



## Shift from Globalism to Regionalism

**For Prelims:** [Globalism](#), [Regionalism](#), [Minilateralism](#), [European Union](#), [ASEAN](#), [SAARC](#), [BIMSTEC](#), [IORA](#), [BBIN \(Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal\)](#) and the [Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project](#), [Indian Ocean Region](#), [International Buddhist Conclave](#), [revival of Nalanda University](#), [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), [Neighbourhood First Policy](#).

**For Mains:** India's significance in South Asia, Key Issues Hindering India's Active Engagements in South Asia.

[Source:IE](#)

### Why in News?

The [Global Order](#) is shifting from **universalist globalism** to interest-driven [regionalism](#) and [minilateralism](#), as nations increasingly prefer smaller coalitions over multilateral institutions.

### How is the World Shifting from Globalism to Regionalism?

- **Global Conflicts and Institutional Paralysis:** Ongoing conflicts like the [Russia-Ukraine war](#) and the [Israel-Gaza crisis](#) have exposed the limited efficacy of global governance structures.
  - [UN Security Council](#) deadlocks, often due to great power rivalries, have eroded faith in multilateral conflict resolution.
- **Rise of Regionalism and minilateralism:** Regionalism is marked by geographically and culturally aligned partnerships, while minilateralism involves smaller, interest-based groups like the [QUAD](#), and [I2U2](#) for focused cooperation.
  - The EU evolved from the European Economic Community, and initiatives like [ASEAN](#), [SAARC](#), [BIMSTEC](#), and [IORA](#), reflect regionalism, though with varied success.
  - Emerging flexible coalitions like [QUAD](#), [BRICS](#), and [IMEC](#) promote strategic autonomy, faster decision-making, and targeted cooperation in areas such as security, technology, and infrastructure.
- **Reassertion of National Sovereignty:** The **Covid-19 pandemic** revealed global supply chain vulnerabilities and unequal vaccine access, reinforcing the idea that national preparedness trumps global solidarity.
  - Countries began to prioritize self-reliance, health sovereignty, and economic resilience over global integration.
- **Historical Disillusionment:** Developing countries, including India, have criticized the unequal power dynamics in global institutions like the [WTO](#), [IMF](#), and [World Bank](#). The lack of reforms has led nations to seek alternative platforms like BRICS and AIIB.
- **India's Strategic Recalibration:** India is actively engaging in regional initiatives like [BIMSTEC](#), and [IORA](#), while also strengthening minilateral engagements.
  - This reflects a pragmatic shift in foreign policy from idealistic multilateralism to interest-driven regional cooperation and strategic partnerships.

## What is India's Role in Regional Integration?

- **Anchor of Regional Connectivity:** India plays a central role in promoting cross-border infrastructure and trade corridors like [BBIN \(Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal\)](#) and the [Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project](#) to improve economic and physical connectivity in South Asia.
- **Security Provider and Humanitarian Responder:** India's role as a net security provider through naval presence in the [Indian Ocean Region](#) and disaster relief missions like **Operation Maitri (Nepal)** and **Operation Brahma (Myanmar)** strengthens its strategic credibility and deepens regional trust.
- **Trade and Investment Hub:** As the largest economy in South Asia, India **serves as a trade and investment anchor for neighbouring countries**, offering preferential trade arrangements and extending lines of credit and development assistance.
  - In 2023, India's trade with ASEAN reached approximately USD 101.9 billion, accounting for 2.86% of total ASEAN trade.
- **Shared Cultural and Democratic Values:** India promotes shared cultural and democratic values through initiatives like the [International Buddhist Conclave](#), [revival of Nalanda University](#), and support to post-conflict democracies, reinforcing its civilizational influence.
  - Projects like the **Buddhist Circuit and South Asian University** foster regional cultural ties, enhance mutual understanding, and help counter anti-India narratives in neighboring countries.

## What are the Key Challenges to India's Regional Integration Efforts?

- **Perception of Hegemony:** Smaller [South Asian nations](#) often perceive **India's dominance as overbearing**, leading to mistrust and reluctance in embracing India-led initiatives, thereby limiting the effectiveness of regional cooperation.
- **Bilateral Political Tensions:** The enduring Kashmir dispute with Pakistan and unresolved border tensions with China, such as the 2020 Galwan Valley standoff, continue to strain India's regional relations.
  - These conflicts often trigger military confrontations and diplomatic deadlocks, diverting focus from collaborative regional development initiatives.
  - Ongoing hostilities and strained ties have weakened SAARC and hindered regional multilateralism.
- **Asymmetry in Economic Capabilities:** South Asia's vast economic disparities hinder policy alignment and equitable integration. Intra-regional trade remains low at around 5%, far below ASEAN's 25%.
  - India-Pakistan tensions have stalled SAARC, while initiatives like BBIN and projects like the India-Nepal Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project continue to face significant delays.
- **China's Strategic Entrenchment:** China's growing presence in South Asia through the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#) and infrastructure diplomacy poses a strategic counterweight to India's regional leadership, complicating India's integration agenda.

## Way Forward

- **Revive and Reform Regional Institutions:** India should spearhead the institutional revitalization of **BIMSTEC** and **IORA** through **regular summits**, greater funding, and functional secretariats, while promoting sector-specific cooperation in trade, energy, disaster management, and digital connectivity.
- **Strengthen Sub-Regional Partnerships:** India should deepen engagement through platforms like **BBIN** and promote functional minilaterals focused on health, education, and green energy, especially when SAARC consensus is lacking.
- **Boost Regional Trade and Connectivity:** Enhancing trade through simplified customs, shared standards, and integrated transport and digital infrastructure can foster economic interdependence and regional stability.
- **Foster Inclusive Engagement:** To counter rising external influence, India must lead with

transparent development aid, cultural diplomacy, and people-centric initiatives under the **Neighbourhood First Policy**.

**Drishti Mains Question:**

Critically examine India's evolving role in fostering regional integration and navigating strategic coalitions to safeguard its national and neighbourhood interests.

**UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)**

**Prelims:**

**Q. With reference to “Look East Policy” of India, consider the following statements: (2011)**

1. India wants to establish itself as an important regional player in East Asian affairs.
2. India wants to plug the vacuum created by the termination of the Cold War.
3. India wants to restore the historical and cultural ties with its neighbors in Southeast and East Asia.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (d)**

**Mains:**

**Q. “China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia”. In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbour. (2017)**