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**Subregional Security
Cooperation: An Exploratory
Study of India's Approach**

K. YHOME



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K. YHOME

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. Yhome is Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation (ORF). Yhome has a PhD and an MPhil from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and an MA (Political Science) from Hyderabad Central University. He is the author of *Myanmar: Can the Generals Resist Change?*

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ABSTRACT

Subregional economic cooperation has become a prioritised agenda in India's neighbourhood policy. Policymakers and scholars increasingly conceptualise subregions in the neighbourhood to promote economic and connectivity cooperation. However, the subregional notion is rarely discussed in the context of security cooperation. This raises an important question regarding the subregional approach, or its lack thereof, in building security cooperation in India's neighbourhood. Analysing two cases, this paper argues that while India's subregional approach to security cooperation has gained currency in recent years, the idea is yet to crystallise and remains under-discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

As India prioritises its immediate neighbourhood under its “Neighbourhood First” policy, subregional cooperation has emerged as an important approach, particularly in the area of cross-border connectivity.¹ The neighbourhood remains India’s “highest priority, with a focus on creating mutually beneficial, people-oriented, regional frameworks for stability and prosperity.”² India is currently a member of several subregional forums to promote transnational economic and connectivity cooperation, including the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative; the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC); the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor; and the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC).³

However, unlike the subregional projects for economic cooperation, policymakers and scholars rarely discuss security cooperation in ‘subregional’ terms. Much of the current policy debates and discussions on India’s security cooperation with its neighbours are framed within bilateral and regional frameworks.⁴ This paper explores the linkage between subregional and security cooperation to understand whether India’s security cooperation has a subregional dimension, especially in the context of the country’s *neighbourhood approach*. Security cooperation at the subregional level may provide new perspectives in understanding emerging security dynamics. The paper argues that while India’s security cooperation with its neighbours has a subregional dimension, the idea is still evolving.

'SUBREGIONAL COOPERATION': CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Since 'subregions' are constructed, like regions, their boundaries tend to overlap. International Relations (IR) literature does not have a clear definition of the concept of 'subregion' (or 'subregional'). For the purpose of this study, the author provides a working definition based on insights from Barry Buzan's concept of "regional security complex," which is defined as "a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, de-securitisation, or both, are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another."⁵ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's notion of "subcomplex" captures the "overlap" between security dynamics at the subregions and security interdependence, such that the "interplay" of "the two cannot be disentangled" at the subregional level.⁶

In the Indian context, subregional security complexes or "subcomplexes" involve parts of the country and a group of immediate neighbours.⁷ For instance, the security dynamics of some northern Indian states are interlinked with Bhutan and Nepal; and the security concerns of Northeastern states of India are connected with Bangladesh and Myanmar, owing to cross-border illegal migration, ethnic conflicts, gunrunning, narcotics, smuggling and other cross-border issues. At the same time, most of these security concerns do not have direct implications for other parts of India or other immediate neighbours. Similarly, the impact of the ethnic conflict involving Tamils was more profound in Southern India and Sri Lanka. As Barry Buzan's concept notes, security is "clustered in certain geography" and security concerns "do not travel well over distances." Therefore, just as regions are regarded as "mini-systems" of the international system, subregions may be regarded as mini-systems of regional systems. This paper employs the notion of subregion as "a small

group of three or more geographically adjoining nations involving all or part of their territory share a common ecological system with interconnected development and security sphere.”⁸

Over the years, elements of security cooperation have been added as “priority areas” in some of the existing subregional initiatives in India’s neighbourhood. Much of these originated with an economic focus, such as BIMSTEC. Security cooperation shares certain elements with subregional economic cooperation, such as the participating member-states in security cooperation at the subregional level. While economic logic drives subregional economic-oriented cooperation, subregional security cooperation is driven by security-related interests, such as counterterrorism and transnational crimes. However, economic and security subregions do not always share the same boundaries. As analysed in later sections of this paper, there are some alignments in the boundaries between the two, but the boundaries of security subregional cooperation are not fixed. This, in turn, affects the creation and effectiveness of subregional security cooperation.

The evolution of India’s subregional approach to security cooperation can be traced back to the 1990s, when subregional initiatives to promote economic cooperation began to emerge. One of the first subregional security initiatives was the biennial multilateral naval exercise, MILAN (literally, “coming together”) hosted by the Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal. The first exercise was held in 1995, with participation from Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It aimed to discuss common concerns by sharing views and ideas amongst the navies. Over the years, the MILAN exercise has evolved into a much bigger event involving several nations other than India’s neighbours.⁹ However, the exercise

initially began as a subregional naval exercise involving India's four maritime neighbours. As the Spokesperson of Indian Navy Captain, D.K. Sharma, observes, "From an event of sub-regional context, Milan has now grown into a prestigious international event and encompasses participation by maritime forces from not just the Bay of Bengal and South East Asia but the larger Indian Ocean Region (IOR)." ¹⁰

This paper has selected BIMSTEC and the Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security (TCMS) as case studies, because both the groupings have initiated security dialogues and their nature of cooperation covers both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao has outlined a few broad areas of cooperation regarding the maritime dimensions of India's foreign policy, specifically on naval cooperation in the neighbourhood. India's subregional security cooperation has evolved over the years but remains largely focused on these issues, which include "[c]apacity building, training, equipment and vessel supply... [with the aim to] build a common vision of maritime security, conflict prevention, the unhindered passage of trade, counterterrorism and piracy, disaster prevention and humanitarian relief, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, in a balanced and inclusive manner that safeguards these regional and global commons." ¹¹

For the purpose of this study, "security" is defined in its broadest sense that encompasses traditional security cooperation, including military exercises and assistance to capacity-building as well as non-traditional security cooperation such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, counterterrorism and transnational crime.

INDIA'S SUBREGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION: CASE STUDIES

BIMSTEC Security Cooperation

The Bay of Bengal grouping emerged in the late 1990s, with a primary focus on economic cooperation amongst the key littorals. When it first came into being in June 1997, through the Bangkok Declaration, the grouping was named Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand–Economic Cooperation (BIST–EC). When Myanmar joined the organisation later that year, it was renamed BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). In 2004, its membership further expanded to include Nepal and Bhutan, and the grouping got its current name: Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, or BIMSTEC.

The idea of creating a subregional grouping of the Bay originated from Thailand,¹² which wanted to include cooperation in the security sector. However, on India's insistence, the grouping confined itself to economic and cultural sectors.¹³ Since its inception, BIMSTEC has been a sector-driven cooperative organisation, with six sectors identified for cooperation, namely, trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries. In 2008, BIMSTEC expanded its sectoral cooperation to include agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counterterrorism, environment, culture, people-to-people contact and climate change.

While the title of the Bangkok Declaration had no mention of “subregional,” the text clearly states that the initiative aims “to promote *subregional cooperation* in areas of *trade, investment, technological, exchange and other interrelated areas ...*” [emphasis added].¹⁴ The document has used the term “subregional/subregion”

in several instances, and the grouping continues to call itself a “subregional organisation.”¹⁵ Thus, BIMSTEC is clearly a subregional project, which establishes an important aspect of this study. The other dimension of interest for this study is: What role has India played in forging security cooperation in the BIMSTEC subregional grouping?

The Bay of Bengal subregion has gone through a full circle, from an “interconnected strategic space” during the British Raj to a “space divided” throughout the Cold War period. By the turn of the century, the Bay began to re-emerge as a strategic space, as a result of India’s rise and its eastward drive under the “Look East” Policy of the 1990s.¹⁶ Scholars have argued that the emerging security dynamics re-defining the Bay as “a coherent space” is imperative for India.¹⁷ The first time a security-related concern featured on the BIMSTEC agenda was at the Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in Delhi in 2000, when India raised the issue of terrorism.¹⁸ Three years later, the first BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok, on 31 July 2004, stated in its declaration that member states:

Express grave concern at the continuing threat of international terrorism and transnational crime [and] recognize that the solidarity and friendship existing among member states could be utilized as a basis to counter this threat; agree, as an urgent priority, to co-ordinate [...] efforts to combat this menace, including through the exchange of information among concerned agencies, and other concrete programmes of co-operation, and resolve to continue active co-operation in ongoing efforts of the international community in combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, by whosoever it is perpetrated irrespective of its cause of stated rationale.¹⁹

The meeting agreed to set up a BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism and Transnational Crimes' (JWC-CTTC). Six sub-groups working on a specific aspect of CTTC cooperation were also set up.²⁰ At the second BIMSTEC Summit held in Delhi in November 2008, members finalised the BIMSTEC Convention on "Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking," which was signed in 2009.²¹ The Convention has been ratified by all member states, with Bhutan becoming the last member to do so on 6 February 2020.²² At the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in August 2018, leaders reiterated that "terrorism continues to pose a serious threat to peace and stability [...] and reaffirm [...] strong commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and agree to taking appropriate measures in this regard."²³ BIMSTEC's leaders further urged member states to sign another legal instrument—BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters—"that proposes, among others, the provision for taking measures to locate, freeze and forfeit or confiscate any funds or finances meant for the financing of all criminal acts in the territory of either party."²⁴

At the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat held in Goa in October 2016, leaders of the subregional grouping called "for urgent measures to counter and prevent the spread of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization" and expressed their "determination to take concrete measures to step up cooperation and coordination among [...] law enforcement, intelligence and security organisations."²⁵ A few months later, BIMSTEC set up a new security dialogue mechanism, coordinated at the level of the National Security Advisers (NSA). Its first meeting was hosted by India on 21 March 2017, which focused on developing a common legal and institutional framework in the BIMSTEC subregion for countering terrorism and transnational

crimes. To promote and encourage security dialogue amongst BIMSTEC's strategic community, the meeting decided to establish a Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum. The second and third meetings of the NSA-level were held in Dhaka on 28 March 2018²⁶ and Bangkok on 21 March 2019, respectively.²⁷ BIMSTEC security cooperation was taken to a new level when the subregional member-states conducted the first-ever military exercise in September 2018. India hosted the weeklong drill, with the primary aim of enhancing cooperation in dealing with the challenge of terrorism in the subregion.²⁸ Nepal was the only member state that did not participate.²⁹

Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security

Several years after BIMSTEC added security-related issues in its agenda, another subregional security cooperation was launched in October 2011: the Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security (TCMS) between India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The initiative used the term "trilateral" instead of "subregional," but it can be argued that a trilateral maritime security cooperation involving Sri Lanka and the Maldives is indeed a subregional project, since both nations are India's maritime neighbours. While the official documents³⁰ do not mention the originator of the idea, from all accounts,³¹ the trilateral maritime security cooperation was an Indian initiative. From Delhi's perspective, the trilateral initiative became a strategic imperative in the context of China's growing footprints in the Indian Ocean. As some scholars argue, Delhi has been wary of its closest maritime neighbours, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, "moving closer to China (and Pakistan),"³² prompting it "to consider the implications for its own maritime security."³³ At the same time, the other member states had strong reasons to join the

TCMS. According to one account, Sri Lanka joined the initiative as part of its balancing policy between major powers, a decision that has been interpreted as policy “correction.”³⁴

The trilateral maritime security grouping is coordinated at the National Security Adviser (NSA)-level and is the highest decision-making body. The NSA-level meetings review the progress made in the implementation of areas agreed upon by the three countries. Below the NSA-level is the Working Groups-level, comprising officials and technical experts from all the three countries, which are tasked with the responsibility of executing joint activities in the identified areas and exploring new areas of cooperation. The first NSA-level trilateral meeting was held in the Maldivian capital, Male, on 1 October 2011. However, substantive progress in terms of agreement reached on areas of cooperation amongst the member-states happened only during the second NSA-level trilateral meeting, which took place in Colombo on 8 July 2013. An “Outcome Document” released after the meeting states: “...the three countries agreed on a roadmap for cooperation on maritime security.”³⁵ Further, the meeting “agreed to explore the possibility of expanding the scope of the trilateral initiative to include other Indian Ocean littoral countries.” In 2012, the biannual India–Maldives ‘DOSTI’ (literally, friendship) exercise was expanded to a trilateral joint coast guard exercise by adding Sri Lanka.³⁶

The third NSA-level meeting, held in Delhi on 6 March 2014, not only reviewed the progress of previously decided joint activities, but also discussed “new areas of cooperation including hydrography; training in visit, board, search and seizure operations; training onboard Indian sail training ships; exchanges between think tanks; and joint participation in adventure activities.”³⁷ The meeting saw

the participation of delegations from Mauritius and Seychelles as “guest countries.” The trilateral maritime security grouping has “a strong focus on enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities,”³⁸ in addition to the joint trilateral exercises aimed at tackling illegal maritime activities. The focus on MDA is understandable, since it would strengthen “situational awareness at sea,” enabling suitable responses to various scenarios.³⁹ This is critical in boosting the Indian Navy’s preparedness and presence in the maritime domain to play a leading security role in the region. Indeed, scholars have viewed the trilateral arrangement, with the participation of Mauritius and Seychelles, as a “significant consolidation of India’s leading security role among the Indian Ocean islands” in fulfilling Delhi’s desire to be a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean Region.⁴⁰

During his visit to the three Indian Ocean islands, Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, in March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed the hope that Seychelles and Mauritius would join the trilateral maritime security cooperation along with Sri Lanka and the Maldives.⁴¹ The fourth NSA-level meeting was to be held in the Maldives in 2014, but it had to be tabled due to the domestic political upheavals in the island nation, under President Abdulla Yameen.⁴² The meeting has since been on hold. After the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka in April 2019 and the coming to power of a new regime under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih administration in the Maldives, it was expected that the three countries would revive the NSA-level talks. When Prime Minister Modi visited both Colombo and Male in June 2019,⁴³ and again during the visit of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to India on 7–11 February 2020, there were reports suggesting that the NSA-level talks might be reinstated.⁴⁴ However, nothing seems to have been

finalised and it remains to be seen if the meetings will be revived any time soon.

INDIA'S SUBREGIONAL APPROACH TO SECURITY COOPERATION: AN ANALYSIS

Two factors seem to motivate Delhi's subregional approach to security cooperation. The first comprises the compulsions and benefits of dealing with transnational security challenges beyond bilateralism, i.e. the recognition that security dynamics in a subregion are interconnected and must be viewed and approached holistically. The trilateral maritime security cooperation is a case of shared security challenges amongst India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Thus, one of the key objectives for India has been to address immediate transnational security challenges. The second factor is India's ambition to play a leading security role in the neighbourhood, to be "a net security provider." The geostrategic subtext driving India's calculations is that if Delhi does not play the role, it would open room for other major powers to step in.

A comparative analysis of the two case studies provides some interesting similarities and differences in India's efforts to building security cooperation at the subregional level. While the TCMS was conceptualised as a subregional grouping *focused* on security-related issues, BIMSTEC had an economic origin and evolved to acquire security elements. However, from its very inception, the member-states recognised the need for BIMSTEC to ensure peace in the subregion. For instance, the 1997 Bangkok Declaration called upon the grouping to "contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity" and advocated "peaceful co-existence" amongst its member states. As indicated in the above discussion, the threat posed by terrorism was discussed in the grouping as early as 2000. In terms of membership,

Sri Lanka is a member to both BIMSTEC as well as the TCMS, while the Maldives is not a member of the former. This also suggests that membership in subregional security groupings is a function of geography, at least in the case of these bodies. Moreover, that the two groupings have initiated NSA-level security dialogues indicates that they receive high-level political attention. Neither BIMSTEC nor the TCMS are driven solely by the traditional notion of security cooperation, i.e. hard defence and military engagements, but also by non-traditional security challenges such as combating terrorism, transnational crimes and piracy.

There is a general tendency to view subregional initiatives as an alternative to regional initiatives. Many believe that India is pushing BIMSTEC because Pakistan is not a member of this grouping. While the absence of Pakistan in BIMSTEC does allow the initiative to function without been obstructed by bilateral tensions, as has been the case for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, from a subregional perspective, India's interests are not driven by this alone but by the merits of the dynamics in terms of specific security threats and challenges that the subregion presents and their implications for India. Moreover, an important element for subregional cooperation is geographical location. In the case of the Bay of Bengal, Pakistan cannot be regarded as a member because it is located outside the boundary of the subregion.

Indeed, India was against the idea of security-related cooperation in the 1990s, when subregional initiatives began to emerge. As noted earlier, Delhi objected to adding security issues in the BIMSTEC's agenda, which were proposed by Thailand at the time of the grouping's formation. Since then, India has demonstrated a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of subregional issues—from

refusing to discuss security-related issues to taking a leading role in initiating security cooperation at the subregional level. Unlike the economic subregional initiatives, Delhi has played a pro-active role in building subregional security cooperation in the neighbourhood. There is also a continuity in policy in India's subregional approach to security cooperation. For instance, it was during the NDA government that Delhi brought up terrorism in a BIMSTEC meeting in 2000. Under the UPA government, the initiative was further strengthened when it initiated the NSA-level security dialogue in 2017. Further, the idea of the NSA-level talks initiated by the UPA regime in BIMSTEC was extended to the TCMS by the NDA regime.

Currently, success in subregional security cooperation remains limited. **First**, security cooperation is biased towards bilateral and regional frameworks. For instance, India's bilateral security cooperation in addressing issues such as terrorism and the exchange of intelligence or regional/multilateral military engagements such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) receive far greater interest than subregional security cooperation. **Second**, traditional security cooperation focuses on hard military cooperation, whereas at the subregional level, non-traditional security issues have received greater attention, which requires building from a lower base. Delhi appears to be combining both approaches in its subregional framework. Given the interconnected nature of security dynamics at the subregional level, such a mixed approach is crucial. With increasing subregional connectivity projects and the prospects of more cross-border movement of people and goods, there is an increased need for security and regulatory mechanisms. **Finally**, subregional security cooperation presents some spin-offs. Some of the ideas outlined in the trilateral security cooperation could

be beneficial in bilateral ties, particularly on matters relating to fishing, which has long been a contentious issue between India and Sri Lanka. For example, some provisions in the TCMS could be “formalised at the bilateral level as well, especially with regard to fishermen.”⁴⁵ At the same time, maintaining friendly bilateral relations with member-states of the subregional groupings is critical for Delhi to fulfil “its role as an effective ‘net maritime security provider’.”⁴⁶ The phrase of “net security provider” was first used by former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013, when he observed that India was “well positioned ... to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.”⁴⁷ According to Anit Mukherjee, such a role would involve four activities: capacity building, military diplomacy, military assistance, and direct deployment of forces.⁴⁸ From this perspective, the subregional security cooperation contributes to the wider maritime security, as it forms the first step of implementing the role of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.

Prospects and Challenges

For effective subregional security cooperation, there is a need for better clarity on what constitutes a subregion in terms of its boundary and, therefore, membership. The lack of definitive boundaries can hinder the objectives of the security cooperation project. It may be argued that the core idea behind setting up the MILAN naval exercise was subregional in nature. However, India, or the other members of the TCMS, have not managed to specify the boundaries of these two subregions. For instance, Delhi's desire to include Seychelles and Mauritius as members of the trilateral maritime security arrangement shows a lack of clarity regarding the boundary of the grouping.

After participating in the third NSA-meeting, where Seychelles and Mauritius were guest countries, the then Indian National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon told reporters that India wished to establish a system to share information in the Bay of Bengal subregion, much like the TCMS.⁴⁹ According to the same report, discussions had begun with India's neighbours on the concept of cooperation and on whether to replicate the TCMS-like cooperation for the Bay of Bengal subregion or include the Bay of Bengal subregion within the TCMS by way of expansion. Reportedly, Menon was not in favour of the latter approach, because the island countries of the Indian Ocean, particularly Seychelles and Mauritius, might then "not be too concerned with maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the Bay of Bengal subregion."⁵⁰ The question on whether to expand the TCMS to include the Bay of Bengal subregion highlights India's dilemma in demarcating the boundary of subregions in its neighbourhood. That Menon noted the practical challenges in the expansion of the TCMS acknowledges the subregional characters of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean island nations with their specific challenges, concerns, and interests. This is partly why the TCMS has not been expanded, although the main reason is the domestic political turmoil in the Maldives and the repercussions on the country's ties with India under President Yameen.

While some scholars have used the term "subregion" while examining India's security cooperation, others have used it to refer to "South Asia" and "Southeast Asia," i.e. "subregions of Southern Asia."⁵¹ Many tend to conflate the idea of a subregion with that of a 'region', which creates an ambiguity while using the two constructs, furthering the policy dilemma. Analyst David Brewster observes, "The new maritime security arrangement between the five Indian Ocean states represents a major step forward in the region's security

architecture ... In presaging the possible extension or replication of such arrangements to the Bay of Bengal, New Delhi has flagged a new and much more active security role in our region.”⁵²

Interestingly, India has initiated a few more Navy-led multilateral diplomatic engagements in recent years. In 2017, it launched the Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC), involving 10 maritime neighbours—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives, Malaysia, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand—aiming “to bring together like minded nations to evolve and formulate collective responses to emerging challenges in the maritime domain.”⁵³ Attended by navy and maritime chiefs of the 10 Indian Ocean littoral states at the first GMC interactions, India offered “to share intelligence of maritime movements in the Indian Ocean in real-time.”⁵⁴ The second edition of the GMC was held in 2019 and has been described as a “diplomatic initiatives taken by India in the maritime domain” as part of the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁵⁵ This could be seen as a course correction and the recognition of the need for a subregional approach to security cooperation in the maritime domain. The grouping includes all four original participants (Singapore, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Thailand) of the MILAN multilateral naval diplomacy, which has expanded into a much larger exercise. Further, the GMC includes the two TCMS members (Sri Lanka and the Maldives), guest countries Seychelles and Mauritius, and three members of BIMSTEC countries (Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand). Malaysia is the only country that has not been part of any of India’s naval multilateral initiatives involving maritime neighbours; however, it has participated in other regional naval exercises initiated by India, such as the MILAN exercise, and has been an observer in the IONS.

Another trilateral cooperation in the maritime domain was launched in 2019 and involved Singapore and Thailand: the Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX). The first annual SITMEX exercise was held in September 2019 in the Andaman Sea to underscore “the shared responsibility of the countries to work together in keeping sea lines of communications open and strengthens interoperability between the three countries.”⁵⁶ Some reports have suggested that Malaysia has shown interest in joining the exercise.⁵⁷ In line with its naval-led multilateral diplomatic engagement, India also initiated an Indian Air Force-led multilateral air exercise called Ex-Samvedna (literally, empathy) in 2018.⁵⁸ The first multilateral HADR exercise by the Indian Air Force (with participation from air force units of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal and observers from UAE Air Force) was held off the coast of Kerala.⁵⁹ This initiative is another addition to the multilateral security cooperation involving India's neighbours. The three participants of Ex-Samvedna-18 are all members of BIMSTEC, with Sri Lanka also being a member of the TCMS. The UAE's participation indicates India's willingness to expand its security neighbourhood and, thereby, the boundaries of subregional cooperation.

The GMC initiative, the Ex-Samvedna and the SITMEX indicate at least three things. **First**, there is clearly a recognition of the need for subregional security cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain. One could argue that the GMC initiative was prompted due to a lack of progress in the TCMS. Moreover, Delhi's conception of the initiative shows its inclination to expand maritime security cooperation instead of having two separate mechanisms for the Bay of Bengal subregion and the Indian Ocean island nations. Additionally, the SITMEX initiative indicates a need for a grouping in the Bay of Bengal subregion, with a focus on the security of sea-lines

of communication in the northeast Indian Ocean. Together, these initiatives demonstrate India's continued interest in subregional security cooperation.

However, drawing specific boundaries of the subregions remains a challenge. Some clarity in this regard may help in better framing the objectives of subregional security cooperation and avoiding membership overlaps or duplication of activities. Arguably, the boundary dilemma could be addressed with a clearer articulation of the objective or purpose of setting up a subregional grouping.

Second, subregional groupings are becoming useful forums to exchange views and intelligence and for making important announcements, such as the offer for sharing real-time information at the first GMC. This assumes importance in the context the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR) launched by India to “advance maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean region” and enhance “maritime domain awareness and coordinating activities, through information sharing, cooperation and expertise development; along with partner nations and agencies.”⁶⁰ At the time of its inauguration on 22 December 2018, Admiral Sunil Lanba, the then chief of Indian Navy, said that the IFC-IOR would be “a collaborative construct that will work with partners, countries as well as international agencies; to enhance maritime security and safety” and “work towards capability building in the region, coordination of incident response and disaster relief, and in time, also share submarine safety information.”⁶¹

Third, an issue that will continue to pose a challenge in forging subregional security cooperation relates to the foreign-policy behaviour of smaller neighbours and their choice to

navigate “independent policy paths” that are “at odds with India’s perspectives.”⁶² For instance, the TCMS’s progress suffered a tangible setback due to the divergence between Delhi and Male under the Yameen regime.⁶³ Moreover, smaller neighbours are “[w]ary of being drawn into the India-China rivalry” and prefer to position “themselves as independent actors.”⁶⁴ According to Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, “Sri Lanka’s struggle has been that, even with its nonaligned past, it is evolving today into a more multi-aligned foreign policy that creates both opportunities and challenges.”⁶⁵ This may push smaller neighbours to adopt new foreign-policy strategies. For instance, Nepal participated in both the first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise called BIMSTEC DMEx-17 held in 2017⁶⁶ and the Ex-Samvedna-18, but pulled out of the first BIMSTEC field-training military exercise called MILEX-18⁶⁷ in 2018 on the ground of “internal political pressure” to withdraw. (However, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the decision was influenced by geopolitical calculations.)⁶⁸ This suggests that while smaller nations find it comfortable to cooperate in non-traditional security initiatives at the subregional level, they remain wary when it comes to hard defence and military cooperation. Indeed, despite giving the MILEX-18 a miss, Nepal participated in the second BIMSTEC DMEx-20 held in February 2020.⁶⁹

Another challenge in taking forward the idea of subregional security cooperation in India’s neighbourhood is the re-framing of identities of its smaller neighbours. In recent years, smaller states have been re-defining themselves to maximise their benefits.⁷⁰ For the idea of subregional security cooperation to work, Delhi must recognise this emerging dynamics, including the changing regional geopolitics and the growing aspirations of its smaller neighbours.


CONCLUSION

Subregional cooperation under India's neighbourhood approach has gained popularity in recent years, particularly in the field of cross-border economic and connectivity cooperation. However, security cooperation, or its lack thereof, between India and its neighbours has often been seen through the prisms of bilateral and regional frameworks, such as bilateral military exercises with a neighbouring country or regional/multilateral security exercises, e.g. the IONS or the MALABAR exercises.

This paper has argued that both BIMSTEC and the TCMS have already taken the subregional route to building security cooperation. Since this study is exploratory in nature, further research is required to better understand and explain the emerging security cooperation.

A subregional approach gives India the opportunity to experiment with new arrangements for security cooperation with its neighbours. As the country's economic and strategic interests expand beyond its borders, envisioning its neighbourhood through subregions will require Delhi to develop subregional strategies to promote and protect its interests. India's ability to influence the wider regional order in future will be determined by its ability to shape security and economic dynamics at the subregional level.

"Limited and slow progress in building a 'strong grouping around the Indian Ocean' in terms of either a collective security mechanism or strengthening regional cooperation [and] formation of a new region-wide organisation for cooperation and maritime security ... [is] not likely to take place"⁷¹ in the near future. Thus, apart from

other formats of security cooperation, focusing on subregional security cooperation in the neighbourhood may be the most practical way forward. 

ENDNOTES

- 1 There is a plethora of literature on the idea of subregional economic and connectivity in the Indian neighbourhood context. For instance see Nisha Taneja, Deb Kusum Das and Samridhi, eds. *Sub-Regional Cooperation between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh: Trade, Investment and Connectivity* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2018); Venugopal B. Menon and Joshy M. Paul, eds. *Sub-regional Cooperation in South Asia: India, Sri Lanka and Maldives* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2017) and D. Suba Chandran and Bhavna Singh, eds. *India, China and Sub-Regional Connectivities in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015).
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 - i. “obtain the facility of the Indian Long Range Identification and

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ii. utilisation of the Merchant Ship Information System (MSIS) for exchange of unclassified information on white shipping;

iii. sharing Automatic Identification System (AIS) data in a trilateral format over the MSIS platform;

iv. undertaking Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) training in India;

v. strengthening maritime linkages in the field of Search and Rescue (SAR) including through SAR operations, providing expertise and technical assistance by India in setting up Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCCs) in Sri Lanka and Maldives, coordination in relaying and receiving distress alerts and safety messages, and, conduct of SAR training in India;

vi. strengthening mechanisms for Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surveillance and providing additional support and assets on a case by case basis;

vii. maintaining lines of communication on illegal maritime activities between identified Points of Contact and exchanging messages on a regular basis;

viii. strengthening marine pollution response cooperation through conduct of IMO Level I and Level II courses in India, formulating Contingency Plans for pollution response, capacity building, and participating in India's National Pollution Response Exercise (NATPOLREX), as observers;

ix. strengthening the biennial trilateral exercise 'DOSTI' by conducting table top exercises and seminars on maritime issues in every alternate year;

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org