

India and regional integration

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Introduction

India's involvement in regional integration is the focus of this chapter. This chapter starts with India's *immediate neighbourhood* (i.e. South Asia) and India's sense of identity within that region and with regard to the regional structure there, i.e. the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It then moves on to India's *extended neighbourhood* beyond South Asia (i.e. the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and East Asia), and India's sense of identity within those regions and with regard to their regional structures, i.e. the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIM-STEC—formerly Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation), East Asian Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). All of these involve India's sense and redefining of 'regions', and throw into question varying levels of integration. The words of Peter Jay come to mind, that 'good regionalism is good geopolitics; and bad regionalism is bad geopolitics'.¹ Such questions and shifts within India's sense of 'region' and regionalism involve questions of traditional geopolitics as well as *critical geopolitics*, in which 'region' and regionalism for India have been subject to construction and reshaping, the domain of International Relations (IR) *constructivism*.

South Asia (and SAARC)

India's clearest regional setting is within the subcontinent of South Asia, and its vehicle for regional integration is SAARC. If South Asia is defined geographically as the region bounded by the Hindu Kush-Himalayas on land and the Indian Ocean open waters, then India is immediately at the very heart of this area. It is no coincidence that the Indian subcontinent is called the 'Indian' subcontinent. The question for India is how far that physical suggestion and geopolitical potential gets translated into actual geopolitical power actuality. The term 'hegemon' tends to have unattractive connotations, yet India's weight remains evident. If we take South Asia in the above geographical (Hindu Kush-Himalayas-Indian Ocean boundaries) or political (membership of SAARC), then India looms large. In terms of geography, India covers

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around 75% of the landmass and the population of South Asia. In terms of location it has centrality: whilst it has borders with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, they do not have borders with each other. Consequently, relations within South Asia tend to be India-centred, be it positive or negative, with other bilateral relations between South Asian states being much less evident, in comparison. This gives India clear regional advantages, yet it also gives it regional disadvantages as smaller states either try to obstruct India, balance against India, seek to counterbalance with other South Asian states against India, or seek countervailing external (e.g. the People's Republic of China) help from outside the region. India's own actions towards South Asia have gone through three phases, and have led to the creation and progression of SAARC.

Initially, India's involvement with South Asia was limited, indeed neglected. India's relations with Pakistan were important, but highly negative. Instead, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister (1947–64), who was also Minister of External Affairs, pursued a path of engagement with the world, a foreign policy that stressed morality and ethics, and which concerned itself with global issues like non-alignment and global nuclear disarmament. Nehru's involvement in South Asia was limited to establishing Indian treaty consolidation in the Himalayas, with Bhutan (1949), Sikkim (1950) and Nepal (1950); treaties which left a degree of Indian pre-eminence existing there in varying degrees, even whilst India's 'Forward Rights' inherited in Tibet were being lost to a resurgent China. Having consolidated a local Himalayan pre-eminence, Nehru tended to pursue a fairly limited involvement there, a degree of neglect. Sri Lanka was also neglected by India, as were the Maldives. Pakistan remained the bitter foe whose religious principles of national formation in 1947 had cut across Indian secular-geographical principles of national formation, the foe who had an ongoing territorial dispute with India over the province of Kashmir, and the foe with whom India went to the first of its several wars in 1949. The only sign of co-operation there was at a functional level with the Indus Waters Treaty of 1961. India's relations in South Asia remained bilateral, with no regional mechanisms in place for integration. As for regional integration, there had been some desultory conversations of it at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in April 1947, the Baguio Conference in the Philippines in May 1950, and the Colombo Powers Conference in April 1954, but nothing came of them. Instead, the region settled down to ongoing India–Pakistan friction

Interestingly enough the most evident sign of India exerting itself in South Asia was with its forcible occupation of the Portuguese enclave of Goa, which was 'liberated' in 1961. The arguments used by Nehru were ones that seemed to give a pre-eminence to India, with Nehru invoking the earlier Monroe Doctrine to evoke his own doctrine, dubbed the Nehru Doctrine:

The famous declaration by President Monroe of the United States [that] any interference by a European country would be an interference with the American political system. I submit that [...] the Portuguese retention of Goa is a continuing interference with the political system established in India today. I shall go a step further and say that any interference by any other power would also be an interference with the political system of India today[...] It may be that we are weak and we cannot prevent that interference. But the fact is that any attempt by a foreign power to interfere in any way with India is a thing which India cannot tolerate, and which, subject to her strength, she will oppose. That is the broad doctrine I lay down.²

Unfortunately for Nehru's assumptions, India's strength may have been enough to eject Portugal from Goa, under the Nehru Doctrine, but it was not enough to stop China's growing

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presence in South Asian affairs, which was evident along the Himalayan sub-region, and manifest in China's unexpected, traumatic victory over India in the 1962 war. Nehru's successors were to draw hard lessons from this.

Nehru died in 1964, feeling bitterly betrayed by what he saw as Chinese treachery. After the short transition premiership of Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964–66), Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi took over as leader of the Congress Party. During her time in politics she served as Prime Minister (1966–77, 1980–84), before her assassination at the hands of disgruntled Sikhs, whereupon her son Rajiv Gandhi took over as Congress leader and Prime Minister (1984–89), before his assassination at the hands of disgruntled Tamils. Indira Gandhi changed the focus of Indian foreign policy and its security focus. Instead of Nehru's neglect of South Asia and focus on globalist *soft power* morality, Indira Gandhi concentrated much more on South Asia and focused on an IR *realism-hard power-realpolitik*. Politically, Nehru's emphasis on the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gave way to Indira Gandhi's much closer relationship with the USSR, signalled by their 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation. Militarily, Nehru's relative neglect of India's armed forces gave way to a building up of India's military might. As such, 'bilateralism became the guiding principle of Indian foreign policy', rather than the shaping of any regional/multilateral structures for, and in, South Asia.³

Security-wise, this South Asia focus of Indira Gandhi was underpinned by what came to be dubbed the Indira Doctrine, whereby outside intervention in South Asian affairs was to be averted, 'the principle became a matter of faith for Indian foreign policymakers'.⁴ It had two important planks:

India will not tolerate external intervention in a conflict situation in any South Asian country, if that intervention has any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implication. No South Asian government must therefore ask for military assistance with an anti-Indian bias from any country. If a South Asian country genuinely needs external help to deal with a serious internal conflict situation, or with an intolerable threat to a government legitimately established, it should ask help from a number of neighboring countries including India. The exclusion of India from such a contingency will be considered to be an anti-Indian move on the part of the government concerned.⁵

Instead, local bilateral solutions were to be sought, in effect with India's involvement and indeed leadership, and based on Indian 'perceptions' of whether or not an anti-India bias was in play.

Application of the Indira Doctrine was seen in 1971 when India's intervention in the attempted breakaway of East Pakistan by Bengali nationalists enabled the setting up of an independent Bangladesh, in the wake of a relatively short but decisive military decapitation of Pakistani military forces by India. The 1971 India–Pakistan war transformed South Asian geopolitics and left India more than ever in a position of *hard power* military supremacy over its rival Pakistan, and in South Asia generally. Other examples of this relatively hard-nosed application of Indian power came with military intervention in the Sri Lankan civil war (1971).

Paradoxes abounded thereon, though, with the Indira Doctrine. The 'contradictions' between India's global policy and its regional approach were real.⁶ Thus, 'at the international level, India rejected the notions of balance of power and exclusive spheres of influence; within the region it clung to them'.⁷ Consequently, 'India was strongly opposed to intervention by major powers in the internal affairs of weaker ones, but within the subcontinent it had to perform the function of a provider of security to smaller nations and their regimes'.⁸ Whilst 'India was all for multilateralism at the global level, yet in the region it insisted on bilateralism', in

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which India would have the advantage on account of its inherent size and weight.⁹ All in all, Raja Mohan pointed out that 'India seemed to move effortlessly between the roles of protestor at the global level and that of manager of the security order within the region', so that whilst 'its ambassadors were relentless critics of the international system in the global fora, within the region its envoys were transformed into proconsuls and viceroys in neighbouring capitals'.¹⁰ Amidst such contradictions there was no room for any multilateral regionalism, no room for any South Asian regional integration structure, or organizational set-up, other than India's bilateral application of its own power advantages.

Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 brought her son Rajiv into power and under him the Indira Doctrine (sometimes called the Rajiv Doctrine) remained intact: bilateral arrangements for the region, with India playing the lead role. Examples of this included his decision to dispatch an Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka (1987–90); to send military forces to the Maldives in 1988 (Operation Cactus) to restore the toppled government to power; and to impose a trade embargo on a landlocked Nepal in 1989. However, a decade later and the question can be asked, why did India not go to Sri Lanka's rescue in May 2000 when the island's leadership begged it to intervene to save nearly 40,000 soldiers who were close to being captured by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)? Devotta wondered if 'India's disinclination to get involved, even as Pakistan, China and Israel provided arms to Sri Lanka, raises the question of whether the country is still committed to the Indira Doctrine (which operates as India's equivalent of the United States' Monroe Doctrine in South Asia)', to which his argument was that 'domestic pressures, especially those emanating from Kashmir and the country's northeast, may have left India militarily overextended, especially during the late 1990s, and thereby prevented the country from flexing its military capabilities in the region as it did in the 1980s'.¹¹

A different regional framework was seen with the formation of SAARC in 1985. The impetus for this came from Bangladesh, but India accepted its formation. However, its role was low key.

A change of direction in Indian policy towards South Asia was signalled by Inder Gujral (foreign minister and then Prime Minister), who announced in 1996 what came to be known as the Gujral Doctrine—namely, that the 'Government's Neighbourhood Policy now stands on five basic principles: firstly, with neighbours like Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, India does not ask for reciprocity but gives all it can in good faith and trust'.¹² What is, of course, interesting is that Pakistan was not included in this listing, their relationship remaining 'tormented' indeed, to use Gujral's own admittance.¹³

In the light of this 'friendly, co-operative mould', the Indian Government responded positively towards a strengthening of SAARC's role. Foreign secretary meetings began in 2002, with heads of government summits in 2004. The question arises, though, of how successful, and how important an avenue for Indian foreign policy SAARC has been? In many ways SAARC has been a disappointment. As one Indian commentator put it in 2010, 'whatever the officials may say, the fact remains that the record of the organisation has nothing concrete to boast of'.¹⁴

In terms of security SAARC has not involved itself in India's security issues, primarily the disputes with Pakistan over Kashmir. India remains keen to keep it as a bilateral issue between itself and Pakistan, to be resolved between them and not by any outside organization like SAARC (or indeed the UN): 'with or without SAARC India enjoys a central position in the economic and foreign policies of the neighbouring countries and conducts its relations bilaterally. It has the geographical advantage to shape bilateral policy without involvement of any third country', or organization like SAARC.¹⁵ The other security issue, transnational terrorism,

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has received some SAARC treatment in the shape of the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1997), but the failure of states like Pakistan to legislate internally on it has nullified much of its 'regional' value for India.

Meanwhile, SAARC's primary goal of fostering economic co-operation has not really worked. Intra-SAARC trade remains meagre. The seventh SAARC Summit meeting at Dhaka in 1993 saw the signing of the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), with a South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) signed at the 12th SAARC Summit in 2004. This SAFTA was to be implemented in 2006, but only in a gradual way, and with sensitive items exempted. South Asia's intra-regional trade as a share of total trade has continued to limp along at around 5% in the 1980s and 1990s and into the present, with SAARC having made little statistical difference. Such continuing low figures stand in contrast to EU intra-trade figure of around 60% and ASEAN figures of around 25%. In terms of India, SAARC remains marginal. Ratna and Sidhu summed it up in 2008 as 'putting it another way India's trade with its immediate neighbourhood of SAARC India's trade with its neighbouring countries has not been very impressive, both in terms of volume and as a percentage of its global trade'.¹⁶ Having taken an already low 3.52% share of India's trade in 2003/04, it declined still further to a 2.83% share by 2007/08. For 2009/10 SAARC accounted for 4.69% of India's exports, and an even more lowly 0.57% of its exports.

Not surprisingly, Indian commentators can be dismissive of SAARC: 'regional interactions both in terms of movement of human beings or of goods, is minimum. Whatever success there may be in terms of economic exchange is perhaps not because of SAARC but despite it'.¹⁷ India's leadership seems well aware of these SAARC limitations. Natwar Singh, foreign minister in 2004, felt that:

Many pessimists would dismiss SAARC as a talking shop whose priorities are all mixed up. Detractors will point to the vast differences in geographical size, economic indicators, and diversity of economic and political systems as hurdles to integration. They would not be entirely wrong. SAARC will be 20 years old next year. It should be in the full maturity of its youth, ready to take on new challenges and directions. Yet, in fact it has yet to consolidate as an organization. At the recent SAARC meeting in Islamabad, we made a strong statement that it was time that SAARC departs from its endless round of meetings, seminars, and conferences, and moves to collaborative projects that brings tangible results to our peoples.¹⁸

A change of government brought little alteration to this analysis of SAARC's failure, and others' success. Manmohan Singh's sense of SAARC has been damning enough: 'it is however a fact that South Asia has not moved as fast as we all would have wished. We have only to see the rapid integration within ASEAN and its emergence as an important economic bloc in Asia to understand the opportunities that beckon'.¹⁹ The only trouble is that such sentiments suggest a readiness for India to look elsewhere for success, to other regions as it were.

A further problem with SAARC has been political, that is to say, China's involvement with it. Here China's push for 'observer' status was initially resisted by India, but eventually was conceded in 2005, in the wake of pressures from other SAARC members for such an arrangement, and as a trade-off for acceptance of a (pro-India) Afghanistan as a full member. Nevertheless, some commentators saw China's presence in SAARC as a (negative) extra-regional influence, thereby in effect tearing up India's own Monroe Doctrine.²⁰ This push by China into South Asia has further spurred India to seek an active role in regions adjoining South Asia, and not to be left out of moves towards regional integration in such areas outside South Asia.

From 'South Asia' to 'southern Asia'

India's initial sense of 'region', a sense from which policy priorities can be shaped, may initially have been focused around 'South Asia' (subcontinent settings of SAARC), but in recent years India's sense of *region* has developed, and from that India's sense of regional organizations and regional integration in which to involve itself. In doing so, they have responded to concerns of Indian commentators in 1997 that 'India should break out of the claustrophobic confines of South Asia'.²¹ In such a vein, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, announced in Singapore in 2000 that 'South Asia was always a dubious framework for situating the Indian security paradigm', for 'India's parameters of security concerns clearly extend beyond confines of the convenient albeit questionable geographical definition of South Asia'.²²

One sign of this is a nudge from the region being considered as 'South Asia' or the region being seen as a wider 'southern Asia': 'Indian strategic experts have been reviving the geographical concept of "Southern Asia" to define India's role and context, thereby widening the geographical limits of its strategic neighbourhood to include states outside the SAARC area'.²³ Not only strategic commentators, but India's politicians have been quite deliberately expanding the sense of what India's region actually involves:

Our engagement with our neighbours is, as I am sure you realize, multi-pronged. It is at the same time conducted bilaterally, regionally under the ambit of SAARC, and through what one might call sub-regional or even trans-regional mechanisms such as BIMSTEC, which includes some SAARC members and some ASEAN ones, or IOR-ARC, which pulls together 18 countries whose shores are washed by the Indian Ocean, including some South Asian nations and several on other continents.²⁴

Accordingly, India's sense of 'region' within which it operates and shapes its foreign policy has shifted to include overlapping and wider areas, namely the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and Pacific Asia/East Asia, to which we can turn.

The Indian Ocean (and the IOR-ARC, IONS)

The 1990s saw India embrace moves towards a wider regionalism, not focused on India's bilateral focus (Indira Doctrine) on the South Asia region, but rather on India's multilateral role within the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Consequently, as part of its Gujral Doctrine embrace of multilateralism and regionalism, India joined the IOR-ARC in 1995. Admittedly this economics-based view of regional structuring languished in subsequent years. Partly this was because of the relative economic insignificance of the Indian Ocean basin states, and partly because of drift as other major Indian Ocean littoral players like South Africa and Australia looked elsewhere for their own respective regional engagement—South Africa to Africa, and Australia to the Asia-Pacific. The organization still exists, but its importance for India has never really been established.

A more recent development, and one that perhaps now engages India more, is the IONS. This was set up by India in 2008, and is deliberately modelled on the West Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). Interestingly enough, whilst India is a member of the WPNS, China is not a member of the IONS, with India blocking such an appearance by China. Instead, the IONS serves as a potential avenue for Indian leadership in the IOR, albeit unofficially. India's drive in fostering the creation of this organization is part of its 'Look South' policy, its maritime

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rediscovery of the Indian Ocean, the Indian Ocean as India's backyard, the Indian Ocean as somehow 'India's Ocean'—all reflecting Panikkar's sense of 'making the Indian Ocean truly Indian'.²⁵ India's naval chief, Sureesh Mehta, explained that 'many navies of the Indian Ocean Region look to India to promote regional maritime security', in effect to show some regional leadership.²⁶ Chinese sources were certainly quick to report the comments by Rear Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, that the IONS would 'obviate the dependency on extra regional players in the region', and thereby enable India to take a lead and show its clear regional pre-eminence.²⁷ Whilst official statements about the IONS were fairly bland, a 'non-hegemonistic, cooperative consultative gathering', Indian media sources were clear enough that 'with India's growing clout [...] the navy has floated a maritime military bloc' for the Indian Ocean, led in effect by India.²⁸

Bay of Bengal (and BIMSTEC, etc.)

India's regional setting is as much to do with the Bay of Bengal as with South Asia. After all, the entire western littoral of the Bay of Bengal consists of India's long eastern seaboard, and the eastern littoral of the Bay of Bengal is dominated by India's sprawling Nicobar and Andaman island chains, which sit on choke point exit (the Strait of Malacca) from the Bay of Bengal into South-East Asia. This also gives India much of the Exclusive Economic Zone for Bay of Bengal waters, much more than any other Bay of Bengal littoral state.

One trans-regional forum for India's involvement has been BIMSTEC, set up in 1997 by Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with Nepal and Bhutan joining in 2004. For India, BIMSTEC has the advantages of SAARC without the disadvantages (Pakistan), and represents a bridge between South Asia and South-East Asia (Myanmar, Thailand). India's sense was clear at the first BIMSTEC Summit in 2004, that 'we see BIMST-EC as a collective forum for giving full expression to the widely felt need to rediscover the coherence of our region based on the commonality of linkages around the Bay of Bengal', in which 'we consider our participation in BIMST-EC as a key element in our "Look East Policy" and long standing approach of good neighbourliness towards all our neighbours – by land and sea'.²⁹ Another trans-regional forum in which India is involved is the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which was set up in 2000 to bring together India and five South-East Asian nations, namely Thailand, Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, but not China, despite its Mekong headwaters and tributaries.

A further framework shaped by New Delhi has been India's hosting of the MILAN exercises since 1995, organized from India's Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) at Port Blair in the Andaman islands. These exercises in the Bay of Bengal initially involved five nations—India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. The number of navies participating in the MILAN exercises has gradually increased over the years, from five in 1995, seven in 1997, seven in 1999, eight in 2003, nine in 2005, to 13 in 2008. In the 2010 MILAN exercises Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Viet Nam, Australia and New Zealand again joined India. Neither Pakistan nor China was invited to participate.

East Asia (and the EAS, etc.)

India's 'Look East' policy, in mark-1 (South-East Asia) and mark-2 (Australasia, Oceania, East Asia), has taken India out of its South Asia setting into that of East Asia/Pacific Asia and the Pacific Ocean. This underpins comments from India's leadership that:

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It is important to recognize manifest political and economic realities, when we try to tackle the crucial issues of growth and security. As home to 1 billion people, India has to be integral to any regional process pertaining to the Asia Pacific. We have a constructive and multi-faceted relationship with every major country of the region. This is also true of India's relations with ASEAN's East Asian neighbours [...] India's belonging to the Asia Pacific community is a geographical fact and a political reality. It does not require formal membership of any regional organization for its recognition or sustenance.³⁰

With this in mind, India has forged membership links in various regional organizations in the western Pacific/East Asia/Asia-Pacific settings.

In part, this has involved India in close links with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with which there is far greater trade, and with which India is a Dialogue Summit partner. This also involves India in membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which links Pacific Rim countries and India with ASEAN. Such linkages have pulled India into the emerging Asia-Pacific, or rather Pacific Asia/East Asia settings. India has been an observer member of the WPNS since 1998, and is currently seeking full membership. It has also had observer status in 2006, 2008 and 2010 with the RIMPAC exercises held by the USA and other Pacific Rim nations (though not China), and will in all likelihood join as a full participant. Questions of regional definitions continue to crop up, as *The Hindu* put it:

One technical hurdle is the APEC stipulation that 'an applicant economy should be located in the Asia-Pacific region'. It is for India to emphasise the hyphenated nature of this region and draw attention to an important plus. As a founder-participant in the evolving EAS process, India is already privy to the inter-state affairs of the Pacific-bordering East Asia. APEC membership will be a logical follow-up, with potential benefits to both sides.³¹

Currently India is seeking full membership of APEC, where the moratorium of expanding members ends in 2010.³²

Here, one important development within the Asia-Pacific has been the move towards East Asian regionality, through the mechanism of the EAS, which first met in 2005. This is seen as the driving force for some sort of East Asian Community to evolve. India was keen to be involved, for which it received strong support from Japan but initial obstruction from China. Nevertheless, India was invited and has settled down as one of the leading players at subsequent EAS summits. For India, EAS participation in this 'regional architecture for greater cooperation and economic integration', was 'a reflection of the increasing significance of the eastern orientation of India's foreign policy and our quest for closer engagement with countries of South-East Asia and East Asia'.³³ For Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, the invitation had a simple aim, 'India would be a useful balance to China's heft'.³⁴

Conclusions

Old-fashioned politics seem to underpin much of India's role in regional integration. Within South Asia, SAARC remains a weak channel for regional integration. India's very strength, and sheer size, within South Asia and SAARC means that other states keep looking out of the region: 'most South Asian countries have actively perceived their main security threat to be India. Accordingly, South Asian states have actively sought military, economic and diplomatic assistance from external [extra-regional] powers to offset India's influence. In such an environment, regional accommodation policies have become increasingly difficult'.³⁵ Conversely,

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India's own sense of economic opportunity, as well as challenging or constraining China outside South Asia, is leading China into a wider sense of regionality. In terms of 'regionality', a sub-continental mindset is being replaced by wider perceptions of region by India.

Notes

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- 7 *Ibid.*, p.239.
- 8 *Ibid.*
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