Introduction: South Asia today

South Asia, home to 1.6 billion people, is a geographic reality but not a political one. On the contrary, among the eight states that make up the region, there are profound ideational cleavages and irreconcilable perspectives regarding internal and external security, regional cooperation, and geostrategic objectives. The situation is compounded by diverging levels of economic strength and military capabilities. Above all, South Asia is characterized by dissimilar national approaches regarding the organization of complex, often multifaceted states that possess a bewildering array of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities, with adverse consequences for the way in which foreign policy is formulated and implemented. In addition, there are lasting negative legacies of British colonial rule; of the events surrounding the 1947 partition of British India; and a protracted cycle of mutual conflict and suspicion, especially between India and Pakistan.

Although South Asian governments have embraced democracy, they are characterized by family rule (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), authoritarian rule and/or military domination (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives), and political instability (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) or are close to being failed states only surviving due to massive financial and military outside backing (Afghanistan) (Freedom House 2015). Cross-border terrorism; drug and human trafficking; poor governance; corruption; weak democratic accountability; extreme poverty; inequality; suppressed minority rights; ethnic separatism; sectarianism; and the existence of two hostile, nuclear-armed powers complete the bleak picture of a complex and fragile region.

India, the geographic and economic hegemon of the region, shares land and maritime boundaries with eight countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India shares historical, religious, ethnic, or linguistic ties with all of these nations and has strong bilateral economic links with all South Asian countries except Pakistan. As a result, the region of South Asia is clearly Indo-centric. Yet, in spite of vital cultural ties and traditional trade linkages among all nations, South Asia is still the least economically integrated region in the world (World Bank 2014) as South Asian states generally do not trade much with one another.
In short, there is neither political nor economic unity within South Asia. Critically, the asymmetric presence of India has led smaller South Asian countries to fear Indian hegemony, causing, in turn, an enduring irritation within India due to the view that its smaller neighbours are united only in their anti-India sentiments. Against this backdrop, a common regional policy – for example, regarding the fight against cross-border terrorism – has been difficult to implement as each South Asian state follows its own foreign policy agenda, which more often than not contradicts that of its neighbours. In addition, vastly differing threat perceptions have guided the efforts of South Asian states to engage extra-regional powers, such as China, Russia, and the United States, in the past, with Indian fears of encirclement especially reinforced by deepening Pakistan-China ties. Today, foreign policy activity within South Asia mostly revolves around the India-Pakistan conflict and the contested region of Kashmir as well as related problems in the form of terrorism, transnational trafficking, regional nuclearization, and the involvement of external powers.

One of the main contributions of the literature on international relations theory (IRT) is the fact that this literature helps to identify the general conditions that shape interstate conflicts and situations of war and peace in the international system. In the context of this chapter on the international relations of South Asia, the following section will therefore first examine the role of South Asia in IRT. Next, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry as the most significant conflict in South Asia will be analysed, along with the question of to what extent events and policies in South Asia have been influenced by outside powers, especially China, Russia, and the United States. The subsequent section then looks at bilateral cooperation and regional multilateralism in the form of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), specifically focussing on cooperation in the security sphere. The penultimate section examines South Asia’s role in global multilateralism, and the final section assesses the role of South Asia in the changing international state architecture.

**South Asia in international relations theory**

Nation states, state policies, and especially foreign policy are the core of IRT analysis, and states are a common unit of analysis for the majority of theories of international relations. In general, IRT offers three different perspectives for understanding and explaining sources of international conflicts. The first, realism, postulates that states are the primary actors in international politics and are engaged in an unending struggle for power and relative gains, thereby inevitably causing conflict and wars (Morgenthau 1961). Other, later variants of realism, especially what is known as neorealism, tend to view the rise and decline of regional and interstate conflicts as primarily a function of the distribution of power (Waltz 1979; Keohane 1984) and to consider all states to act based on international anarchy. A second theoretical perspective on international relations, known as liberalism, is more concerned with explaining the conditions for peace than the causes of war (Moravcsik 1998). Liberalism has at least three variants, focussing on domestic politics, economic interdependence, and international institutions. As a theory of international relations, it postulates that low levels of economic interdependence as well as the absence of international institutions providing dispute settlement mechanisms are major factors contributing to conflict between states. Social constructivism, the third perspective, seeks to explain international relations focussing on culture and state identity, even though culture and identity can promote conflict as well as cooperation. Unlike realists (or similar rationalist perspectives), constructivists argue that the interests and identities of states are not exogenous to the process of their mutual interaction (Walker 1992; Wendt 1999) but are derived endogenously.
One of the major empirical caveats towards IRT is its Western or American origin (Hoffmann 1977) as well as its embeddedness in the “West” as the key empirical point of reference. With regard to South Asia in IRT, leading scholars who analysed international affairs through theoretical lenses virtually ignored South Asia and its hegemon India until the end of the Cold War, and literature on the region was generally non-theoretical (Acharya and Acharya 2006, 157–158). Academic literature on the international politics of South Asia has proliferated, especially since the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests and, more recently, with the new and transformative role of emerging regional powers, such as India in international affairs. However, this literature has been predominantly realist or neorealist in its epistemological or ontological orientation. This, in essence, has reduced South Asia to primarily being an actor in its own right and thus observing the region principally from the outside (Hewitt 1997). Traditionally, realism has paid little attention to internal conflicts, tending to ignore domestic political systems and ethnic and cultural identities that underpin regional conflicts, especially in Asia or Africa. Such an approach, virtually ahistorical in nature, has precluded an analysis of links between the state and domestic politics; how domestic politics are influenced directly by international actors (state or non-state) and vice versa; and, most importantly, the role of cultural and ideational factors on policy or process.

As all states are regarded as unitary actors, the determining factor for foreign policy has been international anarchy and hence an outside perspective rather than the view that, for example, South Asian elites and decision-makers have of the international system. Yet this understanding of the state is not suitable for a region where state formation has taken place under pressure, with a great deal of outside interference, and where sovereignty was achieved barely 70 years ago or later. Until 1947, South Asia never experienced the kind of “European nation-state that is assumed to be given” (Behera 2008, 29). Moreover, it becomes difficult to treat the nation state in South Asia as a monolithic, unitary, and individualized unit of analysis, making South Asia an intriguing test case for the universality claim of IRT. An analysis of the subcontinent necessitates that the relationship between agency and structure factors in non-materialist sources of power – specifically culture and religion – be the driving force of South Asian politics.

On the other hand, there is a “poor state of IR theorizing in South Asia” itself (Behera 2008, 17). The interrelated question of why there is no original non-Western IRT has been equally raised (Acharya and Buzan 2007; Mallavarapu 2009, 168–169). According to Amitav Acharya, the epistemic foundations of international relations in South Asia are generally weak, and theoretical work is “dreaded and despised”; he attributes this to “the persisting ethno-centrism or Americanocentrism of Western theories that often leads to alienation when its tools prove to be ineffective in understanding the ground realities that are rooted in a very different historical, social and cultural milieu” (Acharya 2008, 80). Crucially, there is also a lasting divide between academia and foreign policy bureaucracy, compounded by what has been labelled as an “iron curtain” (Behera 2008, 13) that divides the two in practically all countries in South Asia, “which live in a separate, almost self-contained worlds that operate from fundamentally different information bases. There is no sharing of memory, no reliance on institutional memory and no light thrown on decision-making processes” (Behera 2008, 13), resulting in severe empirical and analytical obstacles.

In spite of these difficulties, a number of South Asian scholars have begun to apply IRTs to analyse events, structures, and ongoing processes in South Asia, thereby addressing a double research lacuna and incorporating indigenous analytical perspectives and approaches. In a way, their work is a (belated but welcome) response to Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous 1958 statement that
the emergence of the independent nations in Asia naturally leads to what might be called vaguely an Asian way of looking at the world. I do not say there is one Asian way, because Asia is a big continent, offering different viewpoints. However, it is a new angle, and is a change from the Europe-centred or any other view of the world.

(Nehru 2006, 280)

Navnita Behera’s *International Relations Theory in South Asia* applies various theoretical approaches, with topics ranging from nuclear deterrence to international order (Behera 2008). Focussing specifically on questions of security and foreign policy, authors such as Kanti Bajpai and Siddarth Mallavarapu (2005), Rajen Harshe and K.M. Seethi (2005), and Eswaran Sridharan (2007, 2014) have contributed to IRT by using South Asian perspectives. The edited volume *Bringing Theory Back Home* (Bajpai and Mallavarapu 2005a), for example, deals with South Asia by applying realism, postcolonial theory, Marxism, or feminism. The edited companion volume *International Relations in India: Theorizing the Region and Nation* (Bajpai and Mallavarapu 2005b) uses, for example, regime theory to explain the international political economy of South Asia, Indo-Chinese border negotiations, or the scepticism of so-called hyperrealists and structural realist explanations of the Indo-Pakistan conflict. Sridharan’s two volumes on *International Relations Theory and South Asia: Security, Political Economy, Domestic Politics, Identities, and Images* (Sridharan 2014) provide another wide range of IRTs addressing South Asian politics. All of these works represent important advances over mainstream and traditional IRTs, such as realism and liberalism, and show the new significance of South Asia for IRT.

While contemporary indigenous theorizing is useful for understanding and explaining South Asian politics, South Asian classical literature and analyses also merit attention. Already in 1919, the Indian social scientist Benoy Sarkar published an article in the *American Political Science Review* titled “Hindu Theory of International Relations”, the earliest modern scholarly work to comprehensively address the parameters of an indigenous South Asian/Indian theory of international relations (Sarkar 1919; Modelski 1964). One key indigenous contribution of South Asia to IRT is the work of Kautilya (also known as Chanakya, c. 370–283 BC). His *Arthashastra* is one of the oldest manuals of statecraft (Zaman 2006; Liebig 2013) and introduced the *mandala* model, also known as the circle of states. At the centre of the state were the king and his court. The *mandala* model was rooted in the geopolitical reality of the Indo-Gangetic Plain (North Indian Plain) where extended military movements took place regularly, with territorial gains as one of the major objectives of the king. Of course, this model was more a guide to subcontinental than international politics (Michael 2013a, 24–27); nonetheless, it provided a systemic and relational classification of power and status for the conduct of statecraft. The treatise represents one of the earliest known writings on the foreign affairs of states; rediscovered in 1912, Kautilya is now regarded as the “first political realist” (Boesche 2002). His work has been frequently used to explain contemporary international relations in South Asia.

Distilling this, Acharya demanded that “we should look into the minds of Kautilya and Confucius and not just Machiavelli and Marx. Similarly, we ought to seek theoretical insights from Nehru or Sukarno just as Western theorizing has drawn from Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger” (Acharya 2008, 81). In this sense, Kautilya and his geostrategic *mandala* perspective – a domestic South Asian approach towards international relations – has put South Asian strategic and theoretical thought on the map of IRT scholars, and a vibrant debate is under way as to how to adequately locate South Asia in IRT, essentially moving away from the narrow analytical focus of political realism.
The India-Pakistan conflict and the role of external powers in South Asia

South Asian regional politics and foreign policy have been shaped by the Indo-Pakistan conflict. Since 1947, Indo-Pakistani relations have been beset by enmity and almost constant conflict, resulting from their diverging attitudes with regard to territory and identity. Contestation over the status and precise designation of Kashmir, the core of the animosities, has led to wars in 1947–48, 1965, and 1999. India-Pakistan relations are one of “the most enduring rivalries in the post-World War II era” (Paul, 2006) and are the most intractable and intense of those in South Asia (Malone 2011, 105). Lines of foreign alliances radiated out from the centrality of this conflict to the regional and international system, essentially internationalizing the conflict.

The current status of Kashmir is a territorial split, India controlling approximately 60 per cent of the region, Pakistan controlling 30 per cent, and China controlling 10 per cent (mainly the Aksai Chin region and land ceded by Pakistan in 1963 as part of closer strategic relations). This split dates back to the first Indo-Pakistan War in 1947 and was reasserted by the Tashkent Declaration of January 1966, which stipulated that India and Pakistan had to withdraw from their pre-1965 war positions. Following the 3 July 1972 Shimla Agreement, a de facto border was created in Kashmir with the establishment of the Line of Control (LoC). The Kashmir dispute was further manifested in perpetual incidences of insurgency and terrorism from the 1980s onwards, with a Pakistan-terrorism nexus becoming a recognizable trait within Indo-Pakistan relations (Ogden 2014, 18). A range of terrorist acts have been directly linked to Pakistan: for example, the coordinated bomb attacks on Mumbai in 1993, the attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001, the funding of terrorism groups that are active in India (such as Lashkar-e-Taiba), and the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008.

Overall, tangible results in terms of conflict transformation have been elusive, with just a few high-level meetings actually taking place in either country; most took place on the sidelines of international conferences and SAARC meetings. The two countries have reached numerous agreements since the late 1980s on issues including the protection of nuclear facilities, human trafficking, irregular immigration, and the establishment of trading routes. Additionally, periodic ceasefires were declared in Kashmir, and there were various historic attempts at holding peace summits and talks (such as in Lahore in February 1999, Agra in July 2001, or Islamabad in January 2004). In September 2006, the India-Pakistan Joint-Counter Terrorism Mechanism was set up, a milestone in the relations between the two countries.

Special visits – such as to India by President Pervez Musharraf in April 2005 and President Asif Ali Zardari in April 2012 – have helped to steadily improve relations. In addition, regular bilateral meetings by foreign secretaries, defence secretaries, and external affairs ministers have also aided the institutionalization of dialogue. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s (unexpected) visit to Lahore in December 2015 was hailed as the latest milestone in Indo-Pakistani relations (Haidar 2015).

In the past 70 years, both sides have been supported by extra-regional powers, with shifting intensity and objectives. On the one hand, India became a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the 1950s. NAM sought to provide a platform for those countries of the Global South that were not part of either power bloc during the Cold War. Pakistan, on the other hand, joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, which was backed by the United States, as well as the Central Treaty Organisation (CETO) in 1955. The United States’ main objective was to contain the spread of communism, and it needed Pakistan as an ally in the region. This was interpreted by India as
dragging the South Asian region into the Cold War rivalry (Gopal 1975, 183). Pakistani support for the United States was in no small measure secured by extensive US military aid. This enabled Pakistan to build up and modernize its armed forces. In return, the United States was able to use military bases in the region. Although US-Pakistan ties fluctuated in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union was seen by both states as a confirmation of the importance of their relations. Wanting to prevent Soviet success in Afghanistan, the United States increased its aid to Pakistan, from US$400 million in 1979 to a total of US$3.2 billion between 1981 and 1987 (Hagerty 1998, 79).

Although the United States almost fully detached itself strategically from South Asia after the end of the Cold War, links were subsequently resuscitated after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Pakistan acted as a vital access point for Afghanistan and became a key strategic country for the United States. Since 2001, Pakistan has received more than US$26 billion in US military and economic aid (Mukherjee and Malone 2011, 100; Epstein and Kronstadt 2013). In 2004, the United States even designated Pakistan a major non-NATO ally, thereby elevating its international status.

Besides enjoying financial and military support from the United States, Pakistan also fostered a close relationship with China. Initially motivated by their shared enmity towards India, as well as by elements of anti-Americanism in the 1960s, China began to militarily assist Pakistan in 1966, leading to a strategic partnership in 1972. Sino-Pakistan relations have been strengthened over time by continuous military aid, technological cooperation, and even small (strategic) land swaps in Kashmir. Crucially, China has aided Pakistan’s nuclear programme by providing blueprints and technological advice. The underlying rationale for these relations has always been the containment of India in South Asia, China’s only potential Asian rival. While relations have persisted (as shown by Chinese investment in the deepwater port at Gwadar), greater India-China cooperation over the last decade – mainly in the economic sphere – has led to Chinese neutrality on the Kashmir issue. China now shares widespread concerns with other countries regarding Pakistan’s links with – and often direct support of – terrorist groups (Small 2015).

As for India and Pakistan, they remain worlds apart within the region. T.V. Paul argues that a crucial, neglected structural factor causing the persistence of the India-Pakistan rivalry is the power asymmetry that has prevailed between the antagonists for over half a century (Paul 2006, 601) and is bound to increase in the future. Firmly focussed on principles of sovereignty and self-determination, both sides fear the negative demonstration effects of Kashmir seceding to the other. As any secession would question the cohesion and viability of both states (for India, her secular inclusiveness and for Pakistan as the homeland of South Asia’s Muslim population), the issue has become zero-sum and intractable, overshadowing South Asian foreign policy at large.

Bilateral relations in South Asia and regional multilateralism

With regard to bilateral relations in South Asia, international politics has centred on the relationship between India and its neighbours. Indian elites had since 1947 articulated a foreign policy premised on an ideological commitment to internationalism, non-alignment, and an active solidarity with colonial peoples but with little more than rhetorical support for its South Asian neighbours. This was best exemplified by Nehru. His major foreign policy ideology of idealism was put to the test during the military defeat against China in 1962. Subsequently, China’s status as a nuclear power created a security dilemma that was of regional significance to India, especially in the context of a Pakistan-China alliance. Despite
non-alignment, India subsequently sought the financial and military support of the Soviet Union. This new diplomatic initiative was successful and culminated in a friendship treaty in 1971. In the wake of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, India hence practically checkmated US-Chinese support for Pakistan.

India’s bilateral relations with smaller states of South Asia have been in competition with Pakistan but also with China, especially in northeast India. Still, India markedly influenced domestic events in its neighbouring countries when it intervened militarily in Bangladesh in 1971, in Sri Lanka in 1987, and the Maldives in 1988. India has also continuously sought to influence and control the foreign policy of Nepal. Due to crucial bilateral economic relations, all of the smaller states of South Asia are heavily dependent upon Indian support, which also serves as the main provider of military support.

In South Asia, India is now a vital economic and geostrategic partner for the United States (Schaffer 2009), not least because India and the United States signed an important and far-reaching civilian nuclear deal in 2006. In addition, one of the defining features of a new trend in India’s foreign policy has become the constant search for great power status. India’s current foreign policy has visibly shifted away from earlier ideological articulations and has become pragmatic a trend that began under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, led by Manmohan Singh from 2004 to 2014, and has become even more pronounced under the new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, led by Narendra Modi since May 2014. This shift in foreign policy behaviour has also improved bilateral relations between India and its neighbours as India has begun to offer more development aid and lines of credit to its smaller neighbours (Ganguly 2015).

As South Asian states prefer bilateralism over multilateralism, regional multilateralism has not been successful, in no small part a result of the unresolved Indo-Pakistan enmity. There are essentially two similar regional organizations – the SAARC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) – in which multilateral cooperation has been attempted in various, non-political sectors of cooperation. BIMST-EC was founded in 1997 and meant to further economic cooperation between the states of the Bay of Bengal but has not achieved any of its objectives so far and practically remains inactive (Michael 2013a, 159–163).

Likewise, progress in SAARC has been slow and cooperation proven cumbersome. Before the inaugural first SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in 1985, almost seven years of protracted negotiations took place, beginning with an open letter by then Bangladeshi President Rahman in 1978. Rahman urged his South Asian neighbours to finally start working together in order to strengthen economic cooperation as well as security in South Asia (Michael 2013a, 59–60). However, the eventual outcome of the negotiations was an organization working within the strict confines a common charter that expressly precluded discussing bilateral and contentious issues and anchored the Panchsheel principles – i.e. non-interference in each other’s internal affairs – as one of the major normative orientations of the new organization (Michael 2013b, 41). The charter practically left no room for the organization to grow and foster cooperation.

Between 1985 and 2016, eighteen SAARC summit meetings have taken place; this is the most visible form of South Asian regional cooperation. There is general accord that SAARC has been somewhat useful as a forum for informal talks between, for example, India and Pakistan, but the major objective of a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), though officially in existence since 2004, has still not been brought about the desired economic results. Despite failing as an economic catalyst, three pillars of (embryonic) multilateral security cooperation have emerged nonetheless: political dialogue and bilateral consultations at
At the summit level, confidence-building measures regarding counterterrorism, and concerted measures against various transnational crimes.

Looking at the historical advances regarding political dialogue as one pillar of cooperation, such dialogues have formed an important part during informal, behind-the-scenes summit talks, especially between India and Pakistan. A second pillar of multilateral security cooperation – the common fight against terrorist activities in South Asia – has been part of the SAARC agenda since its inception in 1985. The common terrorist threat was addressed at several SAARC summits, but it took a long time to arrive at more concrete forms of cooperation (Michael 2013a, 104–105). Already at the first SAARC Summit in 1985, the member states governments explored the possibility of cooperation against terrorism by acknowledging that the problem affected “security and stability” of the members (SAARC 1985, 7). In 1986, at the second SAARC Summit in Bangalore, SAARC leaders agreed on furthering cooperation against terrorism and on formulating a regional agreement to curb this severe security challenge (SAARC 2008, 13). Accordingly, in June 1987, the SAARC Council of Ministers met in New Delhi to accelerate the process of drafting a Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (RCST). The convention was subsequently signed at the third SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in November 1987 (SAARC 2008, 27) and came into force in August 1988, following ratification by all member states. When signing the convention, SAARC leaders “unequivocally condemned all acts, methods and practices of terrorism as criminal” (SAARC 2004, 1). The convention was a milestone in that it marked the first common South Asian convention that was actually signed by all South Asian states, obliging its members to exercise self-restraint.

Following the United Nations (UN) Declaration 1373 of 28 September 2001, SAARC passed the Additional Protocol (AP) to the SAARC Regional Convention on Terrorism in 2004. This agreement came into force in 2006 after being ratified by its members. The AP aims at strengthening the RCST by addressing the issue of restriction on the financing of terrorist groups. The agreement requires member states to adopt measures for eradicating the financing of terrorism (SAARC 2004, 11). The members agreed to become parties to the related international instruments to which they were not a party in 2004 (SAARC 2004, 10). As a consequence, commitment towards SAARC agreements encouraged members to become parties to previously ignored international agreements. For example, the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (1999) was ratified by Sri Lanka in 2000, by India and Afghanistan in 2003, by Bhutan in 2004, by Bangladesh in 2005, by Pakistan in 2009, and by Nepal in 2011.

Together with these agreements, in 1995 – and thus eight years after signing of the RCST – SAARC then established the SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) in Colombo (SAARC 2015). The objective of the STOMD is to collate, analyse, and disseminate information on terrorist activities to SAARC member states. At a SAARC meeting in Islamabad in 2010, a decision was then taken to share information on a real-time basis and to exchange data of terrorist elements in respective countries. Yet, despite the existence of the STOMD since 1995, progress has been extremely slow: The desk only has ten employees and suffers from serious underfunding. Also, the national coordinators of the STOMD, comprising the Secretaries of Ministry of Defence of the member states, have met only four times until 2016. Another declaration was issued on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism at the SAARC Ministerial Meeting held on 28 February 2009 (SAARC 2009). However, as of today, India and Pakistan still do not have an extradition treaty (Gordon 2009, 85, 101–102).

A third pillar of SAARC cooperation concerns the common fight against transnational crimes, especially with regard to interstate police cooperation, drug smuggling, and human
trafficking. In line with SAARC’s objective of fighting against cross-border drug smuggling, in 1991 the SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk (SDOMD) was established in Colombo. SDOMD is based at the Police and Narcotics Bureau in Sri Lanka with the function of analysing and disseminating information on drug-related offences in South Asia, in accordance with the SAARC convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The SAARC Coordination Group of Drug Law Enforcement Agencies supervises the work of SDOMD. It has met just three times since inception until 2016. However, the SDOMD has clearly failed in its task to collect and share information with member states on networks of drug smugglers in South Asia.

A balance sheet of SAARC after more than 30 years of existence shows that declarations and letters of intent have been more prominent than actual tangible results, especially in the economic sphere. Several initiatives at closer cooperation have been attempted time and again, yet the necessary implementation has always been the major Achilles heel of South Asian regional cooperation. On 26 May 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressly invited the heads of all the SAARC member countries to his inauguration ceremony. While this important gesture could have marked a new beginning for regional cooperation in South Asia, the latest SAARC Summit in 2014 again failed to further cooperation. As was pointed out earlier, intra-regional trade in South Asia is still very low, and despite the existence of SAFTA, trade agreements are essentially bilateral and include, for example, the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement, trade agreements with Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, and an India-Nepal trade pact.

Global multilateralism: the UN, trade, and the environmental regime

While all South Asian states are members of various global organizations, their imprint has been insignificant. India’s centrality in global multilateral institutions and regimes, on the other hand, has grown with the rise of India as a major economic power. Concomitantly, this rise has been transformative on the crucial role India is now playing in international institutions such as the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Unlike any of its South Asian neighbours, India is also a member of smaller influential multilateral frameworks – especially between emerging powers – such as the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) forum or the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group.

As one of the original members of the UN, India has provided development resources to the UN, being one of the largest contributors to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and a major contributor to United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) and United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Trust Fund for least-developed countries. Crucially, India is one of the leading contributors to UN peacekeeping, having contributed nearly 100,000 troops in more than 40 missions (Murthy 2010). India has served as non-permanent member of the Security Council for seven terms from 1950–52, 1965–67, 1970–72, 1976–78, 1983–85, 1990–92, and 2011–13. Besides India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan are among the top contributors to UN peacekeeping missions across the world, making South Asia as a whole one of the most important regional peacekeeping troop providers of the UN. As part of the G-4 coalition of countries (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), India has been trying to secure a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with British and US backing. However, Pakistan has staunchly opposed an Indian seat in the UNSC. Likewise, India’s attempted membership of the 48-country
strong Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) has been firmly opposed by China and Pakistan, demonstrating that ties between external powers and South Asian states are still highly relevant and alive.

Regarding global trade regimes and environmental challenges, in recent years India has coordinated its efforts with other emerging powers, in particular China, on issues as wide-ranging as climate change, global trade, energy security, and the global financial crisis. Both have committed themselves “to crafting joint Sino-Indian positions in the WTO and global trade negotiations in the hope that this might provide them greater negotiating leverage over other developed states” (Pant 2011, 236). The eighth GATT round – the so-called Uruguay Round – was launched in 1986 and established the WTO in 1995; this was followed by the Doha Development Round that commenced in 2001, committing all nations to negotiations opening agricultural and manufacturing markets, as well as trade-in-services negotiations and expanded intellectual property regulation. Talks have stalled since 2008 primarily because of significant differences between developed nations and major developing nations, led mainly by India, Brazil, and China. The Doha Round trade negotiations collapsed in 2008 over issues of agricultural trade between the United States, India, and China. After prolonged negotiations, the so-called “Bali package” was agreed upon in December 2013 focusing on a trade facilitation agreement (TFA). India agreed to this package on the condition that final decisions on the status of state-supported food programmes were postponed until 2017. But India eventually did a volte-face in July 2014 by completely rejecting the TFA, demanding immediate talks on the unresolved issues and asking for WTO exceptions on its subsidised grain policy. India’s decision, in effect, not only jeopardized multilateral negotiations but was also a sign of new Indian negotiation power and influence. In general, India’s global trade policy has been characterized by assembling coalitions consisting largely of developing countries built around a specific issue area (mainly agriculture). In essence, India has adopted a strict distributive strategy and used an ideational discourse of framing, particularly based on fairness, “focused on both the process and the substance of negotiation” (Narlikar 2013, 429, 431). Here, India was able to secure the support of some of its South Asian neighbours.

Another crucial issue in multilateral diplomacy for South Asia and especially India is the effects of climate change (Sengupta 2013). During the 2009 Copenhagen negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), India, along with the United States, China, Brazil, and South Africa, markedly influenced the outcome of the negotiations (Meilstrup 2010). It was during this conference that India together with Brazil, China, and South Africa formed the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) group (Hurrell and Sengupta 2012). This was a new collaboration among emerging powers, aimed at exerting leverage in multilateral negotiations based upon common positions. In cooperation with the United States, BASIC worked out the Copenhagen Accord, which called for voluntary reductions in greenhouse gas emissions rather than the mandatory reductions that many other states favoured. India’s crucial role at the UNFCCC in Paris was summarized by TIME magazine as “why no country matters more than India” (Worland 2015).

Conclusion: South Asia in the changing global order

A host of domestic and regional problems undermine South Asia’s ability in playing a more proactive role in shaping the world. Regional politics and the foreign policy of South Asian nations are hostage to a triad of competing national ideologies, conflicting ethnic and religious identities, and contested territory, furthering South Asia’s weak position in world
affairs. Importantly, South Asian states, especially India, prefer to conduct international affairs bilaterally, even within the region, thereby hurting chances of improved regional cooperation. Globally, South Asian states have played a prominent role in UN peacekeeping, but this has not translated in international political influence.

For Indo-Pakistani relations, Kashmir has provided the prism through which the two states and their elites perceive each other, and the crisis has structured Pakistan’s foreign policy within both the region and wider international community. Added to this, the growing asymmetry in the respective economic performance as well as in geostrategic significance has created an even more powerful structural dimension to Pakistan’s historical resentments against India, and the uneven balance of power in South Asia hinges markedly upon the support provided by external powers.

In terms of IRT, culture, identity, strategic, and institutionalist considerations are all elements that need to be incorporated in theoretical frameworks in order to do justice to the diversity of South Asia and South Asian politics at large. All in all, it is India that has begun to exert global influence, and India’s membership in the BRICS or BASIC shows that it has the potential to play a veto-wielding role in global affairs. There is the calculation on the Indian side that its role in UN peacekeeping might help India in its drive towards the permanent membership of the UNSC. Conversely, India’s search for great power status and global power is still an irritant to China and perceived as a geopolitical challenge to the status and prospects of Pakistan.

All things considered, India’s negotiating positions on key issues of global governance, such as global trade or climate change, as well as in multilateral institutions, such as the UN, will have major implications not only for South Asia but also the international system. Despite its far-reaching socio-economic problems, South Asia has now become the fastest growing region in the world (World Bank 2015), mainly because of Indian record growth rates. If and how India can translate the current economic growth and growing international influence into economic and political benefits for all South Asian countries will provide an essential litmus test of South Asian foreign policy at large in the near future.

Notes
1 Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
2 SAARC member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
3 BIMST-EC member states are Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal.

Bibliography


