



A CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF THE INDIA-PAKISTAN-BANGLADESH STRATEGIC TRIANGLE: IDENTITY, RIVALRY, AND REGIONAL ORDER

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article reinterprets the India, Pakistan & Bangladesh strategic triangle through a Constructivist lens, arguing that South Asia's persistent rivalry is not solely the outcome of material competition but the product of historically constructed identities and intersubjective threat perceptions. While Realist scholarship emphasises military asymmetry, nuclear deterrence, and territorial disputes, such explanations inadequately account for the symbolic intensity and recurrent reproduction of antagonism in the region. Drawing upon Alexander Wendt's typology of Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures of anarchy, alongside broader Constructivist scholarship, this study traces how critical historical events Partition (1947), the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the 1998 nuclearization, and the institutional evolution of SAARC have successively shaped South Asia's regional culture. The analysis demonstrates that the region has oscillated between Hobbesian enmity and Lockean rivalry, while failing to achieve Kantian transformation. The persistence of insecurity reflects not structural inevitability but identity-driven reproduction of rivalry. By distinguishing between material capabilities and non-material meanings, the study concludes that South Asia's regional order is socially constructed and sustained through identity narratives rather than determined exclusively by power distribution.

Keywords: *Constructivism, Hobbesian Culture, Lockean Rivalry, Kantian Order, National Identity, South Asia, Regional Security*

Introduction

The India, Pakistan & Bangladesh strategic triangle constitutes one of the most enduring regional security configurations in postcolonial international politics. Since 1947, South Asia has witnessed repeated wars, crises, territorial disputes, and nuclear escalation. Conventional interpretations situate this rivalry within a Realist framework, emphasizing material power asymmetry, deterrence stability, and unresolved territorial conflict (Ganguly 2016). However, while material capabilities structure the possibilities of conflict, they do not explain the depth of hostility, the endurance of distrust, or the symbolic power of historical narratives in South Asian diplomacy. The region's insecurity is not only strategic but ontological rooted in identity formation and historical memory. This article argues that the India, Pakistan & Bangladesh strategic triangle is best understood as a socially constructed regional order. Historical events did not merely reflect shifts in power distribution; they actively produced and reproduced distinct cultures of anarchy. Using Wendt's framework (1992; 1999), the study demonstrates that South Asia remains structurally suspended between Hobbesian enmity and Lockean rivalry, with only episodic and incomplete Kantian aspirations.

Problem Definition

The central problem addressed in this research is the inadequacy of materialist explanations in accounting for the persistence and reproduction of rivalry in South Asia. Realist accounts explain conflict through: Territorial disputes (Kashmir), Nuclear deterrence, Power asymmetry & Strategic competition Yet these explanations fail to answer critical questions: Why does hostility persist even under nuclear stability? Why do symbolic events trigger disproportionate escalation? Why has institutional cooperation failed to consolidate despite economic interdependence? If material capabilities were the sole determinant, deterrence would stabilise the region normatively as well as militarily. Instead, South Asia remains emotionally charged and historically reactive. The problem, therefore, lies not only in material rivalry but in identity construction and intersubjective meaning.

Literature Review

The scholarship on South Asia is dominated by Realist and security-complex approaches. Ganguly (2016) emphasises deterrence logic and structural competition. Buzan and Waeber (2003) conceptualise South Asia as a regional security complex characterised by enduring rivalry. Constructivist scholarship provides alternative explanatory tools. Wendt (1992; 1999) argues that anarchy has multiple cultural forms depending on intersubjective relationships. Finnemore (1996) demonstrates that national interests are socially constructed within normative environments. Katzenstein (1996) highlights the role of identity and culture in shaping security policy. Stephen Cohen (2004) traces the ideological formation of Pakistan's state identity. Chatterjee (2005) examines identity-driven ethnic conflict in South Asia. Muni and Mishra (2017) analyze India's evolving regional engagement, highlighting shifts in strategic identity. Despite these contributions, there remains insufficient integration of Wendt's Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian typology into the historical evolution of the India, Pakistan and Bangladesh triangle.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on Indo-Pak rivalry, there remains limited analysis of how historical events constructed distinct regional cultures of anarchy. Existing studies often describe material developments without tracing their identity implications. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to distinguishing material variables (military capability, deterrence) from non-material variables (identity, norms, ontological security). A Wendtian cultural mapping of South Asia's evolution remains underdeveloped.

Research Question

How can the India, Pakistan & Bangladesh rivalry be explained by distinguishing between its material factors (such as military capabilities and nuclear deterrence) and its non-material factors (such as identity, historical memory, and norms)?
In what ways did the 1947 Partition, the 1971 Liberation War, and the 1998 nuclearisation shape the evolution of Hobbesian enmity, Lockean rivalry, and the absence of Kantian transformation in South Asia?

Aims and Objectives

1. To distinguish material and non-material dimensions of rivalry.
2. To interpret Partition (1947) as the foundational Hobbesian moment.
3. To analyze the 1971 Liberation War as identity restructuring.
4. To examine nuclearisation (1998) as institutionalised Lockean rivalry.
5. To assess why Kantian transformation has not materialised in South Asia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Constructivist theory and employs process tracing to examine how key historical events shaped identity and regional culture within the India, Pakistan & Bangladesh strategic triangle. Rather than treating events such as Partition (1947), the 1971 Liberation War, nuclearization (1998), and the evolution of SAARC as purely material developments, the research analyzes them as identity-forming and norm-producing moments. Data are collected primarily from qualitative secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and scholarly analyses on South Asian security, nationalism, and Constructivist theory. In addition, primary documentary sources are consulted, such as official government statements, foreign policy documents, parliamentary debates, leaders' speeches, SAARC declarations, and relevant United Nations records.

The analytical framework distinguishes between material factors (military capabilities, nuclear deterrence, and territorial control) and non-material factors (identity narratives, historical memory, norms, legitimacy, and ontological security). By tracing the interaction between these dimensions across different historical phases, the study explains how South Asia's regional culture of rivalry has been socially constructed and reproduced over time

Phased Construction of South Asia's Regional Order: A Constructivist Synthesis

Phase I: Partition (1947) Institutionalization of Hobbesian Enmity

The Partition of 1947 marked the foundational moment in the construction of South Asia's postcolonial regional order. It represented both territorial division and identity rupture. Lens of material dimension the emergence of India and Pakistan as sovereign states reconfigured the subcontinent's political geography. The immediate militarization of the Kashmir dispute embedded security competition into bilateral relations. Defence institutions in both states were organised around perceived external threats, reinforcing a security dilemma from inception. Lens of non-material dimension: Partition violence generated enduring collective trauma. Competing national ideologies secular territorial nationalism in India and Muslim nationhood in Pakistan produced polarised identity narratives. Each state internalised existential insecurity, framing the other not merely as a competitor but as a civilizational threat. The structural outcome of these dynamics produced a Hobbesian regional culture characterised by mutual enemy perception. Hostility became institutionalised within strategic doctrine, diplomatic posture, and public discourse. The regional order was thus socially constructed around antagonism rather than neutral coexistence.

Phase II: (1971) Identity Reconfiguration Without Cultural Transformation

The Bangladesh Liberation War reshaped the geopolitical configuration but did not fundamentally alter the adversarial structure of regional politics. Lens of material dimension Pakistan's territorial fragmentation and the emergence of Bangladesh created a

strategic triangle involving India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The balance of power shifted significantly, weakening Pakistan's strategic depth. Lens of non-material dimension the ideological premise of a unified Muslim polity across geographically separated territories collapsed. Bengali linguistic and cultural nationalism became institutionalised within Bangladesh. India was temporarily reframed in Bangladeshi political memory as a liberator rather than hegemon. Despite identity restructuring, India and Pakistan hostility persisted. The regional culture did not transition beyond adversarial logic. The triangle became differentiated India and Pakistan remained deeply conflictual, while India and Bangladesh relations reflected conditional cooperation. Structural transformation occurred, but cultural transformation did not.

Phase III: Nuclearisation(1998) Institutionalised Lockean Rivalry

The overt nuclearization of India and Pakistan in 1998 recalibrated the regional security architecture and redefined patterns of interaction. Lens of material dimension nuclear capability introduced deterrence stability by significantly raising the cost of full-scale war. Strategic parity became implicitly recognised, reducing incentives for conventional escalation. Lens of non-material dimension nuclear status became intertwined with prestige, sovereignty assertion, and global recognition. Rivalry shifted from existential elimination to competitive coexistence. Although suspicion endured, mutual recognition of survival rights emerged through deterrence logic. The structural outcome of the bilateral relationship evolved toward a Lockean culture of anarchy, where states treat each other as rivals rather than absolute enemies. Conflict became regulated rather than unlimited. Nuclearisation structured competition without eliminating distrust.

Phase IV: Regional Institutionalism (SAARC) and the Unfulfilled Kantian Aspiration

The establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 represented an institutional attempt to move South Asia beyond entrenched rivalry toward cooperative regionalism. From a Constructivist perspective, particularly through Alexander Wendt's typology of cultures of anarchy, SAARC embodied a tentative Kantian aspiration within a region historically dominated by Hobbesian enmity and Lockean rivalry. In Wendt's Kantian culture, states perceive one another not as enemies or mere rivals, but as members of a cooperative community committed to non-violence and collective security. SAARC's founding principles sovereign equality, non-interference, mutual benefit, and regional cooperation reflected elements of such a normative vision. Institutionally, SAARC sought to promote economic integration, cultural exchange, and collective development, thereby reducing the salience of security competition. However, the Kantian transformation remained incomplete. While material mechanisms for cooperation were created, the non-material foundations required for a security community shared identity, mutual trust, and normative internalization failed to consolidate. Persistent India Pakistan hostility repeatedly paralyzed institutional processes, preventing SAARC from evolving into a forum of collective problem-solving. Norms of cooperation were articulated but not deeply internalised. Consequently, SAARC did not transcend Lockean rivalry. Instead, it operated within a structurally constrained environment where states continued to interpret each other through suspicion and historical memory. The absence of a shared South Asian identity prevented the emergence of Kantian solidarity. Thus, SAARC illustrates not the inevitability of regional failure, but the limits of institutional design in the absence of identity transformation. Without reconstructing intersubjective meanings among member states, institutional frameworks alone cannot produce a Kantian regional order.

Phase V: Contemporary Order Stabilised Deterrence, Persistent Identity Insecurity

Present day South Asia reflects a paradox: material stabilization alongside ideational fragmentation. Lens of material dimension nuclear deterrence continues to constrain large-scale war. Military modernization and strategic competition remain ongoing but largely bounded. Other lens of non-material Dimension: Historical memory and identity narratives continue to reproduce suspicion. Competitive nationalism shapes foreign policy discourse. Public rhetoric frequently reinforces threat perceptions rather than reconciliation. Structural character of the region today exhibits layered cultures of anarchy: Hobbesian tendencies in rhetorical framing and historical memory, Lockean dynamics in deterrence-based rivalry, Absence of Kantian collective identity in regional cooperation.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of South Asia's regional politics reveals that structural change in material power has not automatically generated transformation in regional culture. Territorial division, war, nuclear capability, and institutional initiatives have repeatedly reshaped the external configuration of the region. However, the deeper logic guiding state interaction has remained rooted in identity-based insecurity. The origins of hostility were embedded in the formative moment of state creation, where political sovereignty was tied to competing narratives of nationhood. Subsequent developments most notably the emergence of Bangladesh and later nuclearisation modified strategic calculations but did not fundamentally alter the interpretive frameworks through which states understand one another. Military parity introduced caution, yet it did not cultivate trust. Institutional dialogue created procedural engagement, yet it did not generate shared regional consciousness. Contemporary South Asia therefore reflects a paradoxical condition. Large-scale war is constrained, but suspicion persists. Strategic interaction is structured, yet reconciliation remains shallow. Cooperation occurs episodically, but it lacks a deeply internalised normative foundation. The endurance of rivalry is sustained less by immediate material imbalance and more by historically embedded narratives of threat and competition. The central analytical implication is that regional order is shaped not only by capabilities but by meanings. How states define themselves and interpret others significantly influences whether competition escalates, stabilises, or transforms. Without a shift in collective self-understanding and mutual recognition, institutional frameworks and deterrence arrangements are unlikely to produce lasting normative change. South Asia thus represents a historically layered order

one in which strategic restraint coexists with unresolved identity contestation. Its future trajectory will depend not merely on shifts in power, but on whether political leadership and societal discourse can gradually reconstruct the meanings that underpin inter-state relations.

Future Expectations and Prediction

Looking forward, the trajectory of the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh strategic triangle will be shaped less by shifts in military capability and more by the evolution of regional identities and shared meanings. Nuclear deterrence is likely to continue preventing large-scale war, sustaining a condition of strategic restraint. However, deterrence alone cannot transform adversarial perceptions rooted in historical memory and nationalist narratives. If political discourse continues to draw legitimacy from competitive identity construction, the region will remain stable in military terms yet fragmented at the normative level. Conversely, incremental confidence-building measures, economic integration, climate and connectivity cooperation, and sustained diplomatic engagement could gradually reshape intersubjective expectations. Constructivist logic suggests that repeated cooperative practices, even when initially instrumental, can over time influence identity formation. Therefore, South Asia's future will not be predetermined by structural anarchy but will depend on whether state elites and societies choose to reinterpret past grievances and institutionalise mutual recognition. The durability of rivalry or the possibility of limited normative transformation will ultimately hinge on the reconstruction of meaning rather than the mere redistribution of power.

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