Regionalisation: A Better Strategy in a Post-Pandemic World?

VINITHA REVI

ABSTRACT The coronavirus pandemic has forced nation states to shut down borders and to look decidedly inwards. In this newly emerging and highly tenuous global political economic landscape, a question that is being widely debated is what globalisation will look like in a post-pandemic world. This brief ponders the question in the context of India and its neighbourhood. Revisiting theoretical insights from 'New Regionalism', this analysis examines whether regionalisation may be a better strategy for India as it tries to achieve its foreign policy and development goals in an increasingly fragile and uncertain world.

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic is reordering the world in dramatic ways, and globalisation is being exposed as highly vulnerable and fragile, particularly in times of crises—should India embrace regionalisation[a] as an alternative to development?

Achieving successful regionalisation has long been an elusive goal for India and its immediate neighbourhood. Despite the occasional resurgence of regionalism rhetoric and scattered scholarship on the subject, India has yet to truly succeed in integrating its neighbourhood in any meaningful way. To be sure, every government that comes to power in India proclaims a neighbourhood focus and flags specific policies towards such end. These efforts, however, eventually face challenges and get delayed, or altogether abandoned for various reasons. Pakistan is often assigned the blame for holding regionalisation efforts hostage.[1] Faced with a sense of familiar frustration,[2] the Indian government then moves its focus onto more distant neighbourhoods.

However, as many policy analysts are either proclaiming that "globalization is heading to the ICU"[3] or considering whether "the pandemic has the potential to end globalization as we know it?"[4]—this seems a judicious time for India to consider a regional outlook among other alternatives for achieving its development and foreign policy goals.

Regional integration in India's immediate neighbourhood remains a pipe-dream, given geopolitical considerations. It would be useful to think of regional integration and regional cooperation as two ends of a spectrum. At a time when globalisation is "coming unwound",[5] India needs to take the step of embracing a regional outlook and fostering regional cooperation, while acknowledging that regional integration remains a far-away goal fraught with difficulties.

Given Europe's misadventures with regional integration, there is also the question of whether it is even an entirely desirable goal, to begin with. Embedded in this outlook is a deep acknowledgment that the globalisation project is failing, and has been for some time now. As the great powers are barely willing to agree on anything, and international organisations are struggling to coordinate common goals and strategies, "the underlying anarchy of global governance is being exposed."[6]

The following questions are pertinent: What has the COVID-19 crisis taught us about globalisation? Could a regional approach now prove more beneficial? If regionalisation has never fully succeeded in India's neighbourhood, why would it work

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a   Regionalisation refers to processes that take place within a region that leads to cooperation and/or integration. These can be regional projects, regional activities and regional engagements of various types.

now? Looking ahead, can the ideas and emerging perspectives under the theoretical framework 'New Regionalism' be revisited and applied to India's efforts in a post-pandemic world, and if so, what would it look like?

LESSONS FROM COVID-19

The Fragility of Global Supply Chains

One of the biggest lessons in the ongoing pandemic is that global supply chains and distribution networks are highly susceptible to disruption. While this may not be a particularly new insight, the scale and impact of Covid's fallout has forced a rethinking of the merits of globalisation not only among businesses, but analysts as well. The fragility of global supply chains is no longer a theoretical argument. Chief Economist at the IMF, Gita Gopinath notes, "In future, these firms are likely to take greater account of tail risks, resulting in supply chains that are more local and robust—but less global."[7]

American economist and Nobel Laureate, Joseph E. Stiglitz critiques global supply chains for their inefficiency. He argues that in order to put in place "seemingly efficient supply chains, we searched the world over for the lowest cost producer of every link in the chain."[8] Globalisation, in its singularly narrow pursuit of profits has created a system that is "plainly not resilient, insufficiently diversified, and vulnerable to interruptions."[9]

Political scientists, Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, similarly consider "just-in-time" supply chains that rely on distribution networks which deliver products just hours before they are used, in order to reduce the cost of paying for warehouses.[10] The emphasis here is on having low inventories, if any. This rationale was popularised by Apple CEO, Tim Cook, and his disdain for inventory; the famous dictum goes: "inventory is fundamentally evil". However, as Farrell and Newman explain, "in the midst of a global pandemic, just-in-time can easily become too late."[11]

Hard Borders and Centrality of States

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inherent vulnerabilities of an interconnected and interdependent global political economy. More crucially, it has shaken the theoretical pillars on which globalisation was founded. Globalisation advocates for global manufacturing networks and multi-country supply chains, where each step of the value chain is allocated to a country and guided by the logic of competitive advantage. Such production networks depend on a system in which transportation costs are cheap and products can travel freely and quickly across borders. What COVID-19 has proven is that these networks can shatter as soon as states shut down their borders.

In times of crises, borders suddenly matter, and COVID-19 has demonstrated that the ultimate decision on whether borders remain open or closed, hard or soft, rests on states. Indeed, states are key players in shaping the 'liberal international order' which has proven to be neither liberal nor international, nor able to guarantee order,

as witnessed in recent years by the financial crisis of 2008,[b] or more recently, the Sino-American trade war.[c] The liberal order is, in fact, "*systemically fragile*"[12] and characterised by hard borders and the centrality of states. As some countries hold on tightly to their own supplies of face masks and medical equipment, and others struggle to source supplies, it is further clear that states are ultimately driven by their self-interests, narrowly defined.

The Dark Side of Globalisation

In some ways the pandemic has only underscored aspects of the international system that have long been established. The 'dark side of globalisation'[13] has been the subject of sustained research by International Relations and International Political Economy (IPE) scholars. Debates within the theoretical perspectives of 'New Regionalism' and 'Critical IPE' have been consistent in calling attention to the uneven and exploitative nature of globalisation.[14]

Developing countries that provide much of the cheap labour that has buttressed globalisation face overwhelmingly unfair barriers when it comes to their own exports.

International organisations have also been called out for their "dysfunctionality"[15] because they are not seen as either reflecting the changing power balances, or addressing the fallouts of an interconnected world.

The dark side of globalisation has vaguely been paid lip service to, but largely ignored in policy circles so far. What COVID-19 has done is to expose more visibly many of its faultlines; putting it under a spotlight and giving decision-makers cause for thought. Whether this pause on globalisation is merely rhetorical or whether it will translate into policy, however, remains to be seen. Or will it be the case as Winston Churchill once said, that man "occasionally had stumbled over the truth, but hastily picked himself up and hurried on as if nothing had happened."[16]

Notwithstanding the tendency towards cynicism, it is important to ask, given the pause for concern and a search for alternatives, could regionalisation present an exciting possibility for India and its neighbourhood? More importantly, given that regionalisation has proved difficult for India's neighbourhood, why should it be assumed that it could work now?

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b   The Financial crisis of 2007–08 originated in the US as a subprime mortgage crisis but very quickly developed into a worldwide crisis triggering bankruptcies and cross-border banking collapses that had a massive impact on several major investment and commercial banks, mortgage lenders and insurance companies. It highlighted the vulnerability of the international financial system.

c   Under Donald Trump, the US imposed tariffs on Chinese products with the aim to encourage consumers to buy American products. China retaliated with tariffs of its own on US products. Several rounds of tariffs were imposed in 2018 and 2019.

WHY REGIONALISATION AND WHY NOW?

Political contexts shape economic systems. Regional integration arguments first emerged in Europe after the Second World War.[17] Integration was seen as a way to escape a state-centric international order and the overwhelming distrust that accompanied it. The political context was one of deep scepticism towards the nation state and the belief that liberal international institutions are necessary to establish peace and stability; that left to themselves, nation states, deeply suspicious of each other, would head into conflict. Europe, having been ravaged by two wars, was politically ready to embrace regionalisation.

The second wave of regional activity grew in the mid-1980s as a direct response to bipolar conflict, seen again as a way to mitigate superpower rivalry. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and consequently the collapse of Communism as an ideology, the new political environment gave way to globalisation which thrived in the changed context.[18]

Today the political context seems once again apposite for regionalisation. There is an observable and global rise of populism and an emphasis on domestic priorities the world over. Economic nationalism is being embraced by several governments with Donald Trump's *America First*, Boris Johnson's *Get Brexit Done,* even Narendra Modi's *Make in India* among these. Pre-Covid, governments had already begun to shut off their economies from the rest of the world. There is an ideological backlash, a slant, even if not a total shift away from globalisation. In the developing world this has been due to the visible unevenness of the benefits of globalisation.

In the developed world, particularly the UK and the US, this has translated into a political backlash felt acutely by their politicians and political leaders. Large sections of these populations have been feeling disenfranchised and excluded from the prosperity and high growth rates that their economies and elites have disproportionately benefitted from. It has been observed that the American population "has lost faith in globalisation and international trade."[19]

Post-pandemic, these trends will likely get accentuated, and as India's Former National Security Adviser (NSA) Shiv Shankar Menon predicts, all states will turn inwards: "We are headed for a poorer, meaner, smaller world."[20] At the same time, he points out, India has "shown good sense and hope" in convening South Asian leaders together to craft a common regional response.

Self-reliance and Globalisation: Finding a Balance

Stiglitz recommends that as the world turns inwards, a balance must be sought between self-reliance and globalisation.[21] Could regionalisation be that balance for India? With the recent border problems in

Galwan,[d] India's motivation to build closer ties with its neighbours to establish a stable neighbourhood should be stronger than ever. Both politically, internationally and even regionally, this seems the time to revisit and strengthen regionalisation efforts.

As the western world turns inwards looking to protect their own industries, India needs better alternatives to globalisation. There is perhaps only a small window of opportunity for these alternatives to be vigorously sought. If it misses the boat in creating more stable and sustainable alternatives, then India will need to seriously ask itself if it is indeed willing to trade in a US-centric globalisation for what inevitably looks like a China-centric one.[22]

REVISITING 'NEW REGIONALISM'

New Regionalism emerged as a set of theoretical ideas and debates in the early 2000s. The goal was to reflect the new and perennially changing international context that was not adequately accounted for in earlier regionalism literature that followed the Second World War. New Regionalism debates focused on various aspects of globalisation and regionalisation: some theorists emphasised the diversity and plurality of relationships,[23] others compared and contrasted the two processes,[24] still others believed regionalisation could be the appropriate response to what they saw as the dysfunctional nature of globalisation.[25] In contrast, many also believed regionalisation was equally problematic because it merely reinforced the detrimental effects of globalisation; however, they admitted it had the potential to transcend these issues and eventually contribute to social regulation, social control and development.[26]

These ideas began to take root in India (both within policy discussions and academic literature) in the mid-2000s as regionalisation initiatives through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) faced challenges, stalled, simply failed and/or produced mixed results. New Regionalism helped in assessing the regionalisation process that it saw as decidedly complicated, multidimensional, highly uneven, heterogenous, and also revealing existing power relations.

Since then, explicitly and implicitly, rethinking regional efforts in India's neighbourhood has been underpinned by New Regionalism arguments particularly those advocating sub-regional and trans-regional initiatives as a way of navigating the challenges involved in pursuing regionalism through SAARC.[27] Revisiting the following arguments provides a possible framework for India as a balance is sought between globalisation and self-reliance.

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d This refers to border skirmishes in the Galwan Valley between Indian and Chinese soldiers that took place in June 2020.

Beyond trade and economics: Earlier arguments for regionalism were narrowly focused on economic integration and preferential trade agreements. In contrast, New Regionalism considers different kinds of regionalism appropriate for different regions. Its focus is less on integration and more on cooperation. Professor of European Integration, Thomas Christiansen argues that regional integration describes what is happening in Europe, whereas regional cooperation is the category that best captures the regional phenomenon in the rest of the world.[28]

Keeping the concepts of 'regional cooperation' and 'regional integration' as analytically distinct helps in seeing them as two ends of a spectrum. The goal is to move from cooperation to integration, while at every stage evaluating different kinds of integration and its appropriateness for the region in question. As the vulnerabilities of the Eurozone and its financial integration strategy are becoming increasingly clear, it is important for India and its neighbours to carefully consider what will work for its region. Integration efforts need to benefit from more creative thinking. It needs to consider and push forward other kinds of integration appropriate to the urgent needs of the neighbourhood such as integration of infrastructure and transportation networks, integration of energy policies, a possible common strategy for energy efficiency and the pursuit of renewables.

Plurality of actors and processes: New Regionalism takes into account a broad set of actors and processes that operate at various levels including the local, regional and global. These include NGOs, social movements, businesses, media, informal sector, and other non-state actors and processes –all of which it reckons has agency, albeit in varying degrees.[29]

During the Eurozone crisis,[e] an ugly narrative of national stereotyping was perpetuated by many media outlets who portrayed the northern Europeans as hard-working and law abiding, while their southern counterparts were seen as lazy and profligate. This had huge implications on the public's understanding of the crisis in terms of what caused it and who was responsible, as well as their expectation and trust in European institutions and their effectiveness. It also has larger, long-term implications for European integration and identity.

Media coverage therefore can shape the public's understanding, raise their concerns, reinforce their prejudices; these in turn can have deep long-term implications for regionalisation efforts. In India and in neighbouring countries, media coverage has disproportionately focused on India-Pakistan rivalry as the reason for holding

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e   The Eurozone Crisis refers to the European Debt crisis that has affected the European Union since 2009, particularly the weaker member states of Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and Ireland.

back regionalisation in the neighbourhood.

However, in theory, regionalisation can carry on through sub-regional as well as trans-regional networks, for instance even if India and Pakistan refuse to cooperate with one another. Regional initiatives with India's other neighbours such as Maldives and Sri Lanka should not in theory be held back by hostility in India-Pakistan relations. Consciously considering a range of non-state actors and processes will unearth their potential as drivers of regionalisation.

Importance of International and (Extra-) Regional Environment: Conditions for regionalism, while peculiar to the region, are also tied to the international political setting and structure, and these are always changing. Theorists studying Europe in the 1950s tended to ignore the external and international environment and focused narrowly on endogenous conditions necessary for regionalism. This suggested that regions are in some way insulated from their external environment.

New Regionalism, however, pays specific attention to the driving forces and political motivations at all levels—domestic, regional and international. Consequently, regionalisation processes are seen as being simultaneously inside-out, and outside-in. India needs to consider in particular the impact of the extra-regional environment, where the driving force and political motivation can come from the presence of extra-regional players, such as a China that has decidedly risen or a US with unclear shifting priorities.

The return of the political: New Regionalism sees regionalisation processes as inherently political. These do not occur naturally, and have to be encouraged politically. Ultimately politics and political will matter more. Regionalisation goals will succeed depending on "the degree of political will to subordinate narrow national interests in the short term to achieve regional gains over the long term that benefit all members."[30]

India's Former Ambassador to Afghanistan and Bhutan, and author of *Regional Integration and How Neighbours Converge*, I P Khosla points out, "It does appear that the current Modi government believes in South Asia and in SAARC. They have shown this more than once, first with the inauguration, then the South Asia satellite and also now with the video conference for COVID-19. These efforts need to be taken further by people at the highest levels, first by constantly reemphasising SAARC, reiterating that regional problems must be solved through a regional approach, and second, there should be more stress on the importance of the South Asian neighbourhood to Asia and to the world."[31]

LOOKING AHEAD: A REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR INDIA

Less ambitious, more achievable: Economist and author of *Regional Integration and Development*, Percy S. Mistry, reminds us that, "first generation regional integration arrangements proved that overly ambitious integration attempts – that took no account of economic, political and social realities – were recipes for failure."[32] Therefore, a

framework for regionalisation for India's neighbourhood should be realistic and achievable.

Ambassador Khosla says, "India should focus on spill-over effects which occur when limited steps are taken towards integration goals, this happens when the success of the initial steps cannot succeed without further steps and in this way goals can grow. There is an expansive logic at play here, as one or two initiatives work, it will spur others on. However, this is far from automatic, they need strong political resolve and consistent attention to succeed."[33] In this regard, India pursuing sub-regionalism when regionalism proves challenging seems a step in the right direction.

Sustainability Goals: Globalisation with its narrow focus on low-cost models bargained away other costs, namely social and environmental. In pursuing regionalisation goals in its neighbourhood, India needs to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not remain an elusive concept. SDGs are not just a priority but an imperative for many of India's smaller neighbours, particularly the small island developing states (SIDS) such as Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius.

The Seychelles, for instance, has been internationally applauded for its efforts at developing and implementing its Sustainable Blue Economy (BE) Strategy, a multi-sector integrated framework for development which its government adopted in 2015.[34] It

has shown great innovation and commitment with its debt-for-nature swap, marine spatial planning initiative, and renewable energy projects. Particularly noteworthy is the solar power project on Cousin Island, which is now fully powered by the sun.

However, the impact of COVID-19 on the Seychelles' BE strategy as a result of travel bans and the widespread shutdown of the travel industry has been crippling, and the country is now desperately looking for funding and partnership. As India tries to put meat on its climate change identity, coming together with the SIDS and pursuing a common regional Blue Economy Strategy is something worth considering.

Sovereignty matters, but does it really? Professor of Political Science, Giovanni Barbieri, argues that it is often ignored that "in Asia, sovereignty preservation concerns prevail over supranational integration and regional security considerations."[35] Asian regionalism, he believes, is filled with sovereignty concerns, which translates into the adoption of generally shared consensual decision-making procedures and a strong preference towards non-binding institutional outcomes.[36]

This argument can be applied to regionalism in India's immediate and extended neighbourhood. Sovereignty concerns and consensual decision-making have stalled several projects. In contrast, Chinese projects in India's neighbourhood appear to face none of these obstacles and

are proceeding without delay despite several sovereignty concerns being highlighted both in potential and ongoing projects.

Before creating a framework for regionalism, India needs to ask itself: When compared to China, why does it find itself constantly faced with implementation problems and inordinate delays? Is India going its furthest in terms of what it can offer its smaller neighbours? While China's growing footprint in the neighbourhood is causing insecurities for India, it is important for India to pause and closely consider whether China's model is one that India would like to imitate and whether it is in fact enviable for goals of partnership and development.

CONCLUSION

Though New Regionalism does consider a range of non-state actors and processes, there is an implicit underlining focus on state-driven regionalism that continues to demand a great deal of attention –what some refer to as a "legitimate and relevant focus on states."[37] For regionalisation to get off the ground, it is clear it needs a state-driven framework.

Ambassador Khosla points out that, "political realism stipulates the most powerful regional power has to lead the way, such as Brazil in Mercosur, America in NAFTA, Germany and France in EU."[38] India therefore must lead the way in pursuing regional initiatives in its neighbourhood. It is further imperative that these efforts do not reinforce the exploitative and hegemonic aspects of globalisation. For this, it must go back to principles outlined in the 'Gujral Doctrine.'[f]

Coming together to convene a regional strategy should involve India giving its neighbours chances, resources, opportunities and opportunities for influence, that they do not possess or have access to, as individual countries. For India, rather than competing with (or imitating) China, which is not really within India's capacity to do, regionalisation should be seen as the better strategy to incentivise its neighbours and bring them closer to India and to put in place a more stable, sustainable and long-term development plan for the neighbourhood. ORF

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f   The Gujral Doctrine refers to a set of principles outlined by India's former Prime Minister I K Gujral (when he was Foreign Minister) to guide foreign policy in India's neighbourhood. Principally these included sovereign equality, non-interference and non-reciprocal magnanimity when engaging its smaller neighbours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vinitha Revi is an independent researcher who contributes to ORF, Chennai.

ENDNOTES

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