

# Regional Cooperation on Maritime Science: The Potential Gateway out of South Asian Debacle

Nur Ahmed



It is a global observation that the South Asian region has not been much conducive to political cooperation at the regional level. Even the neighbouring Southeast Asian region had better success at forging regional cooperation. The South Asian countries have a rich history of socio-cultural bonding as the countries were under colonial rule as one subcontinent for a long time. The lineage of similarities goes way beyond the colonial era. However, the political leadership of the region has introduced different experimentation through platforms like SAARC and BIMSTEC. But the region has not come any closer to regional cooperation, let alone integration. The nature of the maritime domain is such that any activities require cooperation from and have potential impact on neighbouring littorals. We often forget that the ocean is one continuous body of water. Therefore, the maritime domain might be the next potential avenue to experiment on the South Asian enigma. However, one must start small and, that's where maritime science can come in. And this is not just wishful thinking; rather, we have a

global example before us. Although the preceding references are not in the maritime domain, there are strong theoretical and practical implications because of the inherent nature of the maritime domain.

It has to be noted that scientific activities and discoveries are not necessarily apolitical. They have political implications as well as political objectives and goals. However, scientific collaboration has less political connotations than economic or socio-cultural cooperation. The Bay of Bengal littorals are vulnerable to extreme challenges in the maritime domain, like oil spillage, extreme weather events, marine pollution, etc. These challenges cannot be dealt without any collaborative frameworks among the state and non-state actors. Even if someone is not concerned about the maritime domain issues, one can imagine the disastrous situation in the event of a major oil spillage in the Bay of Bengal region. Maritime issues cannot be contained within territorial boundaries, and any event of oil spillage will undoubtedly affect all the littorals. Now,

---

the question one must ask is whether these littorals can face this kind of crisis. A follow-up question would be whether these littorals should pursue capacity development independently or go for a collaborative framework. The nature of the maritime issues and the benefits of regional cooperation in any domain, would present the second option as the most viable one.

The first steps should not be anything grand because of the miserable failures of some regional visions to forge political cooperation in South Asia. Seemingly apolitical, concerned scientists' collaborative studies on the marine ecosystem in the Bay of Bengal and the potential danger of an oil spillage might be a good starting point. The same goes for environmental scientists who can collaborate on studies regarding the impacts of global warming on the climatic conditions in the Bay of Bengal region and predict the nature of extreme weather events based on the current and past conditions. Universities and research organizations should lead in this regard, as these collaborations should have an institutional base. These collaborations will create the basis for orchestrating a political understanding among the littorals to develop coalitions to fight specific issues like oil spillage,

conducive ground for further cooperation, the process of which was termed as 'spillover'. Another proposition of Neofunctionalism is that countries tend to transcend economic cooperation to political integration, leading to supranational authority like the EU. Economic issues are nonetheless not apolitical, but the notion of spillover is essential for the South Asian context. We have not seen any such thing happening in South Asia, because we tend to start off with grand political ambition designed to fail in the long run.

So, the new proposition is that the maritime domain is a good starting point for South Asian regional cooperation. If we specify our focus here, maritime science might be the most fitting stepping stone for creating a conducive ambiance for regional cooperation among South Asian littorals. Following the inferences of Neofunctionalism, scientists' collaboration on issues like oil spillage, marine pollution, climate change, marine fisheries, etc., might lead to the formation of a scientific community across the region which could result in political grouping in the form of minilaterals. There is no shortcut in this regard and considering the South Asian context, it is impossible to clear the deadlock within a short passage of

*The European Union (EU) might be the best example of global regional integration. The process of regional integration began in the early 1950s with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).*

marine pollution, climate change, etc. These issue-based coalitions will create a conducive political ambiance to forge collaboration in the maritime domain of the Bay of Bengal littorals. There are established platforms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Still, these were established with grand political objectives. We have to start small, given the entrenched political backlogs regarding regional cooperation among South Asian nations.

The European Union (EU) might be the best example of global regional integration. The process of regional integration began in the early 1950s with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The advent of the EU resembles a small and seemingly apolitical starting point. The journey of European integration was theorised by a school of thought named Neofunctionalism, and it was developed based on the political and economic integration of European countries. One of the fundamental arguments of Neofunctionalism is that when countries come together on a specific issue, it creates a

time. However, the concerned stakeholders do not have the luxury of waiting anymore. The issues I have raised in this Op-Ed have the potential to catch political attention. It is astounding that there is no functioning regional grouping in South Asia on issues like oil spillage, marine pollution, marine resources, climate change etc. The prospect of the institutional gap can be complemented with the appeal of the proposed approach as a gateway out of the South Asian debacle might be a successful starting point. It has to be noted that the process will not be the same as the European, Southeast Asian, or African cases. Every region has its own socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics. Therefore, the suggested process might differ in practice, but the continuation of activities matters. So, the combination of institutional gap, political appeal, and uniqueness of the maritime domain might even be successful in implementing this neofunctionalist approach to get out of the challenge of regional cooperation in South Asia.

*Writer: Nur Ahmed is a Research Officer at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS).  
Email: snahmed184@gmail.com*