



## Batting for 'One South Asia'

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**(MainsGS2:Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.)**

### Context:

- Recently at the **G20** in Rome and COP26 in Glasgow, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at nearly a dozen events, expanding on India's plans to counter climate change.
- However, there was no reference to India's own region, the subcontinent, South Asia, without which India's multiple forays on fighting climate change could well prove fruitless.

### Recent initiatives:

- India's record at the 2015 Paris Accord and initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) are welcomed globally to curtail climate change.
- Launch of the 'Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS)' at the World Leaders Summit at **COP26** was also applauded and recognised globally.
- The announcement of India's new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the "Panchamrit" or five goals for the future elicited applause from across the audience.

### Missing south asia initiative:

- The absence of a South Asian initiative on climate change led by India, accrues to a number of obvious reasons.
- India-Pakistan tensions have led to the degradation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) process, especially since 2014.
- Events in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover will bring India closer to its Central Asian rather than South Asian neighbours.
- The differences over pollution issues within the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping have held up India's initiatives like the common Motor Vehicle Agreement (due mainly to Bhutan's opposition).
- The slow movement amongst the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries along the Bay of Bengal has yet to bring about a common charter at the global level despite adding climate change as an area of cooperation a decade ago.

### **Impact of climate change:**

- Regardless of relations between any of the countries in South Asia, there is a cohesive geographical unit that is sheltered by the Himalayas to the north, fed by its many glaciers in an intricate network of rivers that fall into the ocean, and buffeted by the same climate and monsoon conditions.
- However, South Asia is slowly becoming the world's biggest area of concern when it comes to climate change.
- According to the Global Climate Risk Index, India and Afghanistan are among the top 10 countries worldwide in terms of vulnerability, but South Asia classifies for the overall lowest values.
- By one estimate, 20 out of 23 major cyclone disasters in the world in the past have occurred around the Bay of Bengal region, and global warming, coastal degradation and soil salinity as well as water scarcities cause the deaths of thousands in South Asia each year.
- The Asian Development Bank now predicts a decrease of 11% in South Asian GDPs by 2100 if "Business-As-Usual (BAU) Emissions" are maintained.
- With global warming and sea levels rising, other estimates predict there will be nearly 63 million climate migrants in South Asia by 2050.

### **Collective voice missing:**

- When New Delhi speaks of the need for climate justice, global funding and climate adaptation technology transfer, India's voice would only be strengthened multiple times if it speaks for South Asia as a whole.
- According to the World Bank's newly launched South Asia road map, climate-smart investment opportunities in South Asia total a whopping \$3.4 trillion, with "energy-efficient green buildings" alone representing an investment potential of more than \$1.5 trillion.

- Green transport connectivity and infrastructure, electric vehicles could represent another \$950 billion in investment opportunities by 2030.

#### **Lower trade and connectivity:**

- Growing carbon footprints as well as post-COVID-19 economic compulsions are driving countries into closer regional coalitions, looking for solutions closer home, than those provided by globalisation and long-distance supply chains.
- South Asia has remained an exception, persistently showing lower inter-regional trade and connectivity, and lower levels of cooperation on migrant labour issues, inter-state tourism and cross-border employment than other regions.

#### **Viable options:**

- India has been unable to proffer a viable alternative to the pernicious influence of 'Chinese solutions' to problems in the subcontinent, ranging from unsustainable infrastructure financing to environmentally harmful projects as part of the **Belt and Road Initiative** (BRI).
- South Asian neighbours have learned to seek help from other international partners or even each other.
- For example, when New Delhi failed to respond to Sri Lanka's request for assistance with its currency and debt crisis last year, the Rajapaksa government turned to Bangladesh for a currency swap arrangement.

#### **Responding rightly:**

- India is the largest country in the region sharing the most boundaries with other South Asian neighbours should lead the way to find holistic solutions to accessing funding, tapping the latest climate adaptation technology, and finding cross-border markets for renewable energy networks.
- The "One Sun One World One Grid" and 'Panchamrit plans' would clearly pack more punch if they contain a clear road map for the region, and strive for a common South Asian task force to tackle the enormous challenge that lies ahead for India and its neighbourhood this century.

#### **Conclusion:**

The problems between India and Pakistan have multiplied manifold in the past few years and are no doubt a major obstacle but not one that cannot be surmounted in the face of a common challenge, as the special SAARC conference on **COVID-19** in March 2020 showed.