

INDIAN SUBCONTINENT: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

A subcontinent is a part of a continent that is politically and/or geographically separate from the rest of the continent. The Indian Subcontinent is a subcontinent for both political and geographical reasons. The countries of the Indian Subcontinent have strong political and cultural ties. It is also a subcontinent from a geographical perspective, since it is territory that is geographically separate from the rest of Asia. It should be noted that the term Indian subcontinent is often used interchangeably with the terms South Asia and Southern Asia. In international discourse, these three terms usually denote the same part of the world. The Indian Subcontinent constitutes a distinctive geographic entity that can be divided into three geomorphic provinces: (a) the Indian Peninsula, (b) the Himalayas, and (c) the Indo-Gangetic Alluvial Plains. Politically, the Indian subcontinent includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Sometimes, the geographical term 'Indian subcontinent' is used interchangeably with 'South Asia', although that last term is used typically as a political term and is also used to include Afghanistan

Apart from geography, politics, culture, and history also help define what constitutes the Indian Subcontinent. For example, nearly all of the current countries of the Indian Subcontinent were formerly possessions of the British Empire. This includes the present-day states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Myanmar (Burma) was also a British possession, but since it is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally tied more to East Asia, it is generally not considered part of the Indian Subcontinent.

Two countries that were not possessions of the British Empire, however, namely Nepal and Bhutan, are considered part of the subcontinent, mostly for cultural, religious, and political regions. For instance, Nepal shares a common religion with India. Hinduism is the religion professed by most of the people in both India and Nepal. Both Nepal and Bhutan are also considered part of the Indian Subcontinent for historical and political reasons. Both countries historically maintained close relations

with India when it was under British control, and still maintain strong ties today.

India, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka also have some religious ties. India was the cradle of the Buddhist religion. Today, although most of India's population is not Buddhist, there is still a sizable Buddhist population there. Buddhism is also the most prevalent religion in both Bhutan and Sri Lanka. One could argue that Tibet is part of the Indian Subcontinent because it is linguistically and culturally closer to Bhutan and India rather than China. But since Tibet is controlled by China, it is not considered part of the Indian Subcontinent.

Some consider Afghanistan to be part of the Indian Subcontinent. Indeed, from a political standpoint, Afghanistan is strongly tied to Pakistan, which is universally considered to be part of the Indian Subcontinent. The politics and events that occur in Afghanistan are often intertwined with what happens in Pakistan, especially in regards to the

events preceding and following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. There are also ethnic and religious ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pashtun people, for example, though mostly found in Afghanistan, are also prevalent in southern Pakistan. Many Afghans in general have found refuge in Pakistan, fleeing decades of war in their own country. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan also share Islam as a common religion. From a geographical perspective, however, Afghanistan is generally not thought of as being part of the Indian Subcontinent.

Geopolitically and strategically the Indian Ocean security has in recent years acquired salience even above the Pacific Ocean not only for the United States and Western Pacific nations but also for European Union and NATO countries in relation to China's maritime expansionist plans.

Rise of India, which has become the world's third largest economy in the world (by the Purchasing Power Parity measure). Although India has some distance to go in opening its markets to neighbors, Delhi's political approach can be seen to be evolving in favor of regional economic integration.

Beyond India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have all shown a new economic dynamism. This in turn has made the Subcontinent one of the fastest growing regions of the world during the 2010s. Barring Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the economic prospect is clouded by uncertainty, the rest of the region is likely to grow at an impressive pace in the coming years. China's rapid economic rise to the status of the second largest economy in the world is having a powerful impact on the Subcontinent. China has become the region's largest trading partner. China is also becoming a big investor in the region's infrastructure projects. The geo-economic transformation of the Subcontinent has been complemented by the growth in the region's geopolitical significance. In the second half of the 20th century, the region was considered marginal to the high politics of the Cold War. The Af-Pak region was the lone exception. Today almost every corner of the Subcontinent resonates with strategic potential. This is likely to take the region's strategy

identity away from the vexed questions of India's north western marches. If Bangladesh has become a potential bridge to South East Asia, Bhutan and Nepal have a similar role between India and China, the world's second and third largest economies. To the South, Sri Lanka is rediscovering its central location in the Indian Ocean, as all major powers; China, US and Japan pay unprecedented attention to Colombo. Maldives, which straddles the vital sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean, has now become a highly coveted piece of maritime real estate in the Indian Ocean.

The economy of the region has experienced a series of ups and downs. But after 2009, sustained economic growth in South Asia proved to be a boon to investors who were looking for new places to boost their investment returns. According to the South Asia Economic Report, "Growth in South Asia has been accelerating since the early 1990s, and its economic performance during the last decade and a half has been impressive. Economic growth has contributed to significant reduction in poverty in the region. Today, South Asia stands at a point where the potential for sustained high growth and poverty reduction is excellent. The region has a unique opportunity to drastically reduce poverty over the next decade, provided the right policy choices are made."ⁱ

South Asia remained closed off to the rest of the world, due to a lack of economic integration. But India and Pakistan successfully managed to increase their trade share with East Asian and Sub-Saharan African nations. But there is still a lot of potential with other developing nations.

The growth was largely due to the economic conditions in India. The country's efforts to lift millions out of poverty through education and business opportunities, develop infrastructure, and increase exports led to it becoming one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Similarly, Bangladesh's position in the global market as a manufacturer of textiles and ready-to-wear clothing helped propel growth in the region. The Bangladesh economy demonstrated a

spectacular upturn in 2015 despite a weak global economy. Indeed, Bangladesh economy is an outlier among its peers in terms of robust growth with lowest inflation volatility. It has been on a sustained, steady average annual GDP growth rate for more than half a decade, with the lowest growth and inflation volatility in South Asia.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, Chinese investment in countries like Pakistan may help shape their economies. A key feature of Beijing's South Asia policy has been its 'India-centric' approach, which, in turn, has seen military links with India's neighbors dominating the policy agenda.ⁱ Beijing has always known that India, if it ever gets its economic and strategic acts together, alone has the size, might, numbers and, above all, the intention to match China. In the meantime, perceiving India as weak, indecisive and on the verge of collapse, Beijing took the view that all that was needed was to keep New Delhi under pressure by arming its neighbors and supporting insurgency movements in India's minority regions. All of India's neighbors have obtained much of their military arsenal from China—indeed 90 per cent of China's arms sales go to countries that border India.ⁱⁱⁱ

As other powers begin to devote quality time to engaging South Asian nations, big and small, Delhi has begun to come to terms with the unfolding strategic globalization of the Subcontinent. It has also begun to put some energy behind the foreign policy slogan of 'neighborhood first'. Although India has many problems with its neighbors, the economic geography of the Subcontinent remains in favor of India. As Delhi recognizes that no region in the world

today can be an exclusive sphere of influence for any power, plays to its natural economic strengths in the region, and accepts the possibilities for greater collaboration with other powers, it is likely to be more effective in securing its core regional interests in the region while accelerating the Subcontinent's integration with itself and the wider world.^{iv}

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