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## India's Role in South Asia's Geopolitical Architecture

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### Abstract

India occupies a central position in South Asia's geopolitical architecture due to its vast territorial size, immense population, growing economic strength and highly strategic location. As the largest democracy in the world, India plays a pivotal role in shaping regional security, fostering economic integration, and advancing diplomatic relations across diverse platforms. This paper examines India's multifaceted role in South Asia, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. India's evolving foreign policy reflects a pragmatic balance between cooperation and competition, particularly in its relations with neighboring states such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Border disputes, cross-border terrorism, and migration issues pose significant challenges and India continues to emphasize dialogue, confidence-building measures, and regional peacekeeping efforts. At the same time, India's engagement with global powers like the United States, China, and Russia underscores its ambition to maintain strategic autonomy while contributing to a multipolar world order. Economically, India advocates for regional integration through initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Its leadership in these regional institutions demonstrates a commitment to collective growth, sustainable development, and inclusive prosperity. India's active participation in addressing transnational issues including climate change, energy security, and maritime cooperation reinforces its image as a responsible stakeholder in global governance. India's centrality in South Asia lies in its ability to balance national interests with regional responsibilities, positioning itself as both a security provider and a driver of economic progress.

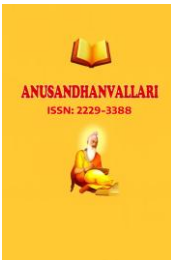
**Keywords:** India; South Asia; Geopolitics; Regional Security; Foreign Policy; Strategic Autonomy; Regional Integration; SAARC; BIMSTEC; Economic Cooperation; Multipolar World Order; Global Governance etc.

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### Introduction:

South Asia is widely regarded as one of the most geopolitically complex regions in the world. It is marked by a long history of conflicts, diverse political systems, and persistent developmental challenges that continue to shape the trajectory of the region. The presence of multiple states with varying levels of economic growth, governance structures, and security concerns makes South Asia a dynamic and fragile geopolitical space. Within this context, India, as the largest country in terms of territory, population, and economic capacity, plays a pivotal role in influencing the political, economic, and security environment of the region.

India's role in South Asia extends far beyond bilateral relations with its neighbors. It is deeply involved in regional groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Through these institutions, India promotes regional integration, economic cooperation, and collective responses to shared challenges such as poverty, climate



change, and terrorism. India's leadership in these forums demonstrates its commitment to fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development, while also balancing its national interests with regional responsibilities.

Politically, India's influence is evident in its evolving foreign policy, which seeks to balance cooperation and competition. Relations with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are often shaped by issues of border disputes, migration, and security threats. India continues to emphasize dialogue, confidence-building measures, and peacekeeping efforts to maintain stability in the region. At the same time, India's engagement with global powers such as the United States, China, and Russia highlights its ambition to maintain strategic autonomy while contributing to a multipolar world order.

Economically, India has emerged as a driver of regional growth. Its expanding markets, technological advancements, and infrastructure projects provide opportunities for neighboring countries to benefit from trade and investment. Initiatives such as cross-border energy cooperation, transport connectivity, and digital integration are examples of India's efforts to strengthen regional economic ties. India's active participation in addressing transnational issues including climate change, energy security, and maritime cooperation reinforces its image as a responsible stakeholder in global governance.

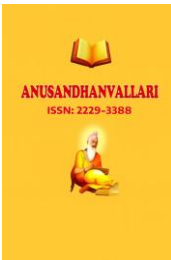
Security remains another crucial dimension of India's role in South Asia. The region faces challenges such as terrorism, insurgency, and geopolitical rivalries, which require coordinated responses. India has positioned itself as a security provider, contributing to regional stability through military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and disaster relief operations. Its naval presence in the Indian Ocean emphasizes its strategic importance in safeguarding maritime routes and ensuring freedom of navigation. India's centrality in South Asia lies in its ability to balance national interests with regional responsibilities. India influences the future of South Asia and represents its interests on global platforms. This dual role as both a regional leader and a global actor highlights India's significance in the evolving geopolitical architecture of South Asia by shaping the region's political discourse, driving economic integration, and contributing to security frameworks.

### History:

**Partition and Independence (1947):** The independence of India in 1947 marked a turning point in South Asia's political history. The partition of British India into India and Pakistan reshaped the political map and created enduring disputes, most notably the Kashmir conflict. The division led to mass migrations, communal violence, and long-term mistrust between the two newly formed states. These tensions have continued to influence regional politics, shaping security concerns and diplomatic relations across South Asia.

**Cold War Dynamics:** During the Cold War, India adopted a policy of non-alignment, seeking to avoid direct alignment with either the United States or the Soviet Union. However, India leaned toward the Soviet Union in terms of defense cooperation and economic assistance. This orientation influenced regional alignments, as Pakistan moved closer to the United States and China. India's non-aligned stance allowed it to maintain strategic autonomy while simultaneously benefiting from Soviet support, thereby strengthening its military and industrial base.

**Post-1991 Liberalization:** The economic reforms introduced in 1991 transformed India's global and regional position. Liberalization policies opened the economy to foreign investment, boosted trade, and accelerated growth. As a result, India's global stature increased, and its influence in South Asia expanded significantly. The reforms



enabled India to emerge as a hub for technology, services, and manufacturing, while also enhancing its ability to support regional economic integration and development initiatives.

### **India's Strategic Position in South Asia:**

**Geography:** India's geographical location makes it central to South Asia's connectivity. Sharing borders with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (through maritime proximity), India is naturally positioned as a hub for trade, transport, and cultural exchange. Its location also provides strategic access to the Indian Ocean, which is vital for global shipping and energy routes. This geographic centrality reinforces India's role as a bridge between South Asia and the wider world.

**Military Power:** India possesses one of the most powerful militaries in the region, with advanced defense capabilities and nuclear weapons. Its military strength establishes it as the primary security actor in South Asia. India's armed forces safeguard national sovereignty and contribute to regional stability through peacekeeping missions, counter-terrorism efforts, and maritime security operations. The presences of nuclear weapons and underline India's strategic importance, deterring external threats and balancing regional power dynamics.

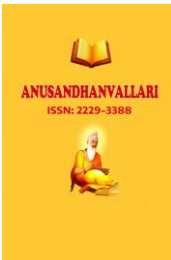
**Economic Strength:** India's economy is the largest in South Asia, with a GDP that surpasses the combined output of its neighbors. This economic strength positions India as the engine of regional growth. Its expanding markets, technological advancements, and infrastructure projects provide opportunities for neighboring countries to benefit from trade and investment. India's leadership in initiatives such as SAARC and BIMSTEC highlights its commitment to fostering regional economic cooperation, sustainable development, and inclusive prosperity.

### **India's Role in Regional Security:**

South Asia remains one of the most volatile and strategically significant regions in the world, and India's role in ensuring regional security is central to its geopolitical identity. As the largest country in the region, India faces multiple security challenges that range from terrorism and border disputes to maritime concerns. Its responses to these issues safeguard national interests and shape the broader security architecture of South Asia.

**Counterterrorism** India has long grappled with the threat of cross-border terrorism, particularly originating from Pakistan. The Kashmir conflict has been a focal point of this challenge, with militant groups operating across the Line of Control and destabilizing the region. Terrorist attacks such as the 2001 Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks underscored the severity of the threat and pushed India to strengthen its counterterrorism strategies. India advocates for stronger regional cooperation against terrorism, emphasizing intelligence sharing, joint training, and coordinated responses through platforms like SAARC. However, political tensions often limit the effectiveness of such cooperation. India continues to push for collective action, recognizing that terrorism is a transnational issue requiring regional solidarity.

**Maritime Security** India's geographic position along the Indian Ocean grants it significant responsibility in safeguarding maritime routes. The Indian Ocean is a critical artery for global trade and energy supplies, with sea lanes connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. India's naval presence ensures the protection of these routes from piracy, trafficking, and potential military threats. Initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and maritime cooperation with countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius highlight India's commitment to regional maritime security. India's naval modernization and its participation in exercises such as "Malabar" with the United States and Japan demonstrate its role in maintaining freedom of navigation and balancing China's growing



influence in the Indo-Pacific. Maritime security is thus both a regional responsibility and a global imperative for India.

**Border Conflicts** India's disputes with China and Pakistan significantly shape its defense posture and regional diplomacy. With Pakistan, the unresolved Kashmir issue continues to fuel tensions, leading to frequent skirmishes and military stand-offs along the border. With China, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has been a source of friction, most recently highlighted by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. These disputes compel India to maintain a strong military presence along its borders and invest heavily in defense modernization. Diplomatically, India balances firmness with dialogue, engaging in talks while simultaneously strengthening alliances with other regional and global powers. These conflicts also influence India's broader strategic outlook, pushing it to deepen partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and enhance its deterrence capabilities.

India's role in regional security is multifaceted, encompassing counterterrorism, maritime security, and border management. India protects its sovereignty and contributes to the stability of South Asia and beyond. Its ability to balance national defense with regional cooperation underscores its position as both a security provider and a responsible stakeholder in global security frameworks.

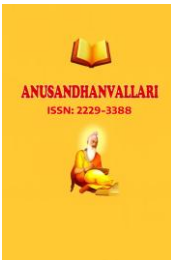
#### **India's Role in Regional Economic Integration:**

India has emerged as a central actor in promoting regional economic integration across South Asia. Its initiatives in trade, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development reflect both national interests and a broader vision of regional prosperity. India seeks to position South Asia as a more cohesive and competitive region in the global economy by strengthening connectivity and development of collaboration,

**Trade and Connectivity:** India has actively promoted initiatives such as the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), which aims to enhance trade and transport linkages among South Asian countries. Through SASEC, India supports projects that improve cross-border transport corridors, streamline customs procedures, and facilitate smoother movement of goods and services. These efforts are designed to reduce trade barriers, increase efficiency, and encourage greater economic interdependence among neighboring states. India boosts its own exports and helps smaller economies access larger markets, thereby fostering inclusive growth by expanding regional trade networks.

**Energy Cooperation:** Energy security is another critical dimension of India's regional engagement. India has invested significantly in regional energy grids and hydropower projects, particularly in Bhutan and Nepal. These projects provide clean and renewable energy to India while generating revenue and development opportunities for its neighbors. For example, hydropower cooperation with Bhutan has become a model of mutually beneficial partnership, where India imports electricity while supporting Bhutan's economic development. Similarly, investments in Nepal's hydropower sector aim to create long-term energy integration across the region. India contributes to sustainable development and reduces dependence on fossil fuels by promoting cross-border energy trade.

**Infrastructure Development:** India also plays a leading role in supporting connectivity projects that link South Asia to Southeast Asia. Initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project are designed to improve road, port, and inland waterway connectivity. These projects strengthen India's ties with its eastern neighbors and integrate South Asia into broader Asian supply chains.



Enhanced infrastructure facilitates trade, tourism, and cultural exchange, while also improving strategic access to the Indo-Pacific region. Through trade facilitation, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development, India demonstrates its commitment to regional integration. These initiatives highlight India's dual role as both an economic engine for South Asia and a bridge to wider Asian markets. India strengthens its leadership in shaping the future of regional cooperation by investing in connectivity and sustainable growth.

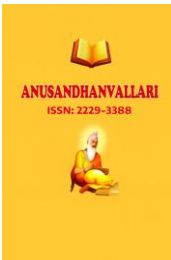
### **India and Regional Institutions:**

India's engagement with regional institutions reflects both its ambitions and the challenges of South Asian geopolitics. India seeks to strengthen cooperation, enhance connectivity, and expand its influence across broader regional and global platforms by participating in organizations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Its approach to these institutions also reveals the complexities of balancing national interests with collective goals.

**SAARC:** The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, was envisioned as a mechanism to promote economic and political cooperation among South Asian states. India has historically been both a driver and a critic of SAARC. On one hand, India has supported initiatives for trade liberalization, poverty reduction, and regional connectivity. On the other hand, India has often expressed frustration at the organization's limited progress, largely due to Pakistan's obstructionist stance. Bilateral tensions, particularly over terrorism and the Kashmir issue, have frequently paralyzed SAARC's functioning. As a result, India has increasingly questioned the effectiveness of SAARC as a platform for meaningful regional integration.

**BIMSTEC:** In contrast, India has placed growing emphasis on the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC connects South Asia with Southeast Asia, including countries such as Thailand and Myanmar. India views BIMSTEC as a more promising forum for advancing regional cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, connectivity, and security. India seeks to bypass the political deadlock of SAARC and build stronger ties with countries that share its vision of economic integration and maritime collaboration. The organization also aligns with India's "Act East" policy, which aims to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.

**Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA):** India's participation in the Indian Ocean Rim Association highlights its strategic interest in maritime governance. The Indian Ocean is vital for global trade and energy flows, and India leverages IORA to expand its influence in shaping rules and norms for maritime security, disaster management, and sustainable development. Through IORA, India promotes freedom of navigation, counter-piracy measures, and cooperation in blue economy initiatives. This engagement strengthens India's role as a key maritime power and enhances its ability to project influence beyond South Asia into the wider Indian Ocean region. India's approach to SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA illustrates its pragmatic strategy of engaging with multiple institutions to advance regional and global interests. While SAARC remains constrained by political disputes, BIMSTEC and IORA provide India with alternative platforms to pursue connectivity, security, and leadership in shaping the future of regional cooperation.



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### Challenges to India's Regional Role:

India's ambition to act as a regional leader in South Asia faces several challenges that complicate its ability to fully realize this role. These challenges stem from external pressures, persistent bilateral disputes, and domestic limitations that collectively shape the scope of India's influence.

**China's Influence:** One of the most significant external challenges comes from China's growing presence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has expanded its economic and strategic footprint in the region by investing heavily in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI project, directly challenges India's dominance by strengthening Pakistan's connectivity with China while bypassing India. These developments raise concerns about debt dependency among smaller South Asian states and create strategic competition that limits India's ability to act as the sole driver of regional integration.

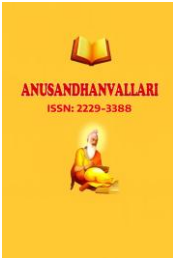
**Pakistan Factor:** Persistent hostility with Pakistan remains another major obstacle. The unresolved Kashmir dispute, cross-border terrorism, and frequent military tensions undermine trust and prevent meaningful cooperation within regional institutions such as SAARC. Pakistan's resistance to India's leadership role often paralyzes regional initiatives, making it difficult for India to advance collective agendas. This rivalry hinders economic integration and diverts resources toward defense preparedness rather than development.

**Domestic Constraints:** India's regional ambitions are also shaped by internal political and economic challenges. Domestic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and uneven development across states sometimes limit the resources available for external engagement. Political debates and coalition pressures slow decision-making on foreign policy, while economic slowdowns reduce India's ability to invest in regional projects. These constraints highlight the need for India to balance domestic priorities with its external commitments.

Thus, China's influence, Pakistan's hostility, and India's domestic constraints present significant hurdles to India's regional leadership. Addressing these challenges is essential for India to strengthen its role as a stabilizing and integrative force in South Asia.

### India's Global Role and Its Impact on South Asia:

India's global engagement has increasingly shaped the strategic and developmental trajectory of South Asia. A key dimension of this role is India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia. Through the Quad framework, India enhances its ability to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. This cooperation strengthens India's defense and maritime capabilities and reassures smaller South Asian states of India's commitment to regional stability and security. Beyond security, India's leadership in climate diplomacy has elevated South Asia's visibility in global discussions on sustainable development. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance, spearheaded by India, highlight the region's potential to contribute to renewable energy transitions and climate resilience. India's growing role in digital governance and emphasizes its global impact. With advancements in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and data regulation, India promotes inclusive digital growth that benefits the wider South Asian region. These efforts enhance connectivity and innovation and ensure that South Asia's interests are represented in shaping global digital norms.



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### Conclusion:

India's role in South Asia's geopolitical architecture is multifaceted, combining leadership aspirations with pragmatic constraints. While India seeks to foster regional integration and stability, its efforts are often challenged by rivalries and external interventions. Nevertheless, India remains the indispensable actor in South Asia, shaping the region's future through diplomacy, economic initiatives, and security strategies.

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