



India's Eastward Subregional Connectivity Strategies And Their Geopolitical Impact: From Vision To Implementation

SRISHTI SINHA

Abstract

India's subregional connectivity strategies have emerged as a pivotal component of its foreign policy, shaping regional geopolitics and economic integration. With initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework, India seeks to enhance trade, infrastructure, and people-to-people linkages. These initiatives aim to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while fostering regional cooperation and sustainable development. However, geopolitical challenges, infrastructural bottlenecks, and political dynamics within neighboring countries continue to influence the implementation of these strategies. This paper analyzes India's vision for subregional connectivity, its progress in execution, and the broader geopolitical ramifications for South Asia.

Keywords- Subregional Connectivity, BIMSTEC, BBIN, Geopolitics, Regional Cooperation

Introduction

Given its size and geographic location, India serves as a natural link between its near neighbors and other countries. Delhi is cognizant of its vital role in improving land and maritime connections in its region. In the late 1990s, began an increasing push in reintegrating the neighborhood using a subregional strategy. A persistent drive for subregional connectedness finally began to take tangible form in the mid-2000s, despite efforts to refocus its approach toward its neighborhood started to change. Bilateral, trilateral, and subregional connectivity projects were started in order to enhance the infrastructure for cross-border transportation. Following the implementation of the "Neighbourhood First" policies and "Act East" policy introduced by the Modi administration, these initiatives have experienced some success in reviving subregional initiatives whereas in the background China's ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), has garnered interest from a number of neighboring countries. [1]

By reintegrating its immediate neighbors into subregions, India hopes to preserve its historical regional primacy. Although there are both internal and external obstacles to overcome, this approach has become a top foreign policy objective. The study examines India's efforts in the development of subregionalism in South Asia, the forces behind this movement, significant subregional projects that have been started, and the difficulties in overseeing these endeavors.

India's evolving subregional approach

The historical partition of South Asia, India's focus on "South Asia" and "Immediate Neighbours" and a stagnant South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation framework limited its economic aspirations and also ties with countries beyond this region. New Delhi now explores "subregions" and "extended neighbourhood" to expand its regional role. [2]

A drawback of using the "immediate" and "extended" ideas to conceptualize India's neighborhood is that they often view the two entities as existing independently of each other. Furthermore, these ideas frequently represent a spectrum of the conventional mindset that regards the "immediate neighborhood" as countries "within South Asia" and the "extended neighborhood" as countries "beyond South Asia." By using a subregional approach, New Delhi is able to see its neighbors from the perspective of both "immediate" and "extended" communities as a continuum.

When viewed from this subregional viewpoint, India's geography is divided into five subregions, each of which has overlapping and connected security and development concerns. India's eastern area is divided into two subregions: the Mekong and the Bay of Bengal. The main littoral countries of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and the northeast and eastern coast of India make up the Bay of Bengal subregion. Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and the northeast and eastern coast of India make up the Mekong subregion. The Himalayan subregion on the north includes China's Tibet autonomous region, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar, and the Indian states that border them. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, the Arab states, and the whole western Indian coast make up the Arabian subregion to the west. The Indian Ocean is a subregion to the south and includes the Maldives, Sri Lanka and southern Indian states. Broadly, this subregion also includes other island nations like Mauritius and Seychelles but they are excluded as no tangible plan for marine connectivity to unite these island states and India has been devised. Additionally, nations like Sri Lanka and the Maldives are appropriated for use in various subregional frameworks that encourage interconnection.

Subregionalism gained popularity in South Asia in 1997 when SAARC established the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), a first-ever subregional economic cooperation initiative involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, focusing on project-based development.[3] However, the majority of the smaller SAARC members expressed fears that it was "an attempt by India to dominate South Asia economically," which prevented the plan from gaining traction.[4] In 2000, the Asian Development Bank backed the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) program, which targeted sectors like technology, energy, tourism, and transportation. Delhi initiated subregional groups, integrating with other subregions.

In 1997, India joined BIMSTEC, a subregional grouping including Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and later joined by Nepal and Bhutan focusing on commerce, investment, technology, tourism, and human resource development. In 2000, it established the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) with five Mekong nations, focusing on tourism, culture, education, and transportation. India has actively participated in these subregional initiatives, except for the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) initiative. India launched the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative in 2015 to enhance cross-border connectivity and focus on its subregions, highlighting India's commitment to link up with these regions. [5] India's subregional strategy focuses on integrating domestic and external policies to advance foreign policy interests. Prioritizing the development of frontier regions, India is building partnerships with like-minded countries. The Indo-Pacific region, guided by values and rules, is opening new opportunities for collaboration. India's states are given greater roles in subregionalism under the principle of cooperative federalism as they are crucial actors in fostering this policy. In 2014 a new States Division was created by MEA to encourage states' participation in foreign policy formulation, economic diplomacy, and regional diplomacy. Effective coordination between state governments and the Center is crucial for cooperative federalism. Minimizing mistrust and maximizing benefits for smaller neighbors and rebuilding mutual trust are the focus of India's subregional approach.

This paper focuses on transport connectivity, the sector that has seen the most number of initiatives.

Factors that influence India's subregional connectivity are as follows-

1. India sees connectivity as crucial for economic reintegration and countering China's growing influence in South Asia and hence building land, sea, and riverine corridors is vital for regional development.
2. An unstable neighborhood threatens India's economic growth and security and hence India aims to reintegrate countries historically linked through geography, history, and culture.[6]
3. Due to India-Pakistan tensions SAARC connectivity initiatives failed and it became a factor for India's focus on subregional connectivity, adopting a bottom-up approach.
4. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) plays a critical role in enhancing subregional connectivity between South and Southeast Asia. As a bridge linking the economies of India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan.
4. India's Act East Policy and focus on ASEAN Connectivity needs a transnational land corridor as they share strong trade ties(\$70 billion in 2016-17).
5. India also seeks to provide Mekong nations with infrastructure alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

India's Major Eastward Subregional Connectivity Initiatives are as follows-

1. India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway has Proposed 1,360-km highway from Moreh (India) to Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar. India is also upgrading 69 bridges and the Kalewa-Yagyi road section in Myanmar but the Project was delayed due to terrain challenges and funding issues and internal political changes in Myanmar. Moreh-Tamu border check post was opened in August 2018 to facilitate movement. The Imphal-Moreh section (65 km) is being widened with ADB's assistance and Highway extension has been planned to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to strengthen BIMSTEC & MGC Connectivity. [7] The Project counters China's North-South corridor and aligns with Japan's East-West Corridor.

2. The BBIN-MVA Agreement signed on 15 June 2015 was supported by ADB under the SASEC programme, aiming to upgrade roads, railways, waterways, energy grids, and communication networks. India considers BBIN-MVA a key instrument for accelerating cross-border trade and economic integration. [8]

3. Cross-Border Transport Initiatives gained impetus when India, Bangladesh, and Nepal began passenger and private vehicle movement in 2018. [9] New bus services between Indian and Nepalese cities and Kolkata-Northeast India via Bangladesh have been introduced and Trial cargo runs were conducted along Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Delhi-Kolkata-Dhaka routes.

4. To Strengthen Border Infrastructure for both economic growth and security India has prioritized border road projects in West Bengal and the Northeast to enhance trade and defense.

5. Coastal and Inland Waterway Connectivity has been enhanced by India-Bangladesh coastal shipping service (2016) that improves India's Northeast connectivity and provides Bangladesh access to Nepal and Bhutan. [10] India is exploring Payra Port development in Bangladesh and expanding railway links under BBIN. India is also focusing on developing ports and multimodal transport to integrate rail, road, and waterways.

6. Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is in progress and Connects Sittwe Port (Myanmar) to Mizoram (India) via river and road and Sittwe Port and Paletwa terminal has been completed. India is building a 109-km road from Paletwa to Zorinpui (Mizoram border). This is a significant infrastructure initiative designed to enhance connectivity between India and Myanmar, and provide a new route for the landlocked Northeast region of India. The project aims to establish a multi-modal transportation network consisting of sea, river, and road corridors, All this enhances India's eastern port infrastructure and regional trade links.

7. Delhi-Hanoi Rail Link, India-Mekong Economic Corridor, and BCIM-Economic Corridor (EC)

India faces challenges in building subregionalism due to competing visions, particularly in the Mekong subregion, where China has aggressively expanded infrastructure. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) includes CLMVT (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) and China's Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. India leads the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) also with CLMVT (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand). Due to China's extensive road, rail, and pipeline networks there is a rising concern about potential economic dependency on China. Nations in the subregions

have welcomed India's initiatives with the goal of maximizing benefits and interacting with more stakeholders to make sure they do not become just a single country's exclusive development zone. India faces the question of whether it can offer a different framework for infrastructure development. Despite being a latecomer to the Mekong subregion's connectivity development, India has an advantage since it can take advantage of the Mekong countries' mistrust of Chinese attempts. India's subregional connectivity projects span a number of industries, including energy, transportation, people-to-people (such as the Buddhist circuit and pilgrimage), institutions, and more.

Structural Challenges in Subregional Connectivity includes India's image as a regional power is impacted by its inability to fully integrate with neighboring subregions. Development Partnership Administration (DPA), established in 2012 under Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), oversees aid projects, focusing on efficient execution of strategic infrastructure projects. The DPA-I and DPA-III deal with line-of-credit and grant assistance projects, involving technical entities like Ircon Infrastructure to expedite procurement, but challenges persist due to bureaucratic delays. Many of India's Line of Credit projects are moving at a suboptimal pace, with bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of financial muscle hindering progress. . National Highways Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL) was created in 2014 to address challenges in road projects in border regions and strategic areas and focuses on strategic roads to boost regional connectivity and support cross-border trade. NHIDCL aims to mitigate delays, lack of transparency, and cost overruns, while reducing the multiplicity of agencies involved in road projects. NHIDCL has expanded its mandate to cover Northeastern states and Andaman and Nicobar Islands but needs to avoid overstretching its capacity.

The Indian government has revived suspended infrastructure projects and adopted policies to address land acquisition and cost overruns. India is increasingly working with external partners like Japan in subregional connectivity projects, such as the Northeast Road Network Connectivity in Meghalaya and Mizoram. The cooperation between India and Japan is part of their broader Indo-Pacific strategy and supports infrastructure development in India's Northeast and cross-border transport.

Conclusion

Connectivity is essential to the new strategy's success as India reimagines its neighborhood, which has long-term strategic ramifications for the country. With the construction of new corridors, India is giving strategic subregions top priority in order to achieve both internal and foreign goals. Once India has established connections with its four subregions, the next step will be to connect all of the subregions with and through India to form a regional connection. Connecting the gaps in and around India will facilitate the land and maritime integration of Vietnam to the east and Iran to the west. The idea of greater integration between Central Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, eastern Africa, and the Indian Ocean will be supported by improved connectivity in India's subregions. New Delhi's efforts to enhance connectivity may involve an element of competition, but as an emerging global power, it carries significant responsibilities on both regional and international fronts. Offering alternative development opportunities to neighboring countries is part of

India's broader goal to share its prosperity, while ensuring infrastructure development respects the sovereignty of all nations, regardless of size. The main challenge for New Delhi lies in maintaining the momentum of its subregional initiatives.

References

1. Harsh V. Pant, "The 'New' South Asia," *The Hindu*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-new-south-asia/article23577235.ece>.
2. For a discussion on the "extended neighbourhood" concept see David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighbourhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no. 9 (April–June 2009): 107–43.
3. See The 9th SAARC Summit Declaration issued on 14 May 1997 in Male, <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/summit9.pdf>.
4. See Muchkund Dubey, *India's Foreign Policy: Coping with the Changing World* (Delhi: Pearson, 2013), 37.
5. K. Yhome, "India's Evolving Subregional Strategy," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No.403, EastWestCentre, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/india%20%99s-evolving-subregional-strategy>.
6. Shivshankar Menon, "Peaceful Periphery is a Prerequisite to Sustain our Growth," Speech at "India and International Security," (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, May 3, 2007).
7. "Cabinet Approves Road Connectivity Projects and Investments," *The Hindu Business Line*, July 12, 2017, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/policy/cabinet-approves-road-connectivity-projects-and-investments/article9762329.ece>.
8. "India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh Sign a landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement for Seamless Movement of Road Traffic among Four SAARC Countries in Thimphu," Press Information Bureau, Government of India Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, June 15, 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=122516>.
9. "BBIN pact: India, Bangladesh, Nepal Okay Vehicle Movement Procedure," *LiveMint*, January 15, 2018, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/kVaw1u3uvAq3SVugqTGkCI/BBIN-pact-India-Bangladesh-Nepal-okay-vehicle-movement-pr.html>.
10. "India and Bangladesh Sign Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to Operationalize Agreement on Coastal Shipping," Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Shipping, November 15, 2017, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=130487>.