

India's Multilateralism

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Introduction:

Multilateralism has a long history. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 may be recalled as its early examples. The current phase of multilateralism is dated to the first and the second World Wars of 1914-18 and 1935-45. Between and after these, three and more countries joined hands to address the issues of global peace and prosperity. This phenomenon emerged in response to the complexities of the issues confronting the world and failures and inadequacies of bilateral and unilateral approaches to the deal with them. Significant early initiatives in this respect were taken by the major powers. Recall the League of Nations, based on an initiative taken by the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to end the first World War and "to promote international cooperation and achieve international peace and security". Even as a multilateral initiative, the League failed to prevent the second world war. Though the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 sounded the death knell of the League as an institution, but its idea of multilateral approach to world politics survived. In 1945, the United Nations was established to replace the shattered League of Nations as a universal institution to ensure peace, security and development. To reconstruct war shattered economies, 44 countries came together at the Bretton Wood in July 1944, to create the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Simultaneously, the unfolding Cold War also brought in military alliances that created two groups of countries under the leadership of the US and the then Soviet Union. These alliances had security and peace as their stated objectives, but an underlying intent of their initiators, was also to consolidate and perpetuate their post-war dominance. The United Nations and the Bretton Wood institutions proved inadequate in their response to deal with the issues of peace, security and development. The poor and developing countries that had pinned their hope on these institutions reacted by initiating reforms and launching parallel institutions and groupings like Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), Group of 77 (G.77) and the New International Economic Order (NIEO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and World Trade organisation (WTO). Inspired and prompted by such initiatives emerged a number of multilateral institutions and groupings to drive international relations forward. As the developing countries started accumulating greater economic capabilities and stronger international voice, the exclusive clubs of the developed and powerful countries like The Group of 7/8 (G.7), had to accommodate the emerging economies and redefine the new group as G.20.

Multilateralism has historically been an evolving process.¹ This evolution has been driven mainly by two factors. One, the increasingly complex and growing nature of global challenges – ranging from core security and developmental issues to those of environment, energy, human rights, disaster management, pandemics and emerging technologies. The second one has been the failing performance of the multilateral institutions; much short of their promises and claims in dealing with these challenges. The declining efficacy and eroding credibility of the universal and broad based mega multilateral institutions like the United Nations, has gradually given rise to "regional multilateralism". The seeds of regional multilateralism were also inherent in the Cold War based military alliances and search for influence areas. Several regional multilateral institutions and organisations like North-Atlantic, Central Asian and Southeast Asian Treaty Organisations (NATO, CENTO and SEATO), African Union, European Union (EU), Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and so on were formed and will continue to be formed.² Multilateral arrangements have been institutionalised (being governed by well-defined rules

¹ Ruggie, John Gerard (Ed.), **Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Forum**, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.

² Harris Mylonas and Emirahan Yorulmazlan, "Regional Multilateralism: The next paradigm in global affairs", *CNN World*, January 14, 2012.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120118143839/http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/14/regional-multilateralism-should-be-the-next-paradigm-in-global-affairs/>.

and norms), as well as informal (based on resilience and consensus among its members). The failures and inadequacies of the regional groupings and organisations has led more to the restructured multilateralism that reflects fragmentation even of the prevailing 'regional multilateralism' in the present century.³ They are regional as well as trans-regional, termed as "mini-laterals and plurilaterals", based on shared values and interests. There are no binding commitments among them nor well-defined norms and governing procedures.

Several factors account for the failures and weaknesses of the multilateral institutions and groupings. It was unfortunate that the end of the second war, did not really launch a period of peace and mutual cooperation. Two of the victors, the United States and the Soviet Union with their respective post-war allies, not only polarised the world into military blocks and ideological contests (democracy versus communism) but also let their rivalry vitiate the functioning of global multilateral institutions like the United Nations. The exercise of veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC), and block mobilisation on the issues of peace and development, they crippled and paralysed the multilateral institutions and eroded their efficacy. This frustrated the rest of the world, that had no effective representation in the global decision making. Added by globalisation and decolonisation of Asia and Africa, the emerging countries started questioning the machinations of the major powers and asked for reforms and restructuring of the prevailing multilateralism. The emerging countries also forged new and parallel multilateral groupings and organisations to pressure the major powers for equality, justice and peace in Global governance. NAM, NIEO and such institutions may be recalled in this respect. Multilateralism has also suffered due to their fragile executing powers, their slow, biased, minimalist and short sided decisions, and bureaucratic inefficiency in meeting the ever-growing complex and challenging nature of global crises.⁴ Despite these crises and weaknesses, multilateralism as a phenomenon is not dead. It is evolving and changing itself to retain its relevance and usefulness in the dynamics of international relations.

With this perspective of evolution and changes in the phenomenon of multilateralism, we propose to look somewhat closely at India's approach in this Chapter. It is possible to identify three dimensions and phases of the evolution of India's approach to multilateralism. The first phase was of response to the post-Cold War world order, Asian resurgence and decolonisation. This was followed by the regional multilateralism; and the present phase may be seen as that of fragmentation of and innovation in the prevailing multilateralism. All these phases have been shaped by India's capabilities and core interests of preserving its new found independence, and securing a global and regional eco-system to promote its security, development and global aspirations. These phases may be discussed in some details.

India and the Post-World War Multilateralism:

Courtesy its colonial legacy, India, even before its independence, became one of the founding members of the Post-Second War multilateral initiatives like the Bretton Woods institutions in 1944 and the United Nations in 1945. The British had realised that the participation of a country of India's potential and weight could not be avoided in shaping the post-war world order. At the Bretton Woods Conference debate, substantial contribution made by the nationalist members of the Indian

³ Acharya, Amitav, "Multilateralism and the changing world order" in Weiss, Thomas G. and Daws, Sam (eds.); **The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations**, Oxford University press, UK, 2018, pp 780-796. Also, Woods, Ngaere; "Multilateralism in the Twenty-First Century"; *Global Perspectives*, University of California, Vol.4, No. 1, 2023.

⁴ Considerable literature is available on the failures and infirmities of Multilateralism. For instance, see; "Multilateralism: What is it and why does it matter?" United Nations Office at Geneva, February 18, 2025. <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/02/103439/multilateralism-what-it-and-why-does-it-matter>. Teresa, Nogueira Pinto; "The failures of multilateralism", *International Structures*, 30 March 2022. [GIS Report. https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/multilateralism-crisis/](https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/multilateralism-crisis/). Abdessalam, Jaldi; "The Crisis of Multilateralism: Viewed from the Global South"; *Policy Paper*. April 2023. https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2023-04/PP_05-23%20%28Jaldi%20%29.pdf. Walden, Bellow; "The Rise and fall of Multilateralism", *Dissent Magazine*. Spring 2021. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-rise-and-fall-of-multilateralism/>. Narlikar, Amrita; "The malaise of multilateralism and how to manage it" Observer Research Foundation(ORF), January 23, 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-malaise-of-multilateralism-and-how-to-manage-it>.

delegation won India membership of the Executive Boards of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. India's concern for preserving its Sterling balance with the United Kingdom was ignored in the deliberations but the Indian delegation succeeded in securing the sixth largest allocation of the Special Drawing Rights (SDRs).⁵ At the UN Charter discussions, Indian delegation introduced the issue of Human Rights protection and the criteria for the election of the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Indian delegation's strong resistance to the Veto power for the permanent members at the very first UN General Assembly meeting in 1946, did not succeed, but the Article 109 of the Charter did provide for a periodic "re-examination of the Charter" which may remove debatable and forced "safeguards" claimed by the major powers.⁶ This provision has largely remained defunct.

India's membership of the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions was driven by its acute consciousness of being a weak and dependent colonial economy and a pressing need for peaceful and stable world order. India's sincere commitment to the UN role in world peace and stability prompted India to take one of its post-independence security issues of Pakistani aggression in Kashmir to the UNSC. India also enthusiastically undertook responsibilities for peace in the world under the UN sponsorship in Korean (1950-53) and Indo-China (1954-1970). India has also been one of the largest man-power contributors to the various UN Peace Keeping Operations in the world. However, the partisan attitude of the UNSC permanent members on Kashmir as also on most of the issues of conflict and peace elsewhere made India soon realise that the major powers in the UNSC were only interested in preserving and expanding their dominance and influence in world politics. Recalling the UN failures and reiterating the need for radical reforms in the post-war world order, India's foreign minister Dr. S. Jaishankar said at the Raisina strategic dialogue in New Delhi on March 18, 2025:

We went to United Nations. What was an invasion was made into dispute. So, the attacker and victim were put on par. Who were the culpable parties? The United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, Australia, the United States. So, pardon me, I have some question marks on that old order.

India has been leading the demand for reforms and democratisation of the UN functioning. Despite stiff resistance of the UNSC permanent members, world opinion has been mobilised in favour of urgent and far-reaching UN reforms.

Yet another multilateral organisation of colonial legacy was the British Commonwealth. Joining the Commonwealth posed a dilemma for independent India; it could neither subordinate itself, even ritualistically, to the British crown, nor could India ignore the worth of Commonwealth as a useful forum for international engagements to promote its economic interests and consolidate its newly acquired independence. As a result, India decided to join the Commonwealth as a Republic, not a British colony; not opposing the place of the British Crown in the organisation, but at the same time, not bowing to it. Nehru described it as a "multilateral association for exchange of views", where decisions taken were not binding on its members.⁷ Like all other multilateral institutions and organisations, the Commonwealth has also evolved and redefined itself. India has made a significant contribution to its evolution. The significance of the Commonwealth has been declining for the past decades resulting in the corresponding moderation in India's involvement in its affairs.⁸

Beyond its colonial legacy, India had a vision of the world and its role aspirations in it. This had two dimensions; one of decolonisation and Asian resurgence; and another to resist the spread of military alliances and blocks led by the super powers. Decolonisation and Asian resurgence were important agenda in India's freedom struggle. Nehru, had articulated this in his writings like the **Glimpses of**

⁵ Balasubramanian, Aditya and Srinath Raghavan, "Present at the Creation: India, the global economy and the Bretton Woods Conference", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 29, No.1, March 2018, pp. 65-94.

⁶ Mukherji, Ashok; "Signing the UN Charter, June 26, 1945", Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), June 26, 2021. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=6127&lid=4212.

⁷ For a useful discussion on India's membership of the Commonwealth, see Gopal, Sarvepalli; **Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography**, Volume two: 1947-1956. Oxford University Press, 1079, pp. 47-56.

⁸ Murthy, C.S.R.; "India and the Commonwealth: Redirecting the Relationship" Carnegie, India, April 11, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/04/india-and-the-commonwealth-redirecting-the-relationship?lang=en>.

World History and **The Discovery of India**, written during his imprisonment by the British. During 1950s and 1960s, India initiated and organised several gatherings of the Asian and decolonised countries to concretise its vision of Asian resurgence. Even before gaining formal independence from the British, India's provisional government hosted the Asian Relations Conference from March 23 to April 02, 1947. To project this Conference as a non-political forum, it was organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs where countries as well as independence movements were invited. Its main objective was to "pool ideas and experiences with a view to raising living standards...(to) strengthen cultural, social and economic ties among the people of Asia". The second Asian Relations Conference was held in May 1950 at Baguio, Philippines, but that proved to be the last one. With this also died the idea of institutionalising Asian resurgence as Asian Relations Organisation.⁹ Earlier, India also organised an international conference to support Indonesia's struggle for independence, and mobilised Commonwealth support for Myanmar's (then Burma) post-independence internal peace and stability. An expanded version of Asian resurgence resulted in the convening of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955. India and Indonesia were the principal drivers of this conference. The core principles highlighted at the Conference were political self-determination, respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, non-aggression and equality among nations. The second Afro-Asian Conference was to be held at Algiers in 1965, but it got sabotaged due to the then resurgent Sino-Soviet rivalry.

India's vision of Asian resurgence and solidarity frittered away for a number of factors. This vision, that projected India's leadership in Asia aroused regional rivalries. India had no economic clout to support the needs and requirements of the newly emerged Asian countries. The wars inflicted on India by China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 further tarnished India's image as a rising power in Asia. There were conflicts and tensions among other Asian countries on bilateral and regional issues. No less critical was the role of the Cold War in shattering Asia's solidarity through the creation of new fault-lines and rivalries. Despite its failures, Asia based multilateralism was not without its positive fallout. It instilled a sense of Asian identity among all the participating countries and gave them courage and confidence to raise issues of their concerns at the global level. Nehru and his India also got international recognition. The British Prime Minister Churchill, howsoever grudgingly, called him "The Light of Asia" and said:

It seems to me that you might be able to do what no other human being could, in giving India the lead, at least in the realm of thought, throughout Asia. With the freedom and dignity of the individual as the ideal...¹⁰

India's commitment to non-alignment was an extension of Asian resurgence, rooted in the experience of India's freedom struggle. The nationalist movement was strongly opposed to the use of Indian troops by the British imperial authority in the second World War, that had nothing to do with India. The nationalist movement did not want India to join others wars. India took a lead along with Egypt and Yugoslavia, in transforming the defunct Afro-Asian movement into a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Abstention from any collective security arrangements led by great powers became the core of NAM, initiated in 1956. It had its first Summit in 1961 in Belgrade. It emerged as a major forum of such Asian, African, Latin American and European countries that did not want to join military blocks led by the US and the USSR. The NAM enabled its militarily weak and economically underdeveloped members to acquire collective power to preserve their independence and promote their security and economic interests. Non-Alignment did not mean neutrality on critical global issues. In its annual Summits, NAM also raised issues of peace and conflicts; arms buildup and disarmament; persisting colonial and racial domination, and freedom struggles; economic development through equitable opportunities for trade, investments, technology transfers and mutual cooperation. With 121 members and 27 Observers (Countries and organisations), NAM represents nearly 55% of the world's population and about 2/3rd of the UN membership.

India was not only its founding member but has played a leading role in its deliberations and decisions. The end of the Cold War and near completion of the decolonisation process, have eroded the strategic significance of NAM, but its relevance in international politics, for mobilisation and networking on the issues of war and peace, great power dominance and economic and social

⁹ Appadorai, A. **Asian Relations: Being Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March-April, 1947**. New Delhi, India: Asian Relations Organization. 1948.

¹⁰ As quoted in Gopal, Sarvapalli; **A Biography**; Volume Two. (n.7), pp. 236-237.

development remains. NAM members collectively contributed to many UN initiatives like the establishment of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 and consensus on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015-2030) to push forward the development of developing countries. Underlining the continued relevance of the NAM, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on 20 January 2024 that its principles are convergent with those of the UN.¹¹ India did not receive much of support from NAM members on its concrete security issues like conflicts with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971). But it helped India in its decolonisation agenda and promoted its global engagements on issues of peace and development, both during and in the post-Cold War periods. India also pushed the agenda of peace and development for the “Global South”, a reincarnation of NAM, at powerful gatherings like the G.20 during New Delhi Summit in 2023.¹²

Regional Multilateralism:

The idea of regional multilateralism was also ingrained in India's pre-independence vision of Asian resurgence. Nehru wrote about “Eastern Federation” and “Asian Federation” even before India attained independence:

If there are to be federations...there should be an Eastern Federation, not hostile to the West, but nevertheless, standing on its own feet, self-reliant and joining with all others...must inevitably consist of China and India, Burma and Ceylon, and Nepal and Afghanistan... Malaya... Siam and Iran... That would be a powerful combination of free nations joining together for their own good as well as for the world's good.¹³

Asian Relations Conference and the Afro-Asian Conference were the results of this vision as noted earlier and may be considered as the examples of mega regional multilateralism. India has actively pursued the course of regional multilateralism at various levels and engaged itself with diverse regional groupings and organisations. Some of the important ones are as follows:

1. ASEAN; (initiated in 1967. First Summit in 1976. India joined as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1992, became a full Dialogue Partner in 1995 and a Summit partner in 2002).
2. South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC; initiated in 1980. Established in 1985;).
3. East Asia Summit (EAS; initiated in 1991. Established in 2005).
4. IORA; (Initiated in 1995. Established in 1997).
5. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC; initiated in 1997, Expanded in 2004).
6. Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC; 2000).
7. India-Africa Forum (2008).
8. Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (2014).
9. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO; Established in 2001. India joined as an Observer in 2005 and became a full member in 2017).

All of these groupings cover security and developmental issues. Except in ASEAN and SCO, India has been a founding member of all other groupings and organisations. It is also one of the biggest members in these organisations and retains an unchallenged primacy in SAARC, BIMSTEC, MGC, India-Africa Forum and Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation. The constraints of time and

¹¹ United Nations, “Secretary General’s remark to the non-aligned movement (as delivered)”. < <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-01-20/secretary-generals-remarks-the-non-aligned-movement-delivered>>.

¹² Global Perspective, “Was the G.20 Summit a Turning Point for the Global South”, Global Memo, Council of Councils, September 14, 2023. < <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/was-g20-summit-turning-point-global-south>>.

¹³ Nehru, Jawaharlal; **The Unity of India, Collected Writings 1937-1940**; Lindsay Drummond, 6 Buckingham Street W.C.2 London 1941, p. 327. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.159881/page/n1/mode/2up>. Also see Appadorai (n.9); and Nehru, Jawaharlal; “Inter-Asian Relations”; *India Quarterly*, ICWA, New Delhi, No.11, 1946.

space do not permit a detailed analysis of India's role in all these regional multilateral organisations, but significant aspects of India's participation in them may be underlined.

India's deep-rooted resistance to the Cold War oriented multilateralism has been clearly evident in approaching the regional groupings as well. India was open to joining ASEAN when it was established in 1967. But its US sponsorship (during Vietnam War), anti-Communist orientation, - the communist countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were kept out initially -, was not acceptable to India. India was also not very welcome by the original ASEAN members for being perceived as pro-Soviet. India approached ASEAN in 1980 again, after the US withdrawal from Vietnam war, but India's support for Vietnam on the Cambodian issue did not let ASEAN accept it. It was only after the end of the Cold War, the gradual rise of China, and India's decision to open its economy that ASEAN found strategic and economic value in partnership with India.¹⁴ The Bangladeshi proposal for South Asian grouping was made in 1980 in the background of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. The US was keen to ensure that the South Asian countries collectively resisted the Soviet southward push. India was reluctant to join the Bangladesh proposal as it was made, but it engaged with the process and after five years of difficult diplomatic parleys, SAARC was established. India redefined the Bangladesh initiative by keeping any security aspect out of SAARC and introducing two conditions before letting the group established formally in 1985. These conditions were that (i) bilateral and contentious issues will be kept out of the SAARC agenda and (ii) all decisions will be taken only unanimously. This ensured that the neighbours will not be able to raise their bilateral issues with India on the SAARC table and also that all others would not be able to gang-up against India on any issue. This suited Pakistan and other neighbours of India as well because it gave every one a veto in SAARC decisions and deterred India from dominating the group.¹⁵

In pursuing its core interests in regional multilaterals, security and strategic interests seem to have been accorded primacy without undermining or compromising economic interests. There is a general hesitation on the part of the regional countries including India, on making regional groupings as instruments of traditional military security. Emphasis has been more on non-traditional security measures like counter-terrorism, disaster management, pandemic, maritime security etc. Mobilising support and evolving consensus for counter-terrorism among India's regional colleagues has been evident on India's part, in view of Pakistan's continued cross border terrorism. India has strongly argued to get counter-terrorism in almost every regional agenda, more emphatically in the regions that directly impinge on India's security concerns. In the first SAARC Summit hosted by India in 1986, "SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism" was adopted. It took four years for all the member countries to ratify it, and its implementation was pathetic. To improve the collective action, another "Additional Protocol" was adopted in 2004. Even this has not been able to restrain Pakistan. BIMSTEC was initiated in 1997 as a mutual cooperation organisation to enhance collective economic development. Counter-terrorism and fighting trans-national crimes were added to the agenda at the first Summit in 2004. Since then, India has pushed the widening of the security agenda.¹⁶ In ASEAN and its various forums like IORA, India has been emphasizing counter-terrorism and maritime security -keeping the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) free and uninterrupted.

India's preference is also evident for such regional groupings where its strategic adversaries like Pakistan and China are absent. India has not got actively involved yet, even after nearly 28 years, in China's Kunming initiative to give access to its peripheral Yunnan province to South Asian markets of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh (BCIM). India, however, enthusiastically joined SCO, with the support of Russia, hoping to contain China's primacy in Central Asia. A common feature of India's participation in BIMSTEC, IORA, MGC, India-Africa Forum and Forum for India- Pacific Islands Cooperation, is the absence of China and Pakistan. India is seriously competing for economic and strategic space with China bilaterally in the member countries of all these groups. These groupings,

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra, **India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy**, SAGE Publications, New Delhi, 2019. Pp.126-137; 181-186.

¹⁵ S.D. Muni and Anuradha Muni; **Regional Cooperation in South Asia**, National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984. S.D. Muni, "Building Regionalism From Below", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 25, 1985, pp. 391-404.

¹⁶ Constantino Xavier and Dhruv Banerjee, "BIMSTEC and Security Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal", Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), August 2024. <https://csep.org/blog/bimstec-and-security-cooperation-in-the-bay-of-bengal/>. Also, Sohini Bose, Anusuya Ray Choudhury, Harsh V. Pant; "BIMSTEC on the cusp: Regional Security Focus", Observer Research Foundation, Issue Brief, August 16, 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bimstec-on-the-cusp-regional-security-in-focus>.

along with ASEAN and EAS are also of critical strategic significance to India in the emerging dynamics of the broader Indo-Pacific region. India successfully resisted attempts by Pakistan and other neighbours to make China a full member of SAARC. Frustration with Pakistan has driven India away from SAARC since 2014, and it is only since then that India's active involvement in BIMSTEC has been stepped up in the hope that it can emerge as "an alternative to SAARC".¹⁷ It was to counter Pakistan's propaganda on Kashmir and Islam related issues that India, in vain though, sought membership of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the year 1976, claiming that India represented world's second largest Muslim population.

India's engagement with ASEAN has played a significant role in opening India's economy and integrating it with the global economy. ASEAN is India's major trade and investment partner. It accounts for 11% of India's global trade at present. Encouraged by the growth of its trade, India concluded Free Trade Agreements (FTA) in goods, services and investments between 2009 and 2014. India's imports from ASEAN registered a 234% growth between 2009 and 2023, and its exports grew by 130% during the same period. While the overall trade with ASEAN grew phenomenally, the trade balance tilted adversely for India, its trade deficit jumping from US\$7.5 bn in 2011 to US\$ 44 bn in 2023.¹⁸ As a result, India is seriously working on restoring the balance by revisiting the terms of FTA with ASEAN. India also pulled itself out of trade negotiations from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a group of 15 countries that includes ASEAN plus Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and China. The RCEP group ignored India's repeated pleas for protections and safeguards to insulate itself from the "apprehended surge in imports".¹⁹ India has now become cautious while negotiating FTAs with other countries and groups. It wants all BIMSTEC members to carefully work out their "priorities in trade negotiations" to finalize the much delayed FTA.²⁰ Economic partnership is also the most important dimension of India-Africa Forum. India has joined hands with Japan to counter growing Chinese economic presence in Africa.

There are two broad categories of India's regional multilaterals; one, where India enjoys primacy (such as in SAARC, BIMSTEC, MGC, and Africa and Pacific Islands' Forums), and the other, where India is one of the major players along with other regional influentials (such as in ASEAN, EAS, IORA and SCO). In the former, India drives consensus on key decisions and in the latter, India is driven to the consensus along with the others. India has used these groupings not only for pursuing its interests collectively, but also in exploring and expanding its bilateral relations with the varied members of these groupings. India has mobilised support of many of its regional partners for its move to reform universal multilaterals and secure membership of UNSC and NSG (Nuclear Suppliers Group). There have however, been issues and areas where India's critical concerns have not received expected support and endorsement from these groupings. One such issues has been conflicts with its two major adversaries, Pakistan and China. Whatever support India received on these conflicts from immediate and extended neighbours, was, however, expressed quietly and informally, couched in diplomatic niceties. The second category of regional groups have functioned smoothly but the evolution and development of those of the first category has been tardy and unsatisfactory. For instance, SAARC has moved very slowly and half-heartedly on the questions of collective security, trade and connectivity. It stands paralysed for the past decade. BIMSTEC finalised its Charter only in 2023, and its Vision 2030, has been endorsed at the Bangkok Summit in April 2025. There is a recurring sense of disappointment in Southeast Asia (the ASEAN region) that India has not come up to their expectations either in opening its economy or helping them balance pressures from assertive major powers like China. A survey being conducted by the ISEAS over the years has been showing India at a very low level of strategic and economic relevance among the Southeast Asian nations.²¹

¹⁷ Prabir De; "Accelerating Regional Cooperation in BIMSTEC"; Policy Brief No.5; September 2024, p.1. Research and Information System for the Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi.

<https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/PB-5%20Dr%20Prabir%20De.pdf>.

¹⁸ Soumya Bhowmick and Tanish Paul; "India's Evolving Trade Strategy with ASEAN", Raisina Dialogue, ORF, August 31, 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-s-evolving-trade-strategy-with-asean>.

¹⁹ Foreign Minister Jaishankar at the Asia Society Policy Institute, interview on March 26, 2025.

²⁰ Statement of India's Minister of Commerce and Industry to the BIMSTEC Business leaders in August 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2042535>.

²¹ **The State of Southeast Asia 2024: Survey Report**; ISEAS-YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE, Singapore, 2024. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf>.

Emergence of Minilaterals/ Plurilaterals:

The unsatisfactory outcomes of and experiences with the regional and universal multilateralism led to the spurt in mini- and plurilaterals. India, a strong advocate of reforms and restructuring of the prevailing multilateralism, actively endorsed this new mode, finding it more relevant to advancing its interests and aspirations. These groupings are smaller, of three to five nations based on shared values, interests and concerns. India's experience with the trilaterals goes back to the early 1950s, when it joined hands with the US and Canada to undertake development projects in Nepal. A more energetic and involved Indian approach in this respect is evident in the 21st century. It started with the Russian Prime Minister Primakov's proposal of a "strategic triangle" of Russia, China and India, after initial hesitation, endorsed the initiative with their first meeting of all three in 2002. In 2003, India also joined hands with Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) to coordinate trans-regional responses to the emerging global challenges. Since then, India has forged about a dozen trilaterals.²²

Besides the trilaterals, India is also a member of the trans-regional plurilateral groupings involving more than three partners. The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) between US, Japan, India and Australia, and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are two strategically important groupings. The idea of Quad was inherent in the coordinated response to 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster by these four partners. In the new strategic dynamics of China's assertive rise, the US posture of rebalance in Asia and formation of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic construct, initiative for Quad was taken by Japan in 2007. After initial hiccups and protracted evolution, Quad has been reactivated since 2017, taking much more than traditional security issues on its agenda. "India drove the revived Quad arrangement".²³ BRICS started as an informal get-together in 2006 of four emerging economies Brazil, Russia, China and India (BRIC). The first Summit of these countries was held in 2009 to give it an institutional form. With South Africa joining the group, its name was changed to BRICS. Its objectives have been to restrain the global financial hegemonies by creating an alternative (to the US Dollar) currency exchange mechanism. Its deliberations also cover critical issues of global governance. BRICS has become BRICS+ in 2024, with the addition of five more countries – Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia and the UAE.

In addition to joining trilateral and plurilateral strategic groupings, India has taken initiatives to form issue specific multilateral groups. Notable among them are the International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Relief Infrastructure (CDRI), India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), and the Voice Of Global South Summit (VOGSS). The ISA is a Treaty based grouping. It was jointly initiated by India and France in 2015 during the Climate Change Conference (COP 21) to ensure sustainable solutions for energy access and climate change challenges by expanding solar power generation and use. It is also called International Agency for Solar Policy and Application (InSPA). More than 110 countries have joined the group. The CDRI was forged at the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019. It has more than 40 members, including sovereign states, private businesses and academic institutions. It will work in collaboration with the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. The IMEC initiative was taken during the G.20 Summit meeting in Delhi in September 2023. It proposes to connect India to Europe via the Middle East (West Asia), through sea and land routes for trade and travel. As such, it will be an alternative to the Silk Road being revived by China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The VOGSS is entirely an India initiative, launched before the G.20 Summit of 2023, to raise the concerns of the non-western countries about the emerging global challenges. At the third VOGSS hosted by India in virtual form in August 2024, 123 countries participated. Being an Indian initiative, China and Pakistan were not invited. All these initiatives are still at their initial stages and only time will tell about their real impact and outcome.

It has been noted earlier that the minilaterals and the plurilaterals emerged in response to the flaws and failures of multilateral institutions. They were innovative additions to the global diplomatic tool kit. They do not suffer from the constraints of minimalist consensus decisions, and partial and slow responses to the critical issues. They are focussed, resilient, efficient and result oriented. They seldom have treaty based rigid commitments. The intensely competitive and vibrant Indo-Pacific

²² For a list of India's trilateral mechanisms from 1990s to 2023, see Shairee Malhotra / Thibault Fournol; "India-France Trilaterals in the Indo-Pacific: Imperatives, Interests and Initiatives"; Occasional Paper, ORF, November 20, 2023.

²³ India's Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar makes this claim in his book, **The India Way: Strategies For An Uncertain World**, Harper Collins, India, 2020. P. 14.

region, bereft of any overarching institutional framework, has witnessed a notable surge in the formation of mini- and plurilaterals. IORA, ASEAN and EAS do not comprehensively cover the Pacific and the East Asian regions. The mini- and plurilaterals not only fill the region's institutional vacuum but also provide voice and a sense of participation to the small and aspirational powers in shaping the emerging world order.

For India, the mini- and plurilaterals have been useful diplomatic anchors to deal with the anxieties and uncertainties of a turbulent regional and global environment. They also express India's aspirations of becoming a major global player. The declining commitment and credibility of the US to protect and preserve the world order created under its primacy after the second World War, its intense rivalry with an assertively rising China for hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, and the disruption in economic supply chains resulting not only from the US-China competition, but also from lingering wars between Russia and Ukraine as well as Israel and Palestinians, have generated conflicting pressures on India. The mini- and plurilateral engagements enable India to deal with these contra-pressures. This is evident in India's participation in Quad versus BRICS; RIC versus India-US-Japan; India-Japan-Australia versus India-Iran-Armenia and the like, mechanisms. In his Nanipalkhivala memorial Address on January 18, 2025, India's Minister of External Affairs said:

Though committed to multilateralism, India has also to deal with the reality of greater competition and a deep gridlock in the world. This encourages engagements through issue-based agendas and partnerships. The Quad, BRICS and IMEC are notable examples. But it is actually India's ability to reconcile these memberships that is worth noting.²⁴

Management of such conflicting engagements while navigating through the regional, and global turbulence is also a bold statement of India's traditional strategic autonomy. India has also maintained its well known foreign policy posture of avoiding military alliances and groupings directed against any other country. This was evident in India's participation in Quad, where India has played a key role in broadening its agenda beyond security, to cover all dimensions of development cooperation. India also refused to join Australia-United Kingdom-United States group (AUKUS) because of its intended deployment for military purposes to keep the Indo-Pacific region open and free;

the QUAD and the AUKUS are not groupings of a similar nature and I'll try and qualify that. The QUAD is a plurilateral grouping, you know, group of countries that have a shared vision of their attributes and values. They also have a shared vision of the Indo Pacific region as a free, open, transparent, inclusive region. The QUAD has adopted a positive proactive agenda, with as I said a wide range varied array of initiatives at the global level, to address some of the issues of the day... On the other hand, AUKUS is a security alliance between three countries. We are not party to this alliance. From our perspective, this is neither relevant to the QUAD, nor will it have any impact on its functioning.²⁵

China's aggressive assertiveness in the region and military encroachments in Ladakh and the Himalayan region in 2020 created a serious security situation for India, the impact of which is also reflected in India's approach to mini-and plurilateral engagements. As in other regional multilaterals, India has continued to compete with China for strategic influence and space through mini- and plurilateral groupings. Reactivated Quad, India-Africa Forum and IMEC clearly underline this. The number, nature and depth of these engagements with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region have grown. India has gradually shed off its traditional hesitation for close defence and security relations, including joint military exercises, with the US, its allies, and other countries in the region.²⁶

²⁴ For the text of the address, see; [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38925/Remarks by External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar at Nani Palkhivala Memorial Lecture India and the World](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38925/Remarks_by_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_Nani_Palkhivala_Memorial_Lecture_India_and_the_World).

²⁵ See the text of foreign secretary's press conference on September 21, 2024. [https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/34292/Transcript of Foreign Secretarys special briefing on Prime Ministers visit to USA](https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/34292/Transcript_of_Foreign_Secretarys_special_briefing_on_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_USA).

²⁶ Keerthii, "India's Military Diplomacy: Exploring Opportunities and Cooperation in Hard Power", THE GEOSTRATA, March 04, 2025. <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/india-s-military-diplomacy-exploring-opportunities-and-cooperation-in-hard-power>. Also, Atul Kumar, "India's Defence Diplomacy: A strategic Response to China in the Modi Years"; Issue Briefs, September 23, 2024, Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-s-defence-diplomacy-a-strategic-response-to-china-in-the-modi->

Expanding such relations have however, been done ostensibly on bilateral basis so as not to blemish its known stance of keeping away from military groupings. By pairing with some of the U.S. allies like Japan, Australia and France, India is reaching out to third countries in the region for development and strategic cooperation in the framework of minilaterals. There are signs of thaw in India-China bilateral relations of late. Their military standoff in the Himalayas has been resolved and they are working to normalise their relations. It remains to be seen as to how and to what extent, this may tone down the intensity of contested spaces and encourage areas of convergence between the two even in their respective multilateral engagements.

Appraisal:

India's approach to multilateralism has kept pace with evolution and innovations in the phenomenon at the global level. Three broad dimensions of this approach may be identified namely; (i) Continuing commitment, (ii) Reforms, restructuring and activation, and (iii) Innovation and search for new forms. Throughout the changes in multilateralism from its universal to regional to mini- and plurilateral forms, India has not wavered in its overall commitment to the traditional multilaterals. In India's perception, "bipolarity or unipolarity is a distortion", but "multipolarity is norm".²⁷ This is the basic form of democratic global governance. India's active involvement in universal and broad-based multilateral institutions and groupings like the United Nations and Non-Aligned Summits, despite disenchantment with the way the UN functions in critical areas and India's non-aligned foreign policy, underlines its persisting commitment to seeking multilateral solutions of global problems. Addressing the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on February 24, 2025, foreign minister Dr. Jaishankar said:

We firmly believe that in these times the world needs all of us together. Multilateralism is more essential than ever, but not in the current form. There is a clear and urgent need for multilateral system that reflects contemporary global realities, one that is better equipped to respond to modern challenges and in essence, that is fit for purpose. The past few years have explored the stark inadequacies of existing multilateral structures. When the world needed them, they were found wanting.

This is a clear articulation of India's position on continuing commitment and need for reforms in the prevailing multilateralism. India has consistently been for reform and restructuring in the United Nations. It has vigorously pursued the UNSC reforms since the end of 1990s in collaboration with other aspiring powers like Japan, Germany, Brazil and South Africa, and even compromised on the issue of veto right for the new permanent members. In reforming the UN systems and organs, India has pleaded for revitalisation and empowering of the UN General Assembly, democratisation of IMF and World Bank decision making and equal opportunities for trade and developmental financing through the WTO. At the "UN Summit of the Future" on September 23, 2024, Prime Minister Modi said: "...for global peace and development, reforms in global institutions are essential. Reform is the key to relevance". An aspiring India wants a seat at the high decision-making tables in global governance like in the UNSC and the NSG. India has also tried to reform and broaden multilateral groupings and organisations of global governance outside the UN like G.20, and BRICS. During New Delhi Summit of G.20, India facilitated the membership of African Union to strengthen the role of Global South. VOGSS is also an instrument of democratisation of global governance. India's efforts to innovate and search for new multilateral systems is clearly manifest in its active participation in mini-and plurilateral groupings.

India's approach to multilateralism has also kept pace with its changing core interests and capabilities. As a weak and underdeveloped new nation, it looked towards the UN for its security and development. With the gaining of confidence and disappointed by the UN on its security concerns like in Kashmir, India pushed for reforms in the UN and also sent the UN Military Observer Group in Kashmir back home in 1972. As a militarily weak nation, India raised the question of disarmament at the UN but it defied the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), by developing its own nuclear weapons capability. India

[years](#). Chunhao Lou, "U.S.-India defense cooperation: progress, motivations and constraints", *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 6, November 08, 2024, pp. 305-318.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-024-00167-4>.

²⁷ Foreign Minister Dr. Jaishankar at an Asia Society Policy Institute conversation in New Delhi on March 26, 2025.

supported Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace in 1974, but it is now actively pursuing diverse military equations to ensure that the Indian Ocean is an open and free region. Mini- and plurilateral groupings have diversified and fragmented multilateralism. The challenge to knit them together to facilitate the emergence of a more homogenous, just and stable world order remains. It is hoped that India will have necessary confidence and capabilities to make a positive contribution in meeting this challenge.
