



SOUTH ASIA WITHIN THE EVOLVING GLOBAL ORDER AND TRENDS

INTERNATIONAL WEBSEMINAR

31 July 2025



Conversations



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Dr. Waliullah Shaheen
Afghanistan



Dr. Shahab Enam Khan
Bangladesh



Dr. Niranjana Sahoo
India



Dr. Shambhu Ram Simkhada
Nepal



Dr. Athaula Ahmed Rasheed
Maldives



Dr. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera
Sri Lanka



Mr. Ejaz Haider
Pakistan



Dr. Idrees Zaman
Afghanistan



Mr. Rahul Roy-Chaudhary
IISS



Dr. Mariam Fatima
Pakistan

Introduction

- The Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA) at the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, hosted an international webseminar titled “South Asia within the Evolving Global Order and Trends” on 31 July 2025.
- This was the third session in ISSRA's international webinar series since Jan 2025, designed to strengthen collaboration and outreach with ISSRA's global and regional partners, including government institutions, think tanks, and academia.
- The session featured expert presentations alongside interactive session that encouraged diverse perspectives and active engagement.
- The distinguished panel included experts from across South Asia, representing Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Pakistani experts participated in person, while regional stakeholders joined virtually, ensuring a broad exchange of ideas.
- Discussions underscored that South Asia's position in the changing global landscape is shaped by strategic re-alignments, competing power interests, and responses to regional challenges. While major powers exert influence, smaller states such as the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were recognised for their role in navigating security and development through strategic diplomacy and balancing ties with India, China, the United States (US), and the Gulf.
- Participants emphasised that enhanced multilateral cooperation and trust-building are essential, with platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) needing to adapt in order to manage challenges, amplify small-state agency, and create pathways for sustainable dialogue, stability, and prosperity.

Key Findings

- South Asia remains the least integrated region in the world, with SAARC paralysed by India - Pakistan mistrust, weak institutions, and political rivalries, leaving trade and cooperation at minimal levels.
- Afghanistan's stability and recognition are central to regional peace and connectivity. Its exclusion undermines integration, while its inclusion could make it a bridge between South and Central Asia.
- China's growing economic and strategic role in South Asia - through Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and others - carries long-term implications, complicating India's balancing act and reshaping regional alignments.

- India's foreign policy shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment allows it to engage across blocs (US, Russia, China, BRICS, SCO, Quad), but mounting global polarisation strains this strategy.
- Regional cooperation in South Asia is essential to withstand global shocks such as tariff wars, climate change, disinformation, and security threats.
- Trust deficit is the single greatest barrier to regionalism. Without confidence-building, functional cooperation in trade, health, climate, or connectivity cannot succeed.
- Identity-driven nationalism, ultra-right politics, and resource disputes threaten stability and deepen fragmentation across South Asia.
- Small states like the Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrate agency - leveraging diplomacy, climate advocacy, and strategic partnerships to safeguard their autonomy and contribute to regional stability.
- Civil society and intellectual networks once fostered dialogue, but their decline has weakened public pressure for peace and integration, leaving politics dominated by zero-sum nationalism.
- The survival of regionalism in South Asia depends on reimagining SAARC - through stronger institutional mechanism, depoliticised cooperation, and harmonisation of national and regional interests - or risk permanent irrelevance.



Summary of Proceedings

- The deliberations emphasised that South Asia is operating in an increasingly turbulent world order, shaped by the return of Trump-era politics, escalating US - China rivalry, tariff wars, and a fraying multilateral system.
- The South Asian region holds nearly a quarter of the world's population and is rich in cultural and historical linkages. Despite this, the region remains one of the least integrated regions, with intraregional trade limited to “around 5%”.
- The absence of a robust mechanism for regional dialogue and cooperation has left the region vulnerable to crises, as highlighted by recent conflict between Pakistan and India.
- Institutions like the United Nations, once trusted to deliver peace and justice, are seen as limited in their capacity to address climate change, security threats, and humanitarian crises. Against this backdrop, regionalism emerges not as an option but a necessity - an instrument to build resilience and collective bargaining power.
- There was broad agreement amongst the participants that SAARC remains dormant, if not in “coma” or “hospice”, primarily due to India-Pakistan tensions, though other structural limitations were also cited, such as an underpowered secretariat and the inability to address bilateral disputes.
- Revitalisation of SAARC would require a stronger mandate for the SAARC Secretariat, potentially led by a Secretary-General with greater authority, and the adoption of flexible coalitions of the willing within the region, similar to practices in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- Some participants stressed that regional cooperation cannot be reduced to bilateral disputes alone. Economic, health, climate, and connectivity agendas could provide functional entry points for collaboration despite political obstacles.
- Afghanistan featured prominently in the discussion, with calls for recognition of its current government to enable trade, connectivity, and peace in the country and broader region.
- Moreover, despite challenges such as restrictions on women's rights and humanitarian concerns, participants noted improvements in domestic revenue collection, reduced corruption, and relative security gains in Afghanistan.

- Afghanistan's exclusion from regional and global forums was deemed counterproductive, given its strategic position linking South and Central Asia.
- Its stability, or instability, was seen as directly impacting neighbours like Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and Central Asian states.
- Participants stressed that only a coordinated regional vision could transform Afghanistan from a liability into an opportunity.
- India was discussed as both a driver and an obstacle to regionalism. Its shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment enables engagement with diverse blocs - US, Russia, China, SCO, BRICS, and the Quad - but also places it under strain amid growing global polarisation.
- India - Pakistan mistrust continues to paralyse regional forums.
- Participants also noted that South Asia's trajectory is increasingly shaped by major power competition, particularly between the US and China.
- China's growing economic and strategic presence in the region was repeatedly emphasised. It has deepened ties with Pakistan, expanded investments in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, and even engaged Afghanistan and the Maldives.
- For many states, China represents opportunity through connectivity and infrastructure, but for India, it remains a strategic threat. This duality underscores South Asia's paradox: China is indispensable to its future, yet integration under a single regional framework remains politically blocked.
- It was also noted that while India benefits economically from large-scale trade with China, it resists inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- India's reliance on Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative to bypass Pakistan, risks fragmenting rather than integrating the region.
- Smaller South Asian states were presented as both vulnerable and influential. These states, such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, often experience geopolitical pressures from larger neighbors, particularly India, while simultaneously seeking engagement with China and other external powers.
- Maldives was recognised for its leadership in climate diplomacy and sustainable development.

- With a projected GDP of \$7 billion in 2025, Maldives economy depends heavily on tourism, yet faces vulnerabilities such as a 12% fiscal deficit and rising climate risks.
- Maldives illustrates how small states can wield disproportionate influence through multilateralism and principled diplomacy.
- Sri Lanka was highlighted as a regional lesson. Emerging from economic bankruptcy, the country has demonstrated the potential of strong domestic leadership and neutral diplomacy.
- Its strategic location positions it as a natural bridge between SAARC, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN, offering a model of “open regionalism” rather than rivalry.
- Bangladesh's sudden political transition in 2024, and volatility along its Myanmar border, underscore the fragility of the neighbourhood.
- SAARC, once envisioned as South Asia's institutional anchor, was described as being on “ventilator support” and “comatose”. It was highlighted that since 2014, the organisation's summit meetings have stalled, the Secretariat has remained weak, and most agreements have gone unimplemented.
- Civil society networks and grassroots initiatives, once influential in sustaining dialogue, have declined due to shrinking civic space and political hostility, leaving little pressure on leaders to cooperate.
- The region's security complex remains fragile, marked by unresolved disputes in Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, and intensified by identity-driven nationalism.
- Religious polarisation, minority exploitation, and ultra-right politics in the region are fuelling mistrust.
- Unlike ASEAN, where fear of external domination fostered unity, in South Asia fear is inward-looking - smaller neighbours often see India as a threat to sovereignty, driving them toward extra-regional powers.
- Participants agreed that South Asia faces shared existential challenges - climate change, water disputes (Indus, Brahmaputra), migration, and cross-border terrorism. These cannot be managed individually, yet regional cooperation remains absent.
- Some participants questioned whether “South Asia” remains a useful framework, noting that the region's economic and strategic ties increasingly extend westward (to the Gulf) and eastward (to ASEAN).

- The debate raised the possibility of redefining South Asia's identity as part of a broader West Asian or Indo-Pacific context rather than being confined by colonial-era regional classifications.
- Discussions emphasised Pakistan's geostrategic location as both a challenge and an opportunity. Its ties with Afghanistan, China, and the Gulf states were noted as shaping its regional outlook. Pakistan's economic dependence on Gulf remittances and energy links was seen as binding its interests increasingly with West Asia, suggesting that Pakistan's identity may extend beyond the South Asian framework.
- Some participants argued that Pakistan, together with smaller South Asian states, could benefit from issue-based coalitions in areas such as the blue economy, digital connectivity, and climate cooperation, even if broader SAARC revival remains stalled.
- Several interventions stressed that Pakistan must remain engaged in dialogue mechanisms – whether through SAARC or Track 1.5/2 diplomacy – to reduce mistrust and encourage cooperation. The view was that Pakistan's proactive engagement with Afghanistan, China, and other South Asian states could help position it as a constructive regional actor or a Net Security Stabiliser.
- There was consensus on the need for joint responses to transnational challenges, including:
 - Depoliticised, functional cooperation in trade, health, climate, and connectivity.
 - Institutional reforms, including a stronger SAARC Secretariat with real authority.
 - Track 1.5/2 dialogues, blending officials and experts, to gradually build trust.
 - A reimagined framework that harmonises sovereignty with collective security and development.
- To sum up, the discussions reflected a mixture of optimism and pessimism. On one hand, there was recognition that regional cooperation is essential for stability and prosperity. On the other, participants acknowledged that deep-rooted mistrust, unresolved disputes, and external rivalries have paralysed formal institutions.
- The path forward lies in fostering dialogue, building trust, empowering regional institutions, and engaging civil society. Without such steps, South Asia risks continued fragmentation and vulnerability in a rapidly changing global order.

Programme

1030-1100 hrs	Online Assembling
1100-1105 hrs	Welcome Remarks by Dr. Atia Ali Kazmi, Director Global and Regional Studies, ISSRA
1105-1235 hrs	<p>South Asia within the Evolving Global Order and Trends</p> <p>Distinguished Speakers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dr. Waliullah Shaheen, Director of Strategic Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Afghanistan 2. Dr. Shahab Enam Khan, Professor of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University (JU), Bangladesh 3. Dr. Niranjana Sahoo, Senior Fellow Governance and Politics Initiative, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India 4. Dr. Athaulla Ahmed Rasheed, Head of Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS), Maldives National University (MNU), Maldives 5. Dr. Shambu Ram Simkhada, Member Infrastructure Development Committee, National Defence University (NDU), Nepal 6. Dr. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, Executive Director South Asia Foresight Network; former Director General, Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), Ministry of Defence (MoD), Sri Lanka 7. Mr. Ejaz Haider, Senior Resident Fellow, Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research, Pakistan <p>Distinguished Discussants:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dr. Idress Zaman, Former Acting Foreign Minister and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs, Afghanistan 2. Mr. Rahul Roy-Chaudhary, Senior Fellow for South and Central Asian Defence, Strategy and Diplomacy, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) <p>Moderator:</p> <p>Dr. Mariam Fatima, Assistant Professor, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Faculty of Contemporary Studies (FCS), NDU, Pakistan</p>
1235-1305 hrs	Interactive Session
1305-1315 hrs	Concluding Remarks by Major General Muhammad Raza Aizad, HI(M), DG ISSRA
1315 hrs	Group Photo Refreshments Dispersal

List of Participants

Chair	
Major General Raza Aizad, HI (M)	Director General ISSRA
Moderator	
Dr. Marium Fatima	Assistant Professor, PCS-FCS, NDU
Experts Participants	
Dr. Waliullah Shaheen	Director of Strategic Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Afghanistan
Dr. Shahab Enam Khan	Professor of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University (JU), Bangladesh
Dr. Niranjana Sahoo	Senior Fellow Governance and Politics Initiative, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India
Dr. Athaulla Ahmed Rasheed	Head of Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS), Maldives National University (MNU), Maldives
Dr. Shambu Ram Simkhada	Member Infrastructure Development Committee, National Defence University (NDU), Nepal
Dr. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera	Executive Director South Asia Foresight Network; former Director General, Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), Ministry of Defence (MoD), Sri Lanka
Mr. Ejaz Haider	Senior Resident Fellow, Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research, Pakistan
Dr. Idress Zaman	Former Acting Foreign Minister and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs, Afghanistan
Mr. Rahul Roy-Chaudhary	Senior Fellow for South and Central Asian Defence, Strategy and Diplomacy, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

Picture Gallery





