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India's Evolving Subregional Strategy

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Development and security issues are interconnected in India's eastern subregions — the Bay of Bengal, the Himalayas, and the Mekong subregion. Together, these subregions form India's first geostrategic chain in the wider Indo-Pacific region. A subregion is a small group of geographically adjoining countries sharing a common ecosystem with interconnected development and security spaces. New Delhi's evolving subregional approach needs to view the three subregions as a single strategic arch.

The recent military standoff between India and China in the Himalayas, the winning of strategic port contracts in key littorals of the Bay of Bengal by Chinese companies, Islamabad's reluctance to be part of regional initiatives and China's growing regional political clout — as demonstrated by the willingness of most nations in the subregions to join the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' — have further complicated India's subregional policies.

Within this challenging environment, India and its smaller neighbors in the subregions have been looking to strengthen alternative subregional institutions such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). The renewed focus on these subregional groupings contributes to both India's domestic and regional governance needs.

That New Delhi has been recalibrating its approach toward its subregions is evident through the launching of the "Neighborhood First" policy and the "Act East" policy. However, in the changed geo-political context, traditional compartmentalized views of the subregions are unlikely to provide the fullest benefits to India.

India's eastern subregions play a critical role in advancing two objectives of the Act East policy. Together the subregions provide India with both land and maritime options to access the East, and have emerged as key spaces for New Delhi to push its cross-border connectivity projects. The ongoing trilateral highway project — linking India's Northeast with Thailand through Myanmar — is one such initiative with plans to further extend it to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in the next phase.

As New Delhi strengthens its security engagements with the region, nations in the three subregions are emerging as important partners. In 2011, New Delhi put into practice its subregional approach in defense cooperation when it set up trilateral maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka and Maldives to enhance maritime security. The idea was later expanded by inviting Mauritius and Seychelles to join the initiative.

K. Yhome, Senior Fellow with the Observer Research Foundation, explains that "New Delhi's evolving subregional approach needs to view the three subregions as a single strategic arch."

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“New Delhi’s subregional strategy aims at finding synergies between domestic and external policies.”

India has entered into new defense and security agreements and initiated joint patrols and exercises with several nations in the subregions. Recent signings of memoranda of understanding for defense cooperation and offers of extending credit for purchase of arms and ammunition to subregional countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Vietnam, are indications of New Delhi’s renewed increase of subregional security cooperation. The following elements define India’s evolving approach:

New Delhi’s subregional strategy aims at finding synergies between domestic and external policies, with the goal of advancing its foreign policy interests. Development of its frontier regions is thus a priority, because those regions play a critical role in the effective implementation of the strategy. In this context, India’s Northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands — along with the entire eastern seaboard — are key spaces in pushing forward India’s subregional strategy.

Building partnerships with like-minded countries in the development and security of the subregions forms another vital element of India’s approach. Unlike the past, when New Delhi was wary of collaborating with external actors in its subregions, India is now willing to leverage its partners where strategic interests converge. The subregions are opening up new opportunities for such collaboration. In this context, a shared vision of an Indo-Pacific region guided by ‘values-based’ and ‘rules-based order’ forms the basis for building partnerships.

New Delhi also has been giving greater roles and responsibilities to its states under the principle of cooperative federalism. The emphasis on the states’ role in regional diplomacy is another facet of the subregional approach. In practice, this is a work in progress. For cooperative federalism to support the subregional strategy there is need for effective coordination between the two. There is also need for creating a cadre of subregional specialists in the bureaucracy and a new policy for India bureaucratic services based on geographical zones that are in line with its subregional strategy.

The rebuilding of mutual trust with neighbours is another critical feature of India’s subregional approach. At a time when China is a willing partner in these subregions, and the smaller neighbors are seeking to maximize benefits, New Delhi is trying to minimize the mistrust that has long characterized its relations with smaller neighboring countries. One such attempt is by reviewing past bilateral treaties and agreements that are considered ‘unequal’ by smaller neighbors. In 2007, India updated the 1949 friendship treaty with Bhutan and last year a joint mechanism between India and Nepal was set up to update all bilateral treaties and agreements.

As India’s global aspirations grow, there is recognition that an unstable neighborhood can guarantee neither economic development, nor security. In this context, India’s vision in its eastern subregions has been to share its economic growth and enhance security cooperation, with the aim to build an ‘interlinked destiny’ of peace and prosperity in the region.

India’s eastern subregions are critical in safeguarding the country’s primacy and in expanding its strategic reach. As New Delhi fine tunes its subregional approach, there is need for constant nurturing of the strategy and assessment of its effectiveness in these ever-changing regional dynamics. This revisiting of the strategy should be aimed at injecting it with new dynamism and innovative ideas to keep pace with the changing times.

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