

A south Asia must cooperate

A shared vision is essential to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals

South Asia covers only about 3.5% of the world's land surface area but hosts a fourth of its population, making it a region of significant importance for international development. In spite of the geographic proximity countries in this region enjoy and their common socio-cultural bonds, this is one of the world's least integrated regions. Intra-regional trade is a meagre 5% of the total trade these countries do globally, while intra-regional investment is less than 1% of the region's overall global investment. South Asia's average GDP per capita is only about 9.64% of the global average. Accounting for more than 30% of the world's poor, the region faces myriad economic and environmental challenges.

Lack of initiatives

While the countries share a host of common development challenges, economic cooperation remains less than adequate. While a few noteworthy regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative have been undertaken to bring the countries closer together, economically and socially, there is scope for much more. For a region with common development challenges of inequality, poverty, weak governance and poor infrastructure, a shared vision of attaining the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides enormous opportunities for cooperation, collaboration, and convergence (3C).

Compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were a set of eight objectives to be achieved by developing nations with support from developed nations by 2015, the SDGs are more universal, inclusive and integrated in nature. The 17 goals and their 169 targets are inter-connected and cannot be implemented by countries working in isolation. Many are transnational in nature and require regional efforts. South Asian countries could benefit a lot by adopting a regional framework of cooperation that can support, strengthen and stimulate the SDGs. The SDGs highlight not only the importance of regional approach towards achieving the goals but also the regional synergy and resulting positive value additions towards achieving the SDG 2030 Agenda. In the SDG Index 2018, which is an assessment of countries' progress, among 156 countries only two South Asian countries, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, are in the top 100. India is ranked 112th.

Most South Asian countries have made good progress in ending extreme poverty, but they face persistent challenges to goals related to industry, innovation and infrastructure, zero hunger, gender equality, education, sustainable cities and communities and decent work and economic growth. These apart, most of South Asia continues to be vulnerable to climate change and climate-induced natural disasters.

Varying performances

A closer look at the country-level data shows that India is performing well in Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), Goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production), Goal 13 (climate action) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) while doing poorly in goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure). Like India, Bangladesh is doing well in Goals 1, 6, 12 and 13 but poorly in Goals 2 and 9, and lagging behind in Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy). While doing well in Goals 1 and 12, Pakistan needs improvement in Goals 2, 4, 5 and 9, similar to India and Bangladesh. It also needs improved performance with respect to Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). There are a lot of similarities among these three big economies of South Asia with respect to achieving some specific SDGs as well as exhibiting poor performance in some common goals.

A regional strategic approach to tackle common development challenges can bring enormous benefits to South Asia. SDGs related to energy, biodiversity, infrastructure, climate resilience and capacity development are transnational, and here policy harmonisation can play a pivotal role in

reducing duplication and increasing efficiency. In a study titled ‘SDGs Needs Assessment and Financing Strategy: Bangladesh Perspective’, Bangladesh has undertaken exemplary initiatives for analysing its available resources and additional funding requirements for SDG implementation, suggesting that the country requires an additional \$928 billion to fully implement the SDGs. The study identifies five possible sources for SDGs financing: public sector, private sector, public-private partnership, external sector and non-government organisations. On the other hand, data for many of the SDG targets and indicators for the Maldives are unavailable. Similarly, India has formulated some pragmatic plans and initiatives to improve food and nutrition security from which many of the neighbouring countries can benefit.

To address institutional and infrastructural deficits, South Asian countries need deeper regional cooperation. On financing the SDGs in South Asia, countries can work towards increasing the flow of intra-regional FDI. The private sector too can play a vital role in resource mobilisation.

Taking everyone along

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the platform for regional economic cooperation in this region, has become moribund and remains unsuccessful in promoting regional economic cooperation. If the countries of South Asia, the fastest growing region of the world, can come to a common understanding on regional integration and cooperation in achieving the SDGs, it can unleash a powerful synergistic force that can finally make South Asia converge. A convergence towards achieving a common socio-economic agenda gives hope that no one in South Asia will be left behind in the journey towards eradicating poverty and enduring dignity to all.

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<u>Words</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Proximity		closeness, nearness, propinquity
Integrated		unified, united, consolidated, combined, amalgamated
Enormous		huge, gargantuan, immense, Titanic, cyclopean
Collaboration		co-operation, working together, harmonisation
Convergence		intersecting, joining, meeting
Inclusive		comprehensive, overall, entirely, into to
Isolation		separation, segregation, seclusion
Transactional		the act of buying/selling
Effort		attempt, try, endeavour
Stimulate		Encourage, motivate, prod, trigger
Synergy		Co-operation
Persistent		perseverance, determination, tenacity
Vulnerable		In danger, in peril, in jeopardy, at risk
Lag		fall behind, straggle, fall back, trail (behind)
Exhibit		display, array, showcase
Resilient		flexible, pliable, supple/strong, hardy
Pivotal		central, crucial, vital, decisive
Harmonisation		co-ordination, going together, synchronisation

Moribund

Dying, expiring, at death's door

Enduring

lasting

A new course:

President's address should have fleshed out PM Modi's agenda of winning the trust of all President Ram Nath Kovind's address to the joint sitting of Parliament set out the philosophy and priorities of the Narendra Modi government that has been re-elected. It outlined the rupture that has come to characterise Mr. Modi's politics, marked by his 2014 victory, and pointedly ignored the progress India had made during earlier years. The President said his government was "committed to that very idea of nation-building, the foundation for which was laid in 2014." Harnessing the thoughts of social reformer Sree Narayana Guru and Rabindranath Tagore to emphasise brotherhood among all sections and the celebration of the human spirit would have been uplifting if only the rest of the speech dwelt on those ideas in some detail and with force. In the absence of elaboration, such grand intent in the initial paragraphs was not reassuring. The Prime Minister's newly added objective of winning the trust of all governed, Sabka vishwas, was not fleshed out meaningfully. Sardar Patel, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi found mention, but not Jawaharlal Nehru, the founding Prime Minister whose vision and unflinching commitment to secularism, pluralism and progress set the Republic on a sustainable course.

The 'New India' that the President mentioned is a departure from that founding vision, and there was no ambiguity on that aspect. He struck a chord with the constituency of the government, but not with all. The notion that there is a non-sectarian development agenda that is impervious to identity politics is good to have, and the Prime Minister's evangelical fervour in driving its schemes is laudable. But triumphalism around many schemes such as the Swachh Bharat Mission has deflected public attention from the serious tasks ahead and an honest discussion on achievements. New focus on water conservation and management and the rural economy is not a moment too early. These are critical areas. Mr. Kovind also spoke of the government's intent to expand scientific research and higher education. A speech by the President is significant not for the technical details it offers, but for the vision. The cultural nationalist agenda of the ruling dispensation that has made intellectual curiosity and academic integrity dangerous in India is not the route to any of these goals. The restrictions on cattle trade and violence against those employed in it — mostly Muslims and Dalits — have not merely become a protracted communal conflict but are also among the factors that have pushed the rural economy off the rails. Announcing yet another scheme for cattle, as the President did, is not confronting the real, self-inflicted problem. What differentiates one dispensation from another is not the material ambitions but the social purpose and direction of such pursuits. The clarity on that aspect in the address may be stimulating for many, but certainly not good for India.

<u>Words</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
Flesh out		Expand, elaborate, build on, augment
Outline		Rough out, sketch out, give a rough idea
Rupture		Break, Fracture, Crack
Harness		Control, Utilize, Exploit, use
Dwell on		Speak/write in details
Elaboration		narration, enlarge on, expand on
Ambiguity		ambivalence, equivocation, doubtfulness Chord
Notion		idea, inkling, abstraction
Impervious		unaffected, untouched, impregnable
Evangelical		scriptural, Fundamentalist, orthodox
Fervour		passion, ardour, intensity, vehemence
Laudable		praiseworthy, commendable, admirable
Triumphalism		victory, success, wining
Deflect		turn aside, divert, avert, distract
Dispensation		Distribution, supply, handing out
Curiosity		Interest, inquisitiveness
Protracted		prolonged, long lasting, spun out
Off the rails		
Confront		challenge, beard, brake, defy