Security Conundrum: Neorealist Perspective on SAARC and ASEAN Strategic Integration

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Abstract

The neorealist viewpoint, especially when viewed via the defensive realism lens, offers important insights into the security dilemma in the framework of the strategic integration of ASEAN and SAARC, with a particular emphasis on the issues surrounding the South China Sea and Kashmir. These geopolitical flashpoints' asymmetrical power dynamics, strategic considerations, and security conundrum highlight how difficult it is to promote regional collaboration. In order to advance, member nations of ASEAN and SAARC must recognize the intricate relationship between historical hostilities and national security concerns, and look for ways to implement policies aimed at fostering trust. In addition, more diplomatic work should be done to address the underlying issues that lead to conflicts, including the disputes in the South China Sea and Kashmir, by encouraging communication and the use of legal frameworks for conflict resolution. A balanced strategy that promotes cooperative regional solutions rather than escalating already-existing conflicts should be adopted by foreign parties, especially major countries. In the end, regional integration and easing the security difficulties in South and Southeast Asia will depend on a shared commitment to security and stability as well as sincere attempts to redress past wrongs.

Keywords: *Neorealism, SAARC, ASEAN, Strategic Integration, Security Dilemma.*

Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century observed a wave of numerous regional and global development in the eve of Cold War emergence after the end of devastating World War II. The World War II impacts were so rampant that it prompted nations to rethink of its priorities and strategies for fortifying and managing their national and regional security. These calculations of regional security building and keeping one's own state out of the conflict domain was espoused by the Southeast Asian states. The Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 by the former five member states; Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Meanwhile, in the region of the South Asia, where Pakistan has already aligned with US against USSR also adopted the phenomenon of regional alliance in the shape of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in 1985 at Dhaka (Chakma, 2020). Here is a brief background history of the foundation of the two organizations.

The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 was the pivotal juncture in the Southeast Asia that ensued regional grouping with the backup of USA. In order to minimize the then USSR influence in the region of Southeast Asia, the United States of America initiated such manoeuvres. Interestingly, she has also convinced and push

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Pakistan from South Asia for joining SEATO which was in no way a legitimate geographical unity but for strategic calculations indeed. Although, the region experienced a regional security setup in the form of SEATO, the member states went for an indigenous structure manifested as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961(Caballero-Anthony, 2005). It was followed by another setup of three states; Malaysia, Philippines, & Indonesia termed as MARPHILINDO. Later on after the dissolution of the said structure, the Southeast Asian five major state, mentioned above, unanimously adopted the "Bangkok Declaration" on 8th August, 1967 which pawed the way for foundation of the ASEAN with a rallying cry of "One Vision, One Identity, and One Community"(Chuko, 1965). The organization was later on joined by the remaining five members, currently part of ASEAN; Brunei, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

Meanwhile in South Asia, the process of regional unity was relatively nascent and characterised by various features in comparison to ASEAN. While the foundation of ASEAN was compulsion by the potential threat of USSR and Chinese growing influence in the Southeast Asia region, the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was based on endogenous threats largely contributed by India as the larger state in the region(I. Ahmed, 2012). The Late President, Zia-ur-Rehman from Bangladesh initiated the idea of regional cooperation which was materialized in the shape of the "Dhaka Accord" in 1985. It is of ought importance to mention here that while the ASEAN formulation idea was initiated by Indonesia, being the largest state in the region, in the case of SAARC it was the smaller state, Bangladesh, not India or Pakistan that could be the founding member of the proposed setup rather hesitant to join it initially(Muni, 1978). Currently SAARC has a total of eight regular member states, Afghanistan being the most recent entry in the organization in 2007.

In the 21st century, in accordance with the proposed schemes and in light of the respective charters, both the organizations, striving for regional integration through signing various pacts and agreements for regional peace, integrity, political and economic well-being, climate protection, cooperation on drug trafficking, and human rights protection. Although, in certain domains including economic integration and non-traditional security domains both organization performing well, yet, after several decades of its emergence, both the organizations are "stuck in limbo" when it comes to address both the internal and external security threats in the region. ASEAN, while in the process of building "ASEAN Security Community", yet far away from achieving the goal as the growing Chinese influence, the outstanding South China Sea Dispute, endanger the regional security dynamics, while on the other hand SAARC countries are still engulfed in the traditional rivalries, border disputes, and traditional security matters that halt the already delicate fabrics of regional integration in South Asia (Z. S. Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2008).

This research exposure aims to investigate the regional security dynamics in both the regions; Southeast Asia and South Asia, the underlying causes and remedies. The research uses International Relations Theory, the Neorealist perspective with its two variants commonly termed as "offensive realist" and "defensive realist" assumptions to evaluate the role of both the organizations in the contemporary regions. Moreover, the study will also present explicit recommendations to be adopted in the future for improvement of the regional balance and prosperity in the respective regions.

Theoretical Foundation of the Study

Neorealist paradigm is actually the extension of the classical realism that consider state as the main actor in the international relations guided by power and self-interests (Youngs, 1996). The classical realist contemplate world as anarchic in nature where no authority exists above the state. Relative gains consider above the absolute gains when a state

interacts with another state. Therefore, cooperation among the state is considered superficial, while conflict is inevitable due the state urges for maximizing power and strength. Power is mainly calculated in the realms of economic and military strength. Kenneth Waltz in his work "Theory of International Politics" in the late 1970s coined the theory of neorealism (Waltz, 1993). He altered the realist paradigm of individual nature influencing the state as well the international behaviour rather he stresses upon the international structure that influenced the individual state behaviour in the international arena. Neorealism also referred as structural realism by various realist thinkers. The two most variants of the realist paradigm are "offensive realism" and "defensive realism" recently revealed (Samoraj, 2021).

Mearsheimer, author of the book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" is the proponent of offensive realism, contends that state always tends to maximize its own power compelled by the anarchic nature of international structure. He explains that the maximization of power of the state led to security dilemma where measures to enhance one's security may insecure other state. He further contends that the competition between great powers is perpetual and the need for power accumulation of the states are limitless. He refers that a state never trusts other state and always uncertain about intention of other state. Mearsheimer theory of offensive realism posits that it is necessary for a state to have a clear-cut nuclear superiority over the counter state to achieve global hegemon status. This assumption makes regional hegemony more feasible because it is nearly impossible in the current scenario of nuclear capabilities of various global and regional powers (Mearsheimer, 2001).

On the other hand, According to defensive realism, acquiring too much or too little power might make one feel insecure, making the quest of power risky. While overwhelming power can prompt a balancing alliance by other powers, little strength may encourage conquest. States need an appropriate amount of power in order to maintain security and their standing in the system. A lack of clarity on the intentions of other state breeds mistrust, and the presence of military build-ups can exacerbate perceived threats. This relationship adds to the security dilemma, in which measures taken to increase the security of one state come at the expense of other states' security. According to defensive realism, nations may misunderstand or be the source of their disputes, and they may also be susceptible to resolution or insurmountable (Lobell, 2010).

If we compare both the realist narratives, Waltz's defensive realism espouses power for security and stability of the state and its surrounding. While Mearsheimer agenda of offensive realism pretends that power dynamics can led to more competitive and potentially insecure environment. The different perspectives of both school of thought impact how the state respond to threats, uncertainties, and the role of alliances in their pursuit of power. This study explores the relevancy of the above mentioned variants of neorealist theory to the case of ASEAN and SAARC in the subsequent session with a special focus on South China Sea Dispute and Kashmir Dispute in the respective regions.

Methodology

This study follows qualitative research design while using secondary sources to acquire data for the research. Sources including published materials like books, journal and newspaper articles, organizational websites, national and international survey reports, periodicals, dissertations, working papers, and annual summit reports are examples of secondary sources of data collecting. A thorough and nuanced understanding of the comparative analysis of both regional organizations is the goal of this mixed-methods approach. The qualitative data collected for the study are analysed using a thematic data analysis approach.

South China Sea Dispute and ASEAN

The South China Sea (SCS) is a semi-closed sea that covers roughly 3.7 million km2 in Southeast Asia. It shares borders with several countries, including the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Republic of the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It is situated between the Straits of Taiwan to the north and the Straits of Malacca and Singapore to the south. The Prates Islands in the northeast, the Paracel Islands in the north, Scarborough Shoal in the centre, and the Spratly Islands in the south are the four main groups of islands, rocks, reefs, shoals, and other natural features that make up the South China Sea (Nguyen, 2018).

The South China Sea has grown in importance to global security since the end of the Cold War. A number of states make claims to the adjacent waters, rocks, and islands, which results in a protracted and contentious disagreements. In addition to being a vital sea line of communication (SLOC), the SCS is rich in underwater resources and has strategic military and economic significance. As research advances and extraction activities get underway, it is anticipated that the estimated reserves of oil and gas in the region will increase dramatically (Yahuda, 2014). ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are among the claimants. Tensions have been exacerbated by the two surviving claims, the Republic of China (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), with Beijing being more belligerent and involved in incidents since 1974. The South China Sea issue and the Southeast Asian region have been addressed by the security dilemma concept in this study. A cycle of mutual mistrust and an arms race result when other states view a state's efforts to strengthen its security, such as military build-ups and sea defense capabilities, as a threat. This creates a security conundrum.

Security Dilemma and the Defensive Realism in Southeast Asia

People's Republic of China and the ASEAN nations have been involved in an arms race in the South China Sea, quickly enhancing their military and maritime capabilities. As a result of China's aggressive territorial claims and military buildup in the area, surrounding ASEAN countries have strengthened their own defenses against potential threats (Quyet, 2023).China has significantly increased its defense expenditure since the conclusion of the Cold War, which is indicative of the country's expanding economy and growing importance in the world. China's defense budget increased steadily starting in the early 1990s, while there were sporadic double-digit percentage rises. Through the 2000s and 2010s, this increasing pattern persisted, indicating the nation's goals to update its military prowess. Geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes surrounding the South China Sea conflict have had a significant impact on China's defense spending. China has increased the capabilities of its air force and naval in response to maritime and territorial disputes in the region. China's defense budget as of 2023 was a noteworthy $224 billion, indicating a consistent commitment to military modernization (Scobell, 2023).

On the other hand, Southeast Asian nations have actively sought to modernize and enhance their military capabilities in recent years, frequently with significant budget increases for defence. As an example, a total defense budget of MYR17.74 billion (USD3.97 billion) has been allocated by Malaysia for the year 2023. This amounts to a substantial increase of 10% over the initial 2022 commitment of MYR16.14 billion. The action is consistent with a larger trend seen in Southeast Asia, where a number of countries are aggressively investing in the modernization and improvement of their military forces, and it highlights Malaysia's commitment to bolstering its defense capabilities. The Philippines is another example, where the government has allocated PHP233 billion (USD 4.1 billion) for defense in 2024. Comparing this allocation to the baseline in 2023, there has been a notable tenfold rise (Rosyidin, 2023). This action was taken in the midst of growing hostilities between Beijing and Manila, especially in relation to the South China Sea conflict. In order to handle security issues and protect its national interests in the face of shifting geopolitical dynamics and territorial conflicts in

Southeast Asia, the Philippines, like other regional countries, is working to strengthen its military capabilities.

The current scholarly analysis highlights a paradox in China's military build-up, which is purportedly intended to increase its security but rather heightens insecurity for its neighbours and adds to the complexity of the region. China strongly opposes foreign involvement in Asia, especially from the US, seeing Washington as a significant obstacle to its hegemony in the region. China's persistent military build-up causes worry among neighbours, despite its efforts to foster goodwill among Southeast Asian neighbours by lending support during regional financial crises and taking part in security accords to preserve stability (Sutter, 2023). In an attempt to counteract rather than align with China, smaller and relatively weaker Southeast Asian states have pursued a balancing strategy, building military infrastructure and forging relationships with outside powers like the United States. This strategic decision reflects concerns about China's intentions, especially in light of the South China Sea territorial disputes (SCS). Ironically, China's growing military might doesn't guarantee increased security; rather, it puts its own security and interests in jeopardy, leading to a security conflict between China and other claimants in the SCS (Hu, 2023).

Due to its large territory and population, China has been steadily increasing its military might, which has caused confusion and mistrust among other claimants in the area. China views the military build-up as justified, considering its large landmass and populous population. The military is one of the several sectors that have benefited from China's exceptional economic growth during the 1980s. One could argue that China's increased military spending makes sense given its rapid economic growth. Notably in relation to the World Bank's reported Gross National Product (GNP). In comparison, the US spends about ten times as much on its military as China does, even though it has a smaller population. In addition, despite having a smaller population and area, China's regional rival Japan devotes a comparable amount to its military. But the problem of figuring out "the appropriate amount of power necessary to gain security" creates a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety, which breeds mistrust among the Southeast Asian States in the region (Nye, 2023).

The subjective irreconcilability of sovereignty concerns among claimant states is the root cause of the misunderstanding around the conflict of interest in the South China Sea (SCS) (Britz, 2015). Motivated by feelings of patriotism and a dedication to safeguarding ancestral land sovereignty, all stakeholders are adamant about staying away from negotiations. Nonetheless, when taking into account legal, geopolitical, and economic viewpoints, the dispute is objectively resolvable. In terms of economics, there is still uncertainty on the precise hydrocarbon resources in the SCS, with experts claiming that these resources are insufficient to meet China and other claimant states' expanding energy needs. The South China Sea (SCS) is a strategically significant region that is essential for the importation of oil by East Asian nations, highlighting the importance of collaboration over exclusive possession (Britz, 2015). In addition, there are alternatives for peaceful conflict resolution provided by legal institutions including the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), and International Court of Justice (ICJ). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which establishes a framework for legal remedies, has been ratified by all SCS claimants, including China (Hong, 2012). Even with the rejection of China's proposal for bilateral negotiations, international legal institutions continue to be a reasonable means of settlement. Cases from Southeast Asia, like those involving Thailand and Cambodia or Indonesia and Malaysia, show how successful legal channels are in resolving territory disputes. Supported by Vietnam and Malaysia, the Philippines has pursued resolution through the PCA, demonstrating the region's acceptance of legal frameworks to maintain peace and stability (Castro, 2017).

According to this research, there is a legal framework that may be used to objectively resolve conflicts in the South China Sea (SCS), dispelling the notion that these disputes are incompatible. The claimants' subjective points of view give rise to the seeming conflict. There are two main areas of misperception that exist between China and other SCS claimants: power rivalry and clashing interests. The resolution of SCS issues is made more difficult by these twin misperceptions, which lead to a security conundrum where steps done by one side to improve security are viewed as threatening by the other (Li, 2014).

In continuation, based on the neorealist variants of "defensive realism" and "offensive realism" it could be argued that the Southeast Asian States namely Philippine, Vietnam, and Malaysia are considered defensive realist due to certain assumptions. In general, these nations have refrained from aggressively pursuing territorial expansion within the SCS. Rather than attempting to expand their influence beyond perceived security demands, they frequently concentrate on protecting their current claims and interests. In order to address SCS issues, these countries have shown a readiness to participate in diplomatic initiatives and international forums. The defensive realism theory, which favours cooperation over confrontation in the search for security and stability, is consistent with this cooperative strategy. Moreover, in the SCS dispute, these states give priority to security issues; they frequently look for a balance of power and take action to safeguard their national interests. These findings imply that defensive realism and the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia have certain things in common.

The Kashmir Dispute and SAARC

SAARC, founded in 1985, was first viewed as a potential game changer in the historically contentious South Asian area, owing to India and Pakistan's ongoing rivalry. Nevertheless, the future of the region is still unknown nearly forty years later. Though both nuclear-armed powers, India and Pakistan, were supposed to serve as agents of regional cooperation, they are caught up in an armaments race instead of putting human development first (Khan, 2015). The SAARC mission's objective of promoting prosperity and peace in the area has not been fully met. While there are several barriers standing in the way of SAARC's objective, the Indian-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir is by far the biggest and most significant one. The protracted conflict in Kashmir is a major factor in the region's general problems and lacklustre cooperation dynamics. Here is a brief overview of the conflicted area of Kashmir.

When the British colonialists were getting ready to leave South Asia in 1947, they came up with the "Mountbatten Plan," which established a "partition and rule" system for Pakistan and India based on the idea of majority rule. This theory assigned areas with a majority of Muslims to Pakistan and areas with a majority of Hindus to India. Based on the decisions made by princely states, each state had the option to either join India or Pakistan or stay independent. Due to Kashmir's distinct demographics, the overwhelming population is Muslim but the rulers are Hindu. India and Pakistan have fought multiple armed conflicts over the region, which they both view as essential territory. For Pakistan, maintaining its strategic integrity and sense of self depends on Kashmir. India was able to take the lead in the Kashmir dispute because of its military might in the area, even in spite of Pakistan's unwavering resolve. Pakistan urged the United States and Britain to support them in their UN demand for intervention and a ceasefire. The UN India-Pakistan Commission was tasked with supervising the truce and preparing for a referendum on Kashmir, which was approved on April 21, 1948. The Karachi Agreement, which was signed after talks and places India in control of two thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan in possession of the other third, shows that Pakistan was compelled to maintain the status quo despite its determination (Bain, 2021).

The assumption on the part of Pakistan that India's military might and confidence in defending Kashmir had diminished after the 1962 Sino-Indian confrontation contributed

to the intensification of the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1965, a second conflict broke out, but Pakistan's military plan failed as its objectives were not met, and following UN intervention, the Tashkent Declaration was signed (Chaudhri, 1966). The accord delineated the evacuation of the truce line and a pledge to pursue a peaceful settlement. The situation was compounded by post-war external circumstances, such as the presence of the UN. In 1971, hostilities in Kashmir continued as India dispatched soldiers to split apart East Pakistan, sparking the third Indo-Pakistani war. India benefited greatly, and in December there was a ceasefire. A line of control was established in Kashmir by the Simla Agreement of 1972. Skirmishes continued even after major wars ended, and both countries used nuclear weapons as a deterrence. In response to continuing military actions, both sides currently keep sizable army deployments, stations, bases, or camps close to the ceasefire line (Akkaya, 2018).

Security Dilemma and the Defensive Realism in South Asia

The basic premise of the "security dilemma" is that nations are inherently suspicious of one another and full of fear. This dilemma arises in the context of international politics and impacts all parties that do not trust one another. The security dilemma is shaped by historical animosities, subjective security perceptions, prior conflicts, and a general lack of trust in national leadership and public security. It is both a tangible reality and a psychological state rooted in the structural dynamics of countries. The "security dilemma" between India and Pakistan can be defined as follows in the context of the power dynamics and struggle for influence that followed India's partition: both countries are afraid that the other would suppress, dominate, and annex them in the unstable region of South Asia (Budania, 2001). As a result, they try to increase their own power and influence while attempting to create national security within the larger context of the "national guiding security dilemma," which is impacted by the perceived lack of security in other nations.

India and Pakistan are stuck in a difficult situation with no obvious way out because of the ongoing dispute over Kashmir. Even while both parties have periodically sought diplomatic resolutions and business collaboration, the ongoing volatility in Kashmir continues to be a dividing element. The crux of this issue is the territorial claims made by both countries over Kashmir, an area that is important for various reasons. India aspires to dominate in order to secure essential water resources because it is the upper basin of the Indus and its tributaries. Kashmir is essential to Pakistan's plans to protect its capital. Beyond territorial aspirations, the Kashmir dispute is a geopolitical struggle at the core of India and Pakistan's tense relations (Shukla, 2020). Security dilemma have been created by decades of mutual mistrust that have been made worse by military conflicts. Army deployments along the ceasefire line elicit replies, resulting in an extension of forces until both sides have reached their deployment limitations. Competition is sparked by this cycle in other areas, such military facilities and equipment. Without the intervention of a more powerful army, the security conundrum in Kashmir is difficult to overcome because it is intricately linked to each side's concept of security regarding the disputed area. Its effects are not limited to the military domain; they also affect political and economic facets. A delicate and complex situation for both countries is perpetuated by diplomatic estrangement and a lack of communication channels, which worsen the security dilemma (Aamir, O. (2022).

The theory of defensive realism in international relations provides significant understanding of the dynamics of the Kashmir dispute in South Asia. Defensive realism, which has its roots in the notion that nations prioritize maximizing their security over aggressive expansion, offers a prism through which to view India's and Pakistan's strategic actions in the area (BHATTACHARYA, 2022). Their worries for national security are reflected in the long-standing and divisive territorial dispute over Kashmir between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. Because of their shared history of hostility, both countries view the region as essential to defending their interests and averting

dangers. A key component of defensive realism is the security dilemma, which arises when measures taken by one side to improve security are seen as a threat by the other, sparking an arms race and raising tensions. Defensive realism principles provide a framework to understand the complex relationship between security concerns and territorial ambitions in South Asia. They also provide light on the strategic calculations underpinning military build-ups, troop deployments, and geopolitical posturing in the Kashmir conflict (Jetly, & D'souza, 2012).

Waltz's theory, emphasizing state desire to ensure existence in anarchic system, is especially pertinent in light of India and Pakistan's complex relationship. Even though domestic terrorism in Pakistan has decreased somewhat as a result of collaboration with the international community, the ongoing endorsement of extremism continues to sustain "proxy wars." It is difficult to have constructive talks with Pakistan about the Kashmir issue because of India's insistence on dealing with "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir. Genuine progress in the peace process between India and Pakistan is hampered by the "cross-border terrorism" issue, underscoring the complexity of their security dynamics (Bilal, Begum, Iftikhar, & Abrar, 2022).

Pakistan is in a position where it needs outside assistance to balance out India's influence due to the unequal power dynamics in South Asia, where India dominates Pakistan. However, both India and Pakistan frequently view attempts by outside nations to preserve positive relations with them with mistrust. External intervention usually makes tensions worse rather than better. Following the Afghanistan War, the United States of America participated in South Asian politics under the guise of counterterrorism, changing the geopolitical landscape and escalating tensions between India and Pakistan (Jakhar, 2022). Pakistan receives significant support from the United States in its counterterrorism endeavours, but the US strategy is perceived as establishing American hegemony. The "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was introduced by the United States to strengthen its strategic alliance with India, bolstering its leadership in the area and further shifting the balance of power away from Pakistan. Russia's decision to offer Pakistani assistance coincided with the U.S.-Pakistani relationship cooling, indicating a change in allies. The United States supported India in the 2016 Kashmir dispute, while Russia declared its intention to provide Pakistan with armaments and conduct joint military drills. After Trump's 2017 speech on South Asian policy, Russia took a more assertive stand, denouncing the United States' approach to Pakistan and endorsing Pakistan's counterterrorism endeavours. Nonetheless, Russia continues to supply India with weaponry as part of its established relationships (Shah, 2018). Although it is concerned about the resolution of the protracted dispute between the two South Asian countries, Russia's efforts to mediate between India and Pakistan are seen through the prism of its rivalry with the United States. Meanwhile, the recent Pakistani Premier Imran Khan visit to Russia at the crucial moment of Russian-Ukraine war outrage is highly spectacle for Pakistan to manage balance of power in the region.

Pakistan has already in high collaboration with China through the gigantic Pak-China Economic Corridor which make Pakistan at better position in the region. India, seeing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a strategic alliance between China and Pakistan, is vehemently against its development in Pakistan. The Modi administration has continuously voiced concerns because it sees China using the corridor to quickly expand its strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region of South Asia. Tensions between the two nations have increased as a result of India's opposition to the corridor. By pursuing their own interests within the uneven power structure, external actions in the region worsen the issue rather than helping to find a solution. This exacerbates the security conundrum that exists between Pakistan and India. Furthermore, India's strategic errors concerning China have seriously hampered efforts to resolve the current problems (Chopra, R. (2017).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the neorealist perspective provides valuable insights into the security conundrum within the framework of the strategic integration of ASEAN and SAARC, with a focus on the challenges pertaining to the South China Sea and Kashmir dispute. This is especially true when examined via the defensive realism lens. The asymmetrical power dynamics, strategic considerations, and security dilemma associated with these geopolitical flashpoints underscore the challenges in fostering regional cooperation. To progress, ASEAN and SAARC member countries need to acknowledge the complex interplay between past hostilities and current national security issues, and seek to establish policies that promote trust. Furthermore, by promoting dialogue and the use of legal frameworks for conflict resolution, more diplomatic efforts should be made to address the root causes of conflicts, such as the disputes in the South China Sea and Kashmir. Foreign parties, especially big countries, should adopt a balanced approach that encourages cooperative regional solutions instead of intensifying already-existing disputes. In the end, honest efforts to right historical wrongs as well as a common commitment to peace and stability are what will be needed to facilitate regional integration and lessen the security challenges in South and Southeast Asia.

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