least, unravel some of the complexities that have made themselves apparent in South Asia, and answer whether there will be any element that can stimulate regionalism or will the great power rivalry reduce it to a basket case free for picking as and when the next round starts?

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