

China and Regional Security in South and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis of ASEAN and SAARC

Salman Ali Bettani¹ and Zahid Shahab Ahmed²

¹School of International Relations and Public Affairs,
Fudan University, Shanghai, China 200433

²National Defence College, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
19110170050@fudan.edu.cn; zahid.ahmed@ndc.ac.ae

How to Cite: Bettani, S. A., & Ahmed, Z. S. (2023). China and regional security in South and Southeast Asia: A comparative analysis of ASEAN and SAARC. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 11(2), 289–310. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v11i2.9600>

Abstract

Asian regionalism is largely represented by economic cooperation at sub-regional levels, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is seen as a prominent example of that. In contrast, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has failed to take off as a platform for economic cooperation and has been hostage to the India-Pakistan rivalry. While ASEAN was established as a forum to address members' security apprehensions concerning China, SAARC was created to focus on regional cooperation in non-controversial matters like trade and human security. Hence, ASEAN has engaged more deeply with China through various mechanisms. Conversely, SAARC-China relations remain limited because India, the most dominant actor in the organization and the region, views China as a threat to its security and hegemony in South Asia. The research, therefore, aims to answer the following question: How does one region successfully manage security challenges/threats while the other remains ensnared by them? Resolving this puzzle necessitates a nuanced understanding of the role of regionalism in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the significance of comprehending the process and evolution of regionalism in this context. To address this inquiry, the research employs a comparative-historical analysis grounded in archival data encompassing both primary and secondary sources. The investigation reveals that SAARC's limited engagement with China is a consequence of India's opposition, a dynamic absent in ASEAN, where Indonesia actively supports cooperation with China. The research underscores the critical importance of unraveling the complexities of regionalism in Southeast Asia to grasp the underlying factors contributing to divergent outcomes in these regional organizations.

Keywords: regional security, ASEAN, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), China

Introduction

The 20th century has seen a great transformation in terms of alliances, economic integration, and institutionalization at regional and sub-regional levels. Regionalism has gained momentum after the Cold War, and different regions have exhibited distinct trends and evolutionary patterns, culminating in a complex structure of economic interaction, security architecture, conflict management, power dynamics, and complex interdependence (Oba, 2019). This is particularly the case of regionalism in South and Southeast Asia, as their regionalism paths have been hampered by dynamic security theater, military threats, active conflicts, disputes, and geopolitical challenges from both within and outside the regions (Ahmed, 2013). At the international level, Cold War politics have influenced the emergence of regional organizations. However, the process cannot replace the traditional system of state centrism nor establish a new international order (Ikenberry, 1999). Instead, regions appear to arise either through disseminating various transactions and externalities or as protection against the hegemony of capitalist globalization and great-power politics. Within this background, the research aims to understand how regionalism in South and Southeast Asia has followed different trajectories, especially with reference to managing external security concerns. The research presents a comparative historical analysis of how regional organizations in both regions have engaged with China.

Despite being created as an organization to counter the China threat, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been engaging with China through dialogue and partnership. For instance, ASEAN and China have signed an Memorandum of Understanding to cooperate in non-traditional security (Wibisono, 2017). “While ASEAN’s policy of ‘honest brokerage’ has allowed the presence of other powers to balance China, its policy of enmeshing China has facilitated China’s role as a stakeholder in the ASEAN processes” (Shekhar, 2012). On the contrary, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is not created because of a common external threat perception but it has suffered from intra-regional rivalries, such as between India and Pakistan. Because of India’s opposition, SAARC has cooperated with China in a limited manner because India continues to veto China’s full membership but allows China an observer status in SAARC (Madan, 2014). This situation deserves some examination to understand how the two organizations have engaged with China very differently and whether that is a product of different security dynamics of South and Southeast Asia.

The security architecture in the Asia-Pacific has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War, and it continues to change due to shifting alignments because of the growing geo-economic and geopolitical competition between China and the US. The lack of strategic trust between the major powers and the rise of nationalism in some countries makes it harder to predict how the Asia-Pacific region will grow. Due to their pessimistic views on the future of the region, many US-based intellectuals promote offensive realism (Johnson & Thayer, 2016). Some academics even go so far as to predict that the region’s escalating military rivalry and friction between China and the United States will make it difficult for either side to resolve its security challenge, perhaps opening the door to armed war (Liff & Ikenberry, 2014). These

two perspectives on the nature of balancing and hedging are instructive. The fact that constructivists and realists both have significant and insightful things to say about how security is envisioned and implemented in the East Asian region is notable (Acharya, 2020). An analytically eclectic approach to understanding security in Asia should be used precisely because of the complex, multidimensional nature of what has been called the “regional security complex” (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Choosing how much causal significance to give to material and ideational variables is a constant struggle. The main finding from looking at the history of ASEAN is that these factors change with time and are neither predetermined nor unchangeable. Instead, ASEAN has shown that it can take advantage of changing geopolitical conditions in ways that seem to go against the structural limitations that have sometimes made the group what it is (Beeson, 2016). The security architecture has been evolving in both the regions with tangible indicators and variable threat perception matrix. Southeast Asia has become a nuclear-weapon-free zone, while South Asia is a nuclear flash point undergoing a robust arms race between India and Pakistan (Ali & Lee, 2022).

We use the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to understand the degree to which regional security environments have influenced regional organizations vis-à-vis China. Though significant literature is available on SAARC and ASEAN, the erstwhile literature has not used RSCT to examine how SAARC and ASEAN have tried to address external security challenges faced by some of their members. As the chosen theory argues, actors’ security concerns are limited to their immediate neighborhood. As scholars have argued, “Simple physical adjacency tends to generate more security interaction among neighbors than among states located in different areas” (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Interdependence in security is central to RSCT, and it has been further explained in the following manner: “a group of states whose primary security concerns are linked together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1991). The authors believe that the chosen framework is helpful in terms of understanding how member states of the two regional organizations have viewed regional security and how their interdependence in security or the lack of it has influenced their interactions with China through ASEAN and SAARC.

There is no shortage of literature on ASEAN and SAARC. However, none has compared the two organizations’ different regional security dynamics through the lens of RSCT by taking the case of the two organizations’ engagement with China. There is a lot of literature that focuses on the evolution of the two organizations, with a particular focus on history, institutional dynamics, growth patterns, and structural sustainability (Ahmed & Zahoor, 2015; Napolitano, 2013). With reference to China, there have also been studies on the nature of the two organization’s cooperation with China by examining a range of opportunities and challenges (Asfa & Ahmed, 2015; Beeson, 2016; Kumar, 2015).

Studies have also been done on regional security and the role of the two chosen organizations. ASEAN has promoted regional cooperation and integration in Southeast Asia, albeit gradually and cautiously. It is further believed that ASEAN has been successful in overcoming political disagreements, geographical problems, and economic inequities by focusing on compromise and consensus-building (Jones & Smith, 2007). It is argued that

despite political divisions, territorial conflicts, and economic inequalities, ASEAN has been able to overcome these hurdles to regional cooperation by focusing on practical collaboration, reaching consensus, and compromising (Pempel, 2010). There have also been some comparative studies of ASEAN and SAARC. According to Asfa and Ahmed (2015), ASEAN places regionalism at the ebb of political cohesion and economic liberalization, while SAARC depicts lackadaisical patterns of political and economic amalgamation in practicality. In other studies, scholars have mainly focused on how SAARC, a less developed organization, can learn from ASEAN's progress in various areas, including security (Ahmed, 2013; Antolik, 1987; De Silva, 1999). As there has been no research comparing ASEAN and SAARC's cooperation with China, we believe that our analysis offers a timely examination of the two organizations' engagement with China as the latter continues to expand the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South and Southeast Asia.

In terms of the research design, the research is a comparative-historical analysis. This methodology is well recognized in social sciences and plays an important role in terms of understanding social phenomena. This methodological approach has also been used in International Relations to understand better factors that influence foreign policies (Thies, 2002). For this purpose, we collect archival data comprising a variety of primary and secondary sources, including official documents of the two organizations and their member states, scholarly publications, and media reports. For the two separate cases, our data has covered periods from the inception of the two selected organizations until 2023. The research begins with our separate analysis of how ASEAN and SAARC have cooperated with China. This section follows our examination of ASEAN-China and SAARC-China relations.

Comparative Analysis

China has long-standing territorial disputes with South and Southeast Asian countries, including the South China Sea dispute and a border demarcation dispute with India. Nonetheless, China has benefitted from the interest of ASEAN members by building multifaceted relationships with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN. Regionalism is regarded as the most effective means of fostering economic growth, fostering a culture of shared interests among states, managing globalization, and enhancing regional security through mutual reliance (Taylor, 2015). In the case of regionalism in Southeast Asia, it is important to understand the idea of a security community and how ASEAN members have collectively engaged with China through this regional organization.

ASEAN-China Relations

In 1967, ASEAN was established with a membership of 622 million people and the motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". The threat of communism and interstate rivalries were factors in the political process throughout the Cold War era. Indonesia,

Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam were among the members (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.).

Due to the related concerns, ASEAN has accepted the rapid rise with subdued reluctance. Richard Grant mentions ASEAN's worries that an economically dominant and powerful China will have tremendous political and military influence in the area (Ashraf et al., 2017). The regional security environment of Southeast Asia is not as volatile as South Asia but has peculiar dynamics. There are various territorial disputes among the states, like over the South China Sea. Extra regional security apprehensions, particularly the emerging US-China competition, add another layer of complexity to the regional security environment with implications for regionalism (Keling et al., 2011).

Historical relations and shared geography connect China with ASEAN both culturally and politically. Post-revolutionary China, with its peculiar policy direction, has raised concerns in many Southeast Asian countries. The nature of engagement between the two has been benign, primarily with no exhibition of influence or control from either side, albeit tacit policy impacts have been made with cautious strategic orientation (Narine, 2002). In the 1960s, China's role in the Cold War raised many eyebrows in the region, creating an environment of mistrust. Previously, Southeast countries were preoccupied with their domestic affairs, and the only concern they had was interference from extra-regional powers exploiting internal problems. For instance, the US was involved in the bloody overthrow of Sukarno in Indonesia during 1965-1967 (Scott, 1985). The fear related to China was linked to communist insurgencies in the region, though the early years were tough in terms of internal politics and economic strife. The distrust remained potent because the Indonesian military was always suspicious due to alleged connections to the controversial coup of 1965 and support for the communist party of Indonesia. The US-China rapprochement influenced perceptions and threat assessments in ASEAN.

The change in discernment began when China gradually drifted from a typical Cold War orientation by completely reorienting its policy towards Southeast Asia and beyond. In the mid-1970s, most ASEAN countries normalized their relations with China except Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Sukma, 1999). Earlier, there had been significant differences in understanding of the nature and magnitude of the perceived threat from China among ASEAN members. Indonesia and Malaysia shared a greater threat perception with respect to the influence of China in the region and internal politics, while Singapore and Thailand were concerned about Vietnam to the extent that Thailand turned to China for military assistance (Lee & Lee, 2020). After opening, China achieved tremendous economic success and political stability, which was both an opportunity and a threat for ASEAN nations, given their recent history of skepticism. On a policy level, the rise of China had been the most substantial challenge experienced by these nations in mitigating internal conflicts, financial crises, and international political struggles (Beeson, 2010). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping's visit to Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore) played an important role in taking the relationship to a level of political and economic cooperation.

China's relations with ASEAN members have evolved primarily due to regional and international political situations. China's withdrawal from Vietnam provides ample grounds for China-ASEAN relations to be nourished. During a stronger China for Sino-ASEAN progress, an uncertain US policy toward the region creates space for strengthening ties and removing the threat diplomatically. China plays an important role in that case. It becomes the first country to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), extend strategic cooperation, and enter Free trade agreements (FTAs) and regional forums. Nonetheless, with growing economic relations, the perception of a threat cannot be completely ignored since the issue of the South China Sea continues to impact the political arena of Southeast Asia. From a regional standpoint, relations have shifted more towards economic cooperation since ASEAN prioritizes growth and focuses on the opportunities from China's economic and political rise. As an organization, ASEAN and its members have tried to maintain balanced relations with China and the West (Karim & Chairil, 2016).

The relationship between ASEAN and China has been subject to institutional growth patterns, internal political and strategic strife, and major power rivalries in the early 1990s, while after 1989, the ties improved, crossing all the complexities mentioned. In a visit to Bangkok that year, Chinese Premier Li Peng proposed four principles for Sino-ASEAN relations: (1) peaceful coexistence despite differences in social and political systems; (2) anti-hegemonism, i.e., China not seeking to be a hegemonic power nor interfering in the domestic affairs of ASEAN countries; (3) further development of economic relations; and (4) continuing support of regional cooperation and initiatives from ASEAN (Hao & Huan, 1989). Beijing's emphasis on economic growth and new global challenges has pushed it toward a more inward, regional approach. It has mended its ties with all Southeast Asian nations, especially Indonesia. With Indonesia (DW, 2022), China is eager to enhance economic and military relations, while Indonesia is also interested in active involvement in resolving the South China Sea dispute (Reuters, 2016).

China's factor has been one of the drivers behind the process of regionalism in Southeast Asia, among others. Its threat value, political entanglements in regional and global politics, and economic opportunity have been the main reasons to cooperate with China. Moreover, China also gains strategic importance by gaining the potential of an ally in the geopolitics of Asia. The collective strategic advantage provides member states with an individual economic opportunity by leveraging comparative advantages and complementarities. It has always been clear that the reason for the cooperation is a desire to strengthen security in the Asia-Pacific area. For example, China and Russia made a formal proposal to develop a security cooperation framework for the region during the 8th East Asia Summit. Although the design of the new Asia-Pacific regional security architecture was still in its infancy, this proposal put forward by China and Russia was of paramount strategic significance to the building of a new order in the Asia-Pacific region (Stronski & Ng, 2018). Since China and some ASEAN members have conflictual relations over the South China Sea, this dispute has been a major factor in the ASEAN-China relationship. China has moved quickly to incorporate ASEAN into maritime cooperation frameworks backed by China (Buszynski, 2003). The region has advanced from its murky past to a new development of a distinct region with relative control over its boundary, polarity, structure, and social construction due to a transformation of Southeast

Asia's security from conflict formation to a security regime. Additionally, the battle over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and China's ascent have connected Southeast Asia's security issues sufficiently together and demonstrated how impossible it will be to establish stability and security without effective cooperation between China and Southeast Asian states (Rasmeefueng, 2013).

The Southeast Asian states, individually and through ASEAN, have demonstrated that they are in favor of China becoming a stakeholder in regional security. It is very much reflected in how ASEAN has tried to establish a "stable distribution of power" among China, Japan, and the US (Foot, 1998). It is also reflected through ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which was established in 1994. It is a crucial forum for security discussion in the Indo-Pacific. It offers a forum for members to debate current security concerns and create collaborative actions to improve peace and security in the area. China has been an active stakeholder in ARF and presented a range of position papers in ARF meetings on issues such as cooperation in non-traditional security and maritime risk management.¹ Beijing initially views the ARF with skepticism, fearing that it will lead to the internationalization of the internal conflict or the South Chinese Sea issue. After a period of increased interactions beginning in the mid-1990s, China has come to see ASEAN as a reliable (Asian) mediator upholding values like sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus decision-making (Gerstl, 2008). The ARF's emphasis on dialogue and transparency, as well as its other confidence-building measures, have helped to improve relations between China and ASEAN. China's commitment to multilateralism and its improved relations with ASEAN. TAC, which China acceded to in 2003, commits to multilateral cooperation to settle territorial disputes in the South China Sea and counters transnational threats, which is indicative of trust between these two actors (Panda, n.d.).

SAARC-China Relations

China's continued importance in South Asian affairs is not surprising, given that the country shares a border with the region. Despite increasing geopolitical competition and border disputes with India (Zhang & Sun, 2019), China continues expanding its relations with other South Asian states (Bindra, 2017). China has political, economic, and geostrategic interests in the region but still has not managed to become a member of SAARC. Nevertheless, China's influence on India's decision to form SAARC cannot be ignored. Knowing that SAARC was established in 1985, China's formal participation in SAARC came much later (Fazal-ur-Rahman, 2011; Madan, 2014). SAARC leaders have reached an agreement during this meeting to partner with regional organizations and countries outside of South Asia. At the 13th SAARC summit in Dhaka in 2005, China and Japan became the first non-SAARC countries to join as observers (Saez, 2011). At the 14th SAARC summit in April 2007, China sent its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Li Zhaoxing, to participate for the first time. During a

¹ For further details, view the website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/gjs_665170/gjzzyhy_665174/2612_665212/

stopover in Pakistan, en route to the summit in New Delhi in 2007, the Chinese foreign minister stated that China was eager to strengthen ties with the South Asian countries through SAARC (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in India, 2007). Further, most SAARC members viewed China as a balancing and stabilizing factor inside SAARC. All of them were excited about China's new status as an observer in SAARC, and the increased opportunities for investment, trade, and other forms of collaboration that would result (Fazal-ur-Rahman, 2011).

During the colonial era, much of South Asia was part of the British Indian Sub-continent. South Asia of today is a product of a post-colonial era that started at the end of the 1940s with the creation of India and Pakistan as independent states. It still remains one of the most significant crisis regions in the twenty-first century. In this context, both traditional and cutting-edge security threats coexist and are intricately interwoven. Unsettled territorial disputes like the Jammu and Kashmir, nuclear proliferation, wide range of ethnic, religious, and left-wing rebellions with links to regional and global terrorist groups connected to organized crime, and the unpredictable repercussions of climate change can turn one of the poorest regions in the world into a conflagration (Wagner, 2014). Wars between states have made South Asia a highly militarized region. A corridor of conflict on the world map, it has been at war for millennia, notably since 1947 (Peters et al., 2006). State security issues and human security issues are both present in the region. In many cases, state security is prioritized over human security, with the latter always coming out on the losing end. It is evident through growing defense spending across the region, in particular in India and Pakistan. Despite massive human security problems, such as poverty, India ranked first and Pakistan eighth among the top ten weapon-importing countries in 2023 (Dutta, 2023). Hence, the region is held captive by its security web, and this situation seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

There are four main causes of conflict in South Asia that affect regional security. They are historical memories, colonial legacies, ethnicity, and ties to other countries. These reasons turn into dangerous actions that have terrible effects on both the individual countries and societies and the region as a whole. It leads to interstate wars, intrastate insurgencies, conflict management instead of resolution, an unending conventional and strategic arms race, nuclearization (in India and Pakistan), and extra-regional actors. The security architecture has led to a kind of mini-Cold War in the area, especially between India and Pakistan, the two biggest countries. It is interesting to note that the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), the world's oldest UN mission that is still ongoing, is based in India and Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2021). In many ways, South Asian regionalism has failed to take off like others, such as ASEAN, because of inter-member disputes or the fact that for members, their security threats are intra-regional. According to Ayoob (1985), the fate of South Asian regionalism will depend on various factors, including a shared perception of common threats. While Ayoob viewed those as purely traditional security threats, our analysis shows that is not the case in South Asia, as China is viewed by India as a major threat. Other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, have cooperative relations with China.

South Asia holds an important position in China’s foreign policy, which is evident from its engagement and investment. The BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) attest to the foregoing. Previously, many engagements took place at the China-South Asia Business Forum, established in 2004, which focused on communication, cooperation, development, and mutual advantages. It facilitated communication between Chinese businesses and SAARC business associations, which were activated in 2006. Since 2007, China has sent representatives to each SAARC summit, held a trade exhibition for South Asian countries, and convened a meeting of top officials from SAARC member states. The China-South Asia Exposition was an important event in June 2013, with Bangladesh serving as the featured country (Kondapalli, 2014). In addition, China has enhanced its position in the area by contributing to a variety of development projects, such as the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). The Secretariat of the SDF was inaugurated in Bhutan in 2010 to focus on three key areas, including human welfare, improving quality of life, and accelerating economic growth, social progress, and poverty alleviation in South Asia. Since its inception, China had supported various projects by providing US\$300,000 in 2012 (SAARC Development Fund (SDF), 2012). As its ability to cooperate through SAARC is limited by its observer status, China continues to prefer bilateralism in South Asia.

China begins its vaccine diplomacy in South Asia to refute the narratives pertaining to the virus’s origin and establish confidence among its counterparts. Beijing has been providing vaccines to leverage its medicinal and economic might. China has established the ‘Global Community of Health for All’ for its vaccine diplomacy (Xinhua, 2021). Even before the domestic uncertainties in Beijing improved, Chinese vaccine diplomacy has helped South Asia in terms of handling the pandemic (see Table 1). China delivered Bangladesh its first "500 rapid test kits" and "emergency anti-epidemic medical supplies" in February 2020. In June 2020, Beijing sent a team of medical experts to help fight the pandemic in Bangladesh (Banerji, 2021). In March 2020, China delivered medical supplies to the Gilgit Baltistan region in Pakistan upon the government’s request pertaining to medical supplies (Ali, 2020). Additionally, China supplied Sri Lanka with three batches of medical supplies and safety gear between March and June 2020.

Table India and China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in South and Southeast Asia until the End of 2021

Recipient countries	India (million doses)	China (million doses)
Afghanistan	0.500	--
Pakistan	--	1.060
Bangladesh	3.30	0.50
Sri Lanka	1.00	1.10
Maldives	0.30	0.20
Nepal	1.10	8.00
Bhutan	0.55	--
Total	6.75	3.66

Data sources: Bose (2021), Ministry of External Affairs (2022), Singh et al. (2023), and Xinhua (2021)

Troubled already by China's increasing influence in South Asia through the BRI, India begins its efforts in the region to counter China's vaccine diplomacy. India's efforts include boosting domestic vaccine manufacturing, purchasing vaccines from different sources, developing vaccination alliances and cooperation, and striving to ensure fair vaccine distribution. India has played a significant role in this respect by delivering vaccinations to numerous countries and collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO) to create the COVAX facility, which seeks to enable fair access to COVID-19 vaccines for all nations. In addition, India has collaborated with Africa and other nations to increase vaccine access and collaboration in vaccine development and research. Besides this, India has used its influence in SAARC to counter China's efforts by launching an emergency fund to tackle COVID-19 (Ahmed, 2020). It is in line with India's vaccine diplomacy campaign termed "Vaccine Maitri" (Singh et al., 2023). The project seeks to offer COVID-19 vaccinations to governments to improve India's reputation as a dependable global vaccine supplier. In congruence with that, India has sent vaccinations to several SAARC nations and committed to continue aiding the region in its fight against the COVID-19 epidemic (see Table 1).

Aside from this, the political, economic, and military connections between China and SAARC countries have been enhanced, and China has been given a larger role in the region. China's position during the COVID-19 epidemic set the stage for regional competitiveness in South Asia. As China has begun its vaccine diplomacy by providing vaccines to South Asian states, India decides to counter such efforts through its vaccine diplomacy but also uses SAARC – an organization that New Delhi has ignored in recent years to pressure Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism.

After winning the elections in 2014, Modi pulled off a diplomatic coup by inviting Nawaz Sharif and all the leaders of South Asia to his inauguration. It subsequently gave rise to hitherto unheard-of optimism for the revival of a largely dormant SAARC. However, that was an occasion for taking pictures. The Modi administration focused heavily on neighborhood initiatives with enticing names like "Act East" and "Neighborhood First" but has kept quiet about SAARC (Pattanaik, 2022). SAARC could find no reference to the much-touted government policy of putting neighborhoods first. Additionally, his government actively advocated and convinced Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to call off the 2016 SAARC summit that was due to take place in Islamabad. It took place following the Uri attack on an Indian military post, which intensified tensions between India and Pakistan (Ahmed, 2020).

Many people were surprised by Prime Minister Modi's mention of SAARC in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, given how the organization was handled during his first time in power. Most SAARC members enthusiastically embraced his suggestion for an emergency COVID-19 fund for SAARC member countries and made monetary contributions to the fund as a result. India donated US\$10 million, and by 23 March 2020, the Emergency fund had amassed US\$18.8 million with additional contributions from other member states of SAARC (Ahmed, 2020). Initially, Pakistan was not on board and joined later. In 2020, SDF allocated US\$5 million to tackle the pandemic in South Asia (Noronha, 2020).

China's full membership is one of the most contentious issues on the SAARC platform between pro-China and other members. Indian academics and intelligentsia have raised grave concerns over China's growing involvement in South Asia and SAARC, in contrast to the more optimistic views held by SAARC's smaller republics (Kumar, 2015). Using multilateral and regional organizations to strengthen its economic and political relationships across Asia is seen as part of China's multinational strategy. Over time, Asian economies have become more and more dependent on China, which is beginning to have geopolitical repercussions for Asia and India. India is more concerned about the appearance of a unipolar Asia, and it sees the promotion of "multipolarity" as a cover for consolidating its power in the region (Acharya, 2017). Although there is much optimism about Sino-Indian economic relations and improving political and strategic understanding, there are several troubling events and worries about China's role and goals in Asia that are thought to have direct effects on India. For decades, China has been India's unwelcome next-door neighbor and a major security concern that drives India's security dilemma. India accuses China of actively supporting anti-India movements, countering Indian interests and influence in the region, and focusing on land disputes to achieve this goal (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). The primary concern for India is that the Sino-Pak alliance will undermine its influence in SAARC and significantly limit its interests. The perception is based on experiences where China has blocked India's entry into regional structures like ASEAN, ARF, and East Asian Summit. However, there are regional platforms where both coexist, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS), and the Asia Pacific Economic Forum (Madan, 2014). Apart from geostrategic and geopolitical apprehensions about India, China also faces significant challenges in its relations with SAARC. It is connected to two problematic regions, Xinjiang and Tibet, the tactical dynamism of India and Pakistan in their strategic interests, and the capacity of smaller states in SAARC (Bindra, 2017). Moreover, India still holds influence over the decisions and policies of these smaller states, and it has advantages in social, political, and historical relations as well.

Besides the issue of India's dominance in SAARC/South Asia, there are other challenges facing SAARC. As an organization, SAARC has not been able to fully integrate the region either politically or economically. While the founding fathers of SAARC wanted to avoid political issues, the organization has suffered enormously due to conflicts involving its members, especially India and Pakistan. Such political tensions have blocked SAARC's performance in many ways like through cancellations or postponements of its meetings, such as annual summits. In its 37 years, there have only been 18 annual summits. The 19th summit, which was scheduled to take place in Pakistan in 2016, was postponed due to mainly India's opposition following a terrorist attack on an Indian army camp in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir. This summit has not taken place since then due to differences between India and Pakistan concerning cross-border terrorism. While several ASEAN members, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam, have territorial disputes, China mainly has a territorial dispute with India in South Asia over the demarcation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). While the two sides went to war over the boundary demarcation in 1962, the conflict has continued and intensified in recent years in the shape of the troops from both sides clashing using sticks and bricks - most recently in December 2022 (Yeung, 2022).

India views China's increasing influence in its neighborhood differently. For New Delhi, that is a threat to its influence and hegemony in the region. Therefore, it is availing all possible options to not only reject China's various projects or proposals but also try to counter them whenever possible. India has time again rejected China's invitations to join the BRI and, in fact, criticizes the BRI for going through the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As China has found no bigger opening in SAARC, a dormant organization because of the India-Pakistan dispute, it has come up with its framework to cooperate with its key partners in South Asia. China held an online summit with South Asian nations on 27 April 2021, and India decided not to attend (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021). The Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi, stated that the "door is wide open" for India and other South Asian countries to join the platform (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021). India, however, declined the invitation and said it does not recognize the process. However, it lacked China's ability to aid smaller states in the region with adequate funding, equipment, medicines, and vaccines (Parashar, 2021).

Key Drivers of ASEAN and SAARC's Relationship with China

Members of ASEAN and SAARC have established diplomatic ties with China and are actively collaborating with Beijing in areas like trade, investment, cultural exchange, and tourism, on a bilateral level. FTAs signed by many ASEAN and SAARC countries have also aided in increasing economic cooperation between the two sides. As for multilateral cooperation, both ASEAN and SAARC have set up various mechanisms for working together with China. For instance, ASEAN and China have set up the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) to encourage business transactions and investment. China has adopted the Generalized System of Preferences in many developing countries, which includes most SAARC countries, but there is no institutional agreement between the two regarding trade or economic cooperation between SAARC and China (Zongyi, 2014). The East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are just two examples of regional organizations where ASEAN and SAARC have interacted with China.

The volume of trade between China and ASEAN has increased significantly in recent years. In 2021, the trade volume of goods between China and ASEAN was US\$878.2 billion, reaching a year-on-year increase of 28.1%. Among them, China's exports to ASEAN were US\$483.69 billion, reaching a year-on-year increase of 26.1%, while imports from ASEAN were US\$394.51 billion, reaching a year-on-year increase of 30.8%. ASEAN became China's largest trading partner for the second consecutive year. Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand were China's top three trading partners in ASEAN. The top exports from ASEAN to China included electrical machinery and equipment, machinery and mechanical appliances, and articles of apparel and clothing accessories. Meanwhile, the top imports from China to ASEAN included electrical machinery and equipment, machinery and mechanical appliances, and miscellaneous chemical products (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

The volume of trade between China and SAARC has increased in recent years, but it is still relatively small compared to China's trade with ASEAN. China is also currently the largest trading partner of South Asian countries. Moreover, China's trade with South Asia has substantially increased from US\$93 billion in 2012 to US\$ 118.03 billion in 2018 with imports from the region standing at US\$22.6 billion during the same year (Mufti & Ali, 2021). The top exports from SAARC countries to China include textiles and clothing, mineral fuels and oils, and ores and metals. Then, the top imports from China to SAARC countries include electrical machinery and equipment, machinery and mechanical appliances, and miscellaneous chemical products.

In ASEAN countries, the Chinese diaspora has played a significant role in the relationship between those countries and China. Southeast Asian Chinese account for about 80% of the diaspora of the Chinese population in the world. Although their share of the population in the region is only about 4–6%, their contribution to the region's economic and trade activities is much larger (Priebe & Rudolf, 2015). According to the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute (2018), BRI projects in ASEAN countries amount to more than US\$739 billion, including US\$98.5 billion in Malaysia, US\$70.1 billion in Singapore, and US\$9.4 billion in the Philippines (Liu, 2021).

One way in which the Chinese diaspora has influenced ASEAN-China relations is through trade and investment. Many members of the Chinese diaspora in ASEAN countries own businesses or are involved in trade and investment, and they have helped to facilitate economic ties between ASEAN countries and China. For example, many Chinese-owned businesses in ASEAN countries source their raw materials or finished products from China or export their products to China. Certain sectors of ASEAN economies are almost under the complete control of the Chinese diasporas. The Chinese stake in Thailand's trading and industry sectors has reached 90% (De Pablos & Lytras, 2010). It has helped to strengthen economic ties between ASEAN countries and China and contributed to the overall growth of trade and investment between the two sides. Growing China-ASEAN trade, economic, and social ties have deepened significantly since the commencement of the ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations in 1991. The formation of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area in 2010 created an economic entity with a combined GDP of \$6.6 trillion, 1.9 billion people, and a total trade of \$4.3 trillion. By 2020, China had become the largest trading partner of ASEAN for eleven consecutive years, while ASEAN replaced the EU to become China's largest trade partner since early 2020 (English.gov.cn, 2015). The Chinese FDI to ASEAN countries doubled between 2013 and 2018 to \$14 billion (Liu, 2021).

The role of the Chinese diaspora in terms of people-to-people contact between the ASEAN region and China cannot be ignored. Against the backdrop of multi-layered transnational flows of capital, goods, ideas, and people have increased in both pace and intensity through governmental and societal institutionalized channels, such as the China-ASEAN Exposition and the China-Southeast Asia High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (Ren & Liu, 2022). In addition to trade and investment, the Chinese diaspora in ASEAN countries has also played a role in cultural exchange and people-to-people ties between ASEAN countries and China. Many members of the Chinese diaspora in ASEAN countries are active

in local Chinese language schools and cultural organizations, and they help to promote cultural exchange between ASEAN countries and China. It has helped to foster a better understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture in ASEAN countries and contributed to the overall strengthening of bilateral relations.

In terms of comparing China's engagement with ASEAN and SAARC or vice versa, we cannot ignore the role of regional leaders, namely Indonesia in Southeast Asia/ASEAN and India in South Asia/SAARC. Indonesia is the largest economy in ASEAN, and it has a strong economic relationship with China. China is one of Indonesia's largest trading partners, and Indonesia is a major beneficiary of Chinese investment and trade, particularly the BRI. Implementation of the FTA between China and ASEAN (ACFTA) in 2010, along with the Chinese BRI launched in 2013, have helped to deepen bilateral relationships between both countries. As a result, China has become Indonesia's fourth-biggest trading partner (Chandra & Lontoh, 2011). As a result, Indonesia has a strong interest in maintaining good relations with China and deepening economic ties between the two sides. In 2019 and 2020, China and Indonesia were on the brink of a potential armed conflict due to repeated incursions by China's coast guard and fishing militia into Indonesia's exclusive economic zone in the Natuna Sea (Laksmiana, 2022). Indonesia responded by dispatching warships and fighter jets and calling for its fishing vessels to relocate to the area (Widianto & Costa, 2020). Eventually, China pulled back, but occasional incursions still occurred. Since then, Chinese-Indonesian relations have improved, which can have a significant impact on the United States and its competition with China in the Indo-Pacific amid this tense standoff. Some observers have hailed the moment as an opportunity for Jakarta to lean closer to Washington. In contrast, others predict the rise of a united ASEAN against China's coercive behavior in the contested waters. The United States sees Indonesia as an important economic and security partner, and China sees it as a source of resources and a strategic partner (Yee, 2021). Indonesia follows a policy of nonalignment to avoid angering either country. However, there are still constraints that may limit the potential of their relationship, such as China's continued maritime brinkmanship in Southeast Asia.

The government of Indonesia severed diplomatic ties with the government of the People's Republic of China in October 1967. The failed coup in 1965 was officially blamed on the communist party of Indonesia, and claimed that cutting off diplomatic ties with China was necessary to protect the country from an external threat (Suryadinata, 1990). Although positive changes in Indonesia's external environment were indicated by the willingness of most of its regional partners within ASEAN to establish diplomatic relations with the government in Beijing, relations had remained frozen for over two decades. The transfer of diplomatic ties from Taipei, which had not been an obstacle in Jakarta's case, by the United States and Japan did not sway Indonesia's government to change its mind. In the end, diplomatic relations remained severed until August 1990, a span of nearly 23 years (Sukma, 1999).

In contrast, India and China have often competed for strategic dominance in the international and regional order and continue to be embroiled in border disputes. Hence, India has been skeptical of China's deepening economic ties in South Asia, which India views

as its sphere of influence (Fazli et al., 2022). As a result, India has been less keen on expanding SAARC-China relations compared to Indonesia's role in ASEAN.

There are also political drivers of Indonesia's approach to China. Indonesia has a more neutral stance in regional affairs. It has generally sought to maintain good relations with all its major partners. Indonesia has pursued a policy of positive neutrality in regional affairs, which means that it has sought to avoid taking sides in conflicts or disputes between major powers and instead focused on building good relations with all its major partners. China offers Indonesia benefits that converge neatly with its national policy priorities predicated on development, prosperity, defense self-reliance, and global diplomatic stature (Nabbs-Keller, 2011). This approach has helped to maintain stability and avoid the risk of conflict in the region. In contrast, India has a more assertive foreign policy and sometimes takes a more confrontational stance towards China in regional affairs. India has had territorial disputes with China and is concerned about China's growing influence in the region. As a result, India has been less keen on deepening SAARC-China relations compared to Indonesia and its desire to deepen ASEAN-China relations.

Conclusion

There are many noticeable differences in the trajectories of ASEAN and SAARC in terms of regional cooperation in Southeast and South Asia, respectively. The research argues that the two organizations have engaged differently with China because they face different regional security dynamics. Looking through RSCT, this difference is quite contrasting as there are intra-regional security threats in South Asia, and a visible example of that is the India-Pakistan relationship or the region's two nuclear powers. In contrast, a shared external threat (China) plays a key role in bringing ASEAN members together. Other than India, there is no other SAARC member that has any pending dispute with China and feels threatened by China's growing geopolitical and geo-economic influence in South Asia. In fact, many of them are collaborating with China through BRI. These dynamics have played out in the way that the two organizations have cooperated with China.

ASEAN has made significant progress in the areas of economic and defense cooperation. In contrast, SAARC has been struggling in various ways, including economic and security cooperation. While some progress has been made regarding economic cooperation, South Asia is far behind Southeast Asia with regard to economic integration. The research examines the two organizations' engagement with China to see how they have cooperated in a variety of areas. Through economic, cultural, and defense cooperation, ASEAN has involved China more deeply as a stakeholder in Southeast Asia. In comparison, SAARC-China cooperation remains very limited because SAARC has become hostage to the India-Pakistan relationship overall. As regional cooperation has been politicized, there is not much intra-regional cooperation in any area, including culture and trade. In this way, the trajectory of SAARC is very different from that of ASEAN, which has engaged with China in various ways, especially in terms of cultural relations.

We have looked at a variety of factors that influence ASEAN and SAARC differently. First, China's economic relations with ASEAN members are far greater compared to SAARC member states. However, something may change as China continues to invest billions under the BRI in South Asia, for example in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Second, there is a significant role of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia that has contributed to very good economic and cultural relations between China and major ASEAN members, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Finally, we have examined how regional leaders have viewed China differently. While Indonesia has been supporting deeper engagement with China through ASEAN, India views China as a threat to its regional security and hegemony in South Asia. India's concerns have only grown as China has invested in infrastructure projects under the BRI in South Asia, such as seaports in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Hence, there is little likelihood of India allowing China's full membership of SAARC.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Dean School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, China.

About The Authors

Salman Ali Bettani is a mid-career academic and analyst in the field of international relations. Currently a Ph.D. candidate at the School of IR and Public Affairs at Fudan University in Shanghai, Salman is also a lecturer at the School of Politics & IR at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad. He focuses on politics of South Asia, China, and nuclear politics, and has participated in several international dialogues, including the Track-II between India and Pakistan, and China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. He has been part of Nuclear 3s course at Howard Baker institute University of Tennessee USA. His recent publications are "*Deterrence Measure: A Cause for Promoting Regional Instability in South Asia*" in the Chinese Journal of IR, "*CPEC: Regional Swords and Stability*" in the Indian Journal of Economics and Business, and "*The Novel Changes in Pakistan's Party Politics: Analysis of Causes and Impacts*" in the CPSR.

Zahid Shahab Ahmed is an Associate Professor of Security and Strategic Studies at the National Defence College of the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi. Before that, he was a Senior Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia. During 2013-16, he was an Assistant Professor at the Centre for International Peace and Stability, National University of Sciences and Technology in Pakistan. He has published extensively on international relations in South Asia. Among his publications is *Regionalism and Regional Security in South Asia: The Role of SAARC* (Routledge, 2013). ORCID: 0000-0003-2084-0253.

References

- Acharya, A. (2020). Thinking theoretically about Asian IR. In D. Shambaugh & M. Yahuda (Eds.), *Internaitonal relations of Asia* (pp. 55–86). Rowan & Littlefield Publishers.
- Acharya, A. (2017). China and India in the emerging global order: Lessons from ASEAN. In *East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian encounters in Southeast Asia* (pp. 186–216). Oxford University Press.
- Ahmed, Z. S. (2013). *Regionalism and regional security in South Asia: The role of SAARC*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, Z. S. (2020, 11 April). *Modi, SAARC and Covid-19*. The News. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/642428-modi-saarc-and-covid-19>
- Ahmed, Z. S., & Zahoor, M. (2015). Afghanistan in SAARC: A critical assessment of organisational expansion. *South Asian Survey*, 22(2), 171–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523117748812>
- Ahmed, Z. S., Bhatnagar, S., & AlQadri, A. (2021) The United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan: Analysis of perceptions in India and Pakistan. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 33(2), 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2021.1910227>
- Ali, K. (2020, March 26). *China seeks opening of border with Pakistan for medical supplies*. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543805/china-seeks-opening-of-border-with-pakistan-for-medical-supplies>
- Ali, S., & Lee, T. F. B. (2022). Deterrence measure: A casue for promoting regional instability in South Asia. *Chinese Journal of International Review*, 4(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2630531322500081>
- Antolik, M. (1987). ASEAN and SAARC revisited: More lessons. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 9(3), 221–228. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25797960>
- Asfa, R., & Ahmed, M. (2015). Prospects of regionalism: Comparative analysis of SAARC and ASEAN. *Asia Pacific*, 33, 28–43.
- Ashraf, T., Akhir, M. N. M., & Salyana, J. A. (2017). Mapping of track two initiatives: A case of Pakistan-India conflict (1988-2001). *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 37(1), 16–29.
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://asean.org/about-us/>
- Attanayake, C., & Haiqi, Z. (2021, June 15). *China's pandemic diplomacy in South Asia*. ISAS Insights. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/chinas-pandemic-diplomacy-in-south-asia/>
- Ayoob, M. (1985). The primacy of the political: South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) in comparative perspective. *Asian Survey*, 25(4), 443–457. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644228>

- Banerji, A. (2021, June 25). *India's flawed vaccine diplomacy*. Stimson. <https://www.stimson.org/2021/indias-flawed-vaccine-diplomacy/#:~:text=Although%20some%20have%20suggested%20that,Asia%20in%20the%20near%20future>
- Beeson, M. (2010). Asymmetrical regionalism: China, Southeast Asia and uneven development. *East Asia*, 27(4), 329–343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-010-9121-0>
- Beeson, M. (2016). Can ASEAN cope with China? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341603500101>
- Bindra, S. S. (2017). Chinese strategy in South Asia: A critical analysis. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 21(3), 28–49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48531351>
- Bose, S. (2021). *The dynamics of vaccine diplomacy in India's neighbourhood*. ORF. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-dynamics-of-vaccine-diplomacy-in-indias-neighbourhood/>
- Buszynski, L. (2003). ASEAN, the declaration on conduct, and the South China Sea. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 25(3), 343–362. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25798652>
- Buzan, B. (1991). *People, states and fear: An agenda for international security studies in the Post-Cold War era*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Buzan, B., & Waeber, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structures of international security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chandra, A. C., & Lontoh, L. A. (2011). *Indonesia – China trade relations: The deepening of economic integration amid uncertainty*. International Institute for Sustainable Development. https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/indonesia_china_relations.pdf
- De Pablos, P. O., & Lytras, M. D. (2010). *The China information technology handbook*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- De Silva, K. M. (1999). The European community and Asean: Lessons for SAARC. *South Asian Survey*, 6(2), 271–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152319900600208>
- Dutta, T. (2023, March 14). *India remains world's top importer of arms supplies*. The National. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/2023/03/14/india-remains-worlds-top-importer-of-arms-supplies/>
- DW. (2022, 26 July). *China, Indonesia agree to boost relations in Beijing meeting*. <https://www.dw.com/en/china-and-indonesia-agree-to-boost-relations-during-beijing-meeting/a-62605851>
- English.gov.cn. (2015, March 30). *Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative*. State Council of the People's Republic of China. http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm#:~:text=It%20is%20aimed%20at%20promoting,cooperation%20of%20higher%20standards%3B%20and
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in India. (2007, April 3). *Remarks by Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing at the Opening Ceremony of the Fourteenth SAARC Summit*. http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/embassy_news/2007en/200704/t20070403_2375192.htm

- Fazal-ur-Rahman. (2011). China and SAARC: Envisaging a partnership for development. *Pakistan Horizon*, 64(4), 51–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24711189>
- Fazli, Z., Hossain, D., Bhandari, A., Bhattarai, D., Naseem, A., & Attanayake, C. (2022, August 16). *India-China competition: Perspectives from the neighbourhood*. ORF. <http://20.244.136.131/research/india-china-competition>
- Foot, R. (1998). China in the ASEAN regional forum: Organizational processes and domestic modes of thought. *Asian Survey*, 38(5), 425–440. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645501>
- Gerstl, A. (2008). The China factor in regional security cooperation: The ASEAN regional forum and the Shanghai cooperation organization. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 1(2), 118–139.
- Hao, Y., & Huan, G. (1989). *The Chinese view of the world*. Pantheon Books.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (1999). Institutions, strategic restraint, and the persistence of American postwar order. *International Security*, 23(3), 43–78. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.3.43>
- Johnson, D. D. P., & Thayer, B. A. (2016). The evolution of offensive realism: Survival under anarchy from the Pleistocene to the present. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 35(1), 1–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372766>
- Jones, D. M., & Smith, M. L. R. (2007). Making process, not progress: ASEAN and the evolving East Asian regional order. *International Security*, 32(1), 148–184. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30129804>
- Karim, M. F., & Chairil, T. (2016). Waiting for hard balancing? Explaining Southeast Asia's balancing behaviour towards China. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 15(1), 34–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44162371>
- Keling, M. F., Som, H. M., Saludin, M. N., Shuib, M. S., & Ajis, M. N. (2011). The development of ASEAN from strategic approach. *Asian Social Science*, 5(7), 169–189. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v7n7p169>
- Kondapalli, S. (2014). The paradox of China in the Asia-Pacific theatre. *Griffith Asia Quarterly*, 2(1).
- Kumar, S. Y. S. (2015). China's SAARC membership: The debate. *International Journal of China Studies*, 6(3), 299–311.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2022, August 30). *Jakarta gets 'grey-zoned' by Beijing*. East Asia Forum. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/30/jakarta-gets-grey-zoned-by-beijing/>
- Lee, L., & Lee, J. (2020, February 4). *Understanding, analysing and countering Chinese non-military efforts to increase support for, and decrease resistance to, Beijing's strategic and defence objectives in Southeast Asia*. United States Studies Centre. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/understanding-analysing-and-countering-chinese-non-military-efforts-to-increase-support-for-and-decrease-resistance-to-beijings-strategic-and-defence-objectives-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-malaysia-the-philippines-singapore-thailand-vietnam>

- Liff, A. P., & Ikenberry, G. J. (2014). Racing toward tragedy?: China's rise, military competition in the Asia Pacific, and the security dilemma. *International Security*, 39(2), 52–91. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00176
- Liu, H. (2021). Beyond strategic hedging: Mahathir's China policy and the changing political economy of Malaysia, 2018–2020. In F. Heiduk (Ed.), *Asian geopolitics and the US-China rivalry* (pp. 159–176). Routledge.
- Madan, T. (2014, November 20). *China's Role in SAARC*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-role-in-saarc/>
- Malone, D. M., & Mukherjee, R. (2010). India and China: Conflict and cooperation. *Survival*, 52(1), 137–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396331003612513>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2021, September 16). *Overview of China-ASEAN economic and trade relations, opportunities and challenges--Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Huang Xilian, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202109/t20210916_9717287.html#:~:text=In%20the%20first%20half%20of,two%2Dway%20investment%20was%20booming
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2022). *Ministry of External Affairs: Annual Report 2021-2022*. Government of India.
- Mufti, A., & Ali, I. (2021, February 26). *Sino-SAARC trade relations: Commentary and analysis*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3763691
- Nabbs-Keller, G. (2011). Growing convergence, greater consequence: The strategic implications of closer Indonesia-China relations. *Security Challenges*, 7(3), 23–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26467106>
- Napolitano, J. (2013). Development, sustainability and international politics. In L. Meuleman (Ed.), *Transgovernance: Advancing sustainability governance* (pp. 163–211). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-28009-2_4
- Narine, S. (2002). *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Noronha, G. (2020, 7 April). SAARC development fund allocates \$5 million for Covid-19 projects. *The Economic Times*. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/saarc-development-fund-allocates-5-million-for-covid-19-projects/articleshow/75026957.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
- Oba, M. (2019). Further development of Asian regionalism: Institutional hedging in an uncertain era. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 8(2), 125–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1688905>
- Panda, A. (n.d.). *Treaty of amity and cooperation*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/tag/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation/>

- Parashar, S. (2021, April 29). India declines China invite to join anti-Covid initiative. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-cold-to-chinas-invite-to-participate-in-joint-fight-against-covid/articleshow/82297253.cms>
- Pattanaik, S. S. (2022). India's 'neighbourhood first' policy: The primacy of geoeconomics. *The Round Table*, 111(3), 440–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2082774>
- Pempel, T. J. (2010). Soft balancing, hedging, and institutional Darwinism: The economic-security nexus and East Asian regionalism. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 10(2), 209–238. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418821>
- Peters, J. E., Dickens, J., Eaton, D., Fair, C. C., Hachigian, N., Karasik, T. W., ..., & Wolf, C. (2006). *War and escalation in South Asia*. Rand Corporation.
- Priebe, J., & Rudolf, R. (2015). Does the Chinese diaspora speed up growth in host countries? *World Development*, 76, 249–262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.07.007>
- Rasmeefueng, N. (2013). *Southeast Asian security complex: The case of the Spratly Islands conflict*. Lund University.
- Ren, N., & Liu, H. (2022). Southeast Asian Chinese engage a rising China: Business associations, institutionalised transnationalism, and the networked state. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(4), 873–893. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1983952>
- Reuters. (2016, August 16). *Indonesia actively involved in resolving South China Sea disputes: President*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-indonesia-resolution-idUSKCN10R0BH>
- SAARC Development Fund (SDF). (2012, November). *Chinese ambassador to Nepal visited the SDF secretariat*. <http://www.sdfsec.org/node/105574>
- Saez, L. (2011). *The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): An emerging collaboration architecture*. Routledge.
- Scott, P. D. (1985). The United States and the overthrow of Sukarno, 1965-1967. *Pacific Affairs*, 58(2), 239–264. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758262>
- Shekhar, V. (2012). ASEAN's response to the rise of China: Deploying a Hedging strategy. *China Report*, 48(3), 253–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445512462314>
- Singh, B., Singh, S., Singh, B., & Chattu, V. K. (2023). India's neighbourhood vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19 pandemic: Humanitarian and geopolitical perspectives. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58(6), 1021–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221079310>
- Stronski, P., & Ng, N. (2018, February 28). *Cooperation and competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>
- Sukma, R. (1999). *Indonesia and China: The politics of a troubled relationship*. Routledge.

- Suryadinata, L. (1990). Indonesia-China relations: A recent breakthrough. *Asian Survey*, 30(7), 682–696. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644558>
- Taylor, V. (2015). Advancing regionalism and a social policy agenda for positive change: From rhetoric to action. *Global Social Policy*, 15(3), 329-335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018115600123>
- Thies, C. G. (2002). A pragmatic guide to qualitative historical analysis in the study of international relations. *International Studies Perspectives*, 3(4), 351–372. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44218229>
- Wagner, C. (2014). *Security cooperation in South Asia: Overview, reasons, prospects*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit.
- Wibisono, A. A. (2017). ASEAN-China security relations: Traditional and non-traditional aspects. *Global & Strategis*, 11(1), 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.20473/jgs.11.1.2017.39-54>
- Widianto, S., & Costa, A. B. D. (2020, January 7). *Indonesia deploys fighter jets in stand-off with China*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-china-idUSKBN1Z61AM>
- Xinhua. (2021, August 13). Pakistan steers through pandemic scare with help of Chinese vaccines. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/13/c_1310124805.htm
- Yee, W. Y. (2021, December 2). *Explaining China's relationship with Indonesia, its gateway to Southeast Asia*. The China Project. <https://thechinaproject.com/2021/12/02/explaining-chinas-relationship-with-indonesia-its-gateway-to-southeast-asia/>
- Yeung, J. (2022, December 15). *Indian and Chinese troops fight with sticks and bricks in video*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/14/asia/india-china-border-tensions-video-intl-hnk/index.html>
- Zhang, J., & Sun, Q. (2019). China–India relations: A premature strategic competition between the dragon and the elephant. *Issues & Studies*, 55(03). <https://doi.org/10.1142/s1013251119400046>
- Zongyi, L. (2014, December 12). *China's economic relations with SAARC: Prospects and hurdles*. China Institute of International Studies. https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202007/t20200715_2766.html