Beyond Bilateralism: How Reviving SAARC Can Reset Bangladesh-India Relations

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The Context

For nearly a decade, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has existed mostly as a memory — a summit that stopped happening, a secretariat in Kathmandu keeping the lights on, an idea eight governments still nominally endorse but none dares revive. Since India suspended its participation in 2016, SAARC has drifted from dormancy to irrelevance, and most observers have stopped expecting it to matter again. That assumption deserves to be tested — and Bangladesh, at this moment, is better positioned than any other South Asian state to test it.

This article imagines precisely that possibility—not as fantasy, but as an elegant strategic move: leveraging India's quest for regional legitimacy ahead of the BRICS Summit and Bangladesh's growing strategic agency to revive SAARC and reset the relationship through regional multilateralism, beyond bilateral grievances.

A Moment of Leverage, Not Just Principle

Since the 2024 uprising that ousted the Awami League government, Bangladesh has recalibrated a foreign policy that had bent unusually far toward New Delhi's preferences. That recalibration has not been smooth: Sheikh Hasina, convicted and sentenced in absentia by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal, remains in India, and Dhaka's extradition request has sat 'under examination' for months.

Despite promises to 'engage constructively', India — maintaining plausible deniability — allowed Hasina a virtual press conference from Delhi on the July-uprising anniversary. The move drew a rare rebuke from PM Tarique Rahman, who urged a 'conducive environment' for ties, while Dhaka's formal press release called it an 'affront to its sovereignty', insisting Bangladesh 'will never again become a client state.'

Yet that same week, India's intelligence chief quietly visited Dhaka and its High Commissioner met Bangladesh's foreign minister and prime minister — even as New Delhi kept its BRICS invitation to Rahman open, paired with a bilateral visit.

The message is not subtle: India wants the appearance of a settled, cooperative relationship with Dhaka, particularly as world attention turns to its BRICS presidency.

This is precisely the asymmetry Bangladesh should recognize and strategically leverage.

Conceptually, strategic autonomy means balancing foreign-policy goals to preserve core national interest — a matter of where a state deploys her *political capital* and for what *purpose*.

Linking India's BRICS invitation to a SAARC revival lets Bangladesh demonstrate this: engaging India constructively while moving beyond the Hasina-extradition-bound bilateral frame toward becoming a regional agenda-setter.

Bangladesh currently yields considerable strategic agency. And South Asia's challenges cannot be managed through bilateral relationships alone; a SAARC revival could transform Bangladesh from a smaller bilateral interlocutor into an agenda-setting regional actor.

Reclaiming the SAARC Spirit and Promise

SAARC was not India's creation — it emerged from President Ziaur Rahman's 1985 initiative in Dhaka, on the premise that South Asia's smaller states had as much right to shape regional cooperation as its largest one. For forty years, that founding fact has mattered less than India's ambivalence about the organization.

Yet, that ambivalence was never really about Bangladesh. It has always been a proxy fight with Pakistan, with every other member held hostage to a bilateral rivalry unrelated to their own interests.

Reviving SAARC is not nostalgia for Zia's legacy; it is a chance to argue that South Asian regionalism should not stay frozen over India-Pakistan rivalry — and that Dhaka, as the country that first proposed it, has the standing to say so. Irrespective of the outcome, deploying Bangladesh's political and diplomatic capital for the purpose of SAARC revival would be a forward-looking and people centric.

Why Now, And Why This Works Regardless of India's Answer

There is a *strategic elegance* to proposing this ahead of the BRICS Summit.

A Bangladeshi call to revive SAARC just before that summit forces an implicit question: is India genuinely invested in South Asian regionalism, or only in an 'otherisation' politics that makes cooperation zero-sum? It would also be a statesmanlike use of Bangladesh's political capital — one that subtly pushes the extradition dispute to look trivial.

If India engages, even cautiously, Dhaka shows regional leadership requires initiative, not Delhi's permission. If it declines, that reinforces the view that India's regional diplomacy manages smaller neighbours rather than empowers them and may suggest the Hasina issue functions as political leverage, not mere shelter for an old friend. Either way, Bangladesh strengthens its position as a country willing to lead, not merely react.

This is also a way for Bangladesh to define the regional dimension of her Bangladesh First policy: a SAARC proposal rooted in Zia's founding role offers continuity with a nationalist tradition, rather than reinvention driven by grievance toward Delhi.

That distinction matters. A Bangladesh reviving a dormant institution on principle — one it helped build — will read as something closer to statesmanship, both domestically and internationally.

Building the Coalition Before the Ask

A proposal that arrives as a purely bilateral signal to India will be dismissed as exactly that. Its credibility depends on Bangladesh first sounding out Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives — states with their own frustrations over a moribund SAARC.

What they need is a member willing to spend political capital reopening the conversation.

Unencumbered by the India-Pakistan rivalry, Bangladesh is arguably the only member with both the historical claim to SAARC's founding and the diplomatic distance to convene the others. Bringing two or three capitals along before going public turns the initiative into a genuine regional push India can join or decline — not simply absorb into a bilateral dispute.

Second, 'beyond bilateralism' is an *inevitable* pathway for smaller states in regions facing intense geopolitical contestation. The role of multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations, trading relations through multinational companies adds to that inevitability for a state to exercise its strategic autonomy in an increasingly multilayered and multipolar world.

Beyond the prominent theorists of international relations, contemporary scholars such as Ellis S. Krauss and T. J. Pempel have explored the limits of bilateralism in their book Beyond Bilateralism: U.S.-Japan Relations. Published by Stanford University Press, the book examines how changes in the geopolitical environment transformed what had once been a relatively stable and predominantly bilateral U.S.–Japan relationship.

While the contexts differ, the underlying logic is relevant to Bangladesh–India relations: for smaller states in particular, moving beyond bilateralism can be both a pragmatic and necessary strategy for preserving strategic autonomy and at the same time tacitly addressing bi-lateral grievances.

A Scene Worth Imagining

Imagine Bangladesh's Prime Minister accepting India's invitation on the understanding that, side by side at the BRICS Summit, the two leaders would jointly announce the next SAARC Summit will be held in Dhaka. It would be brief, but its symbolism would resonate: an institution founded by a Bangladeshi president, dormant for a decade over a rivalry between two other members, revived at a moment when Bangladesh could easily have been consumed by its own bilateral grievances with India.

Would such a commitment reflect what South Asia's people want from their leaders, and read as mature statesmanship to the world?

There is good reason to think so.

SAARC remains the least integrated region in the world — a gap felt daily in the cost of goods and difficulty of travel across eight countries that share borders and histories but little functioning cooperation.

A revived SAARC would not fix that overnight, but two prime ministers announcing a shared regional future is a gesture South Asians have rarely had the chance to see.

The Case for Restraint, And Why Bangladesh Should Proceed Anyway

None of this is an easy win. SAARC's drift into irrelevance is, to some analysts, structural rather than accidental — something a Bangladeshi proposal, however well-timed, cannot resolve alone. India's foreign-policy establishment may read a Dhaka-originated push, arriving amid the Hasina dispute, as bilateral leverage-seeking through multilateral cover, and simply decline to engage.

The extradition issue, meanwhile, will likely be litigated on its own track regardless of summitry, since bilateral treaty obligations give India considerable discretion to slow-walk Bangladesh's requests. These are real constraints, and Bangladesh should not oversell what a SAARC proposal can achieve — it may not expedite extradition or produce a summit at all.

But foreign policy is not only about moves that succeed outright — it also clarifies where a country stands and what kind of neighbor it intends to be.

A principled, modest push to revive SAARC costs Dhaka little and offers a rare chance to demonstrate a genuinely Bangladesh First policy — one that could shift ties beyond a narrow bilateral lens toward what South Asia could build together.

As Bangladesh writes the next chapter of its democratic story, this push toward regionalism is no small offer to the neighborhood — a reminder to India and Pakistan alike that regional leadership cannot simply be claimed. It has to be earned by building what the region's people want.

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