

FOSTERING MARITIME CONNECTIVITY IN SOUTH ASIA: ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Maritime connectivity plays a vital role in fostering economic growth, regional integration, and geopolitical stability in South Asia. The efficient flow of goods, services, and ideas through maritime routes is crucial for the region's economic development and integration. However, there are various challenges that need to be addressed to ensure security and sustainability in the maritime domain. Regional organizations have emerged as key actors in fostering cooperation and connectivity among countries in South Asia. The primary objective of this study is to examine the importance of maritime connectivity in South Asia and explore the role of regional organizations in promoting collaboration and integration in the region. To achieve the objectives of this study, a qualitative research approach (i.e., content analysis) is utilized. The findings reveal that maritime trade plays a significant role in the South Asian economy, with a substantial share of the region's exports and imports being handled by South Asian ports. Challenges faced include political tensions, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic hurdles that impede the progress of maritime connectivity. Regional organizations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), play a vital role in promoting maritime cooperation and connectivity in South Asia. These organizations serve as platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and coordination among South Asian countries. They facilitate initiatives to enhance maritime connectivity, including infrastructure development, port connectivity, maritime security, and capacity building. Successful initiatives, such as the establishment of transnational shipping routes and the harmonization of trade regulations, have positively impacted maritime connectivity in the region. To further strengthen the role of regional organizations in fostering

maritime connectivity, several strategies need to be implemented. They include 1) enhancing institutional frameworks within these organizations to ensure effective implementation of maritime connectivity initiatives; 2) promoting information sharing among member states and relevant stakeholders for enhancing understanding and cooperation on maritime connectivity issues, and 3) facilitating investment and technology transfer in maritime infrastructure development. Additionally, encouraging public and private investments in ports, logistics facilities, and connectivity projects can significantly enhance efficiency and sustainability. Technology transfer and capacity building programs can further enhance the region's maritime capabilities. Fostering people-to-people exchanges through cultural exchanges, educational programs, and tourism initiatives can contribute to building trust, understanding, and cooperation among the people of South Asian countries. Most importantly, strengthening maritime security cooperation is essential to address piracy, smuggling, and maritime terrorism. Collaboration among regional organizations, navies, and coast guards can enhance maritime security measures and ensure the safety and stability of maritime routes. In conclusion, regional organizations play a crucial role as catalysts for fostering maritime cooperation and connectivity among countries in the South Asian region. However, given the complexity of maritime security challenges in the region, there is a pressing need for the establishment of an Indian Ocean Treaty Organization (IOTO) as a mechanism to further strengthen efforts in fostering maritime connectivity and security in South Asia and the broader region. The IOTO would provide a comprehensive platform for member states to collaborate on maritime security matters, address common challenges, and ensure the safety and stability of maritime routes.

Keywords: Maritime Connectivity, South Asia, Regional Organizations, Indian Ocean Treaty Organization