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# DISASTER GOVERNANCE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

## FUTURE PATHWAYS FOR SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Policy Report

August 2021

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**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**  
**SINGAPORE**

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## **Executive Summary**

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South Asia is highly exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of natural hazards. It has been affected by several large-scale disasters over the past two decades, including the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Multiple small and medium disasters have also occurred with increasing frequency, disrupting the lives of affected communities and halting developments in a region already fraught with poverty. Yet, none of these events have been a catalyst for greater regional cooperation on disaster management, unlike in Southeast Asia.

This policy report traces developments in disaster governance in South Asia as an area of cooperation for Southeast Asia. It will also explore the role of existing regional organisations, bilateral and multilateral platforms, and other initiatives between the countries from both sides, as potential avenues for inter-regional cooperation on disaster governance.

# Introduction

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South Asia consists of eight countries — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. It is home to one-fifth of the world's population<sup>1</sup> and accounts for a disproportionately large share of the world's poorest people. In 2017, South Asia accommodated 48 per cent — almost half of the world's multi-dimensionally poor people.<sup>2</sup> It is also highly exposed and vulnerable to the impacts of natural hazards, with countries facing floods, cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, and droughts.<sup>3</sup> Flooding and cyclones are the two most common disaster events in the region.

This policy report assesses the trajectory of humanitarian commitments in South Asia to inform the crafting of an evidence-based strategy for Southeast Asia. It evaluates the feasibility of political commitment to inter-regional cooperation, the ability of institutions to implement the strategy, and the technical correctness needed for such a strategy. It identifies platforms available in South Asia and assesses whether and where there is a sufficient community of practice in disaster management to facilitate greater cooperation between South and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Stacey White. "A Critical Disconnect: The Role of SAARC in Building the DRM Capacities of South Asian Countries." Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Role-of-SAARC-in-DRM-South-Asia-May-5-2015.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Finnigan. "Poverty in South Asia: The Long View." LSE South Asia Centre, 9 April 2019. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/04/09/poverty-in-south-asia-the-long-view/#:~:text=In%20terms%20of%20multidimensional%20poverty,multidimensionally%20poor%20people%20in%202017.>

<sup>3</sup> Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery. "Disaster Risk Management in South Asia: A Regional Overview." World Bank, 1 December 2012. [https://www.gfdr.org/en/publication/disaster-risk-management-south-asia-regional-overview-2013.](https://www.gfdr.org/en/publication/disaster-risk-management-south-asia-regional-overview-2013)

## Methodology

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This policy report is based on desk research and 28 in-depth, semi-structured elite interviews with multiple stakeholders conducted from November 2020 to March 2021.<sup>4</sup> The interview subjects comprised government personnel and members of international and local humanitarian organisations, think tanks, and academia. The participants were predominantly based in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, or had expertise in the region. Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that in-person fieldwork was deferred. Interviews were instead conducted using online audio and video meeting platforms.

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<sup>4</sup> This research was administered by Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board, under project number IRB-2020-03-035.

# Disaster Management at the Regional Level

## South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

The main institution for regional cooperation in South Asia is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).<sup>5</sup> SAARC was established in 1985, by seven of the eight South Asian countries (Afghanistan eventually joined the grouping in 2007) as a regional political and economic organisation with the aim to promote “regional peace, economic prosperity, and social empowerment for the people in the region”.<sup>6</sup> The SAARC Charter<sup>7</sup> serves as the constitution of SAARC and member states are legally bound to adhere to the provisions laid out in the document.

In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, an Expert Group comprising of member countries came together to explicitly address the issues of early warning, disaster management, and disaster prevention in South Asia.<sup>8</sup> This resulted in the development of the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management in 2006<sup>9</sup>, which led to the formation of the SAARC Centre for Disaster Management and Preparedness (SDMC), housed within the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) in New Delhi.<sup>10</sup> Through the priorities laid out in the Comprehensive Framework, the SDMC provides member states with policy advice and technical support to improve national response mechanisms. The SDMC oversees the development and implementation of regional disaster risk reduction strategies.<sup>11</sup> It also facilitates information exchange and expertise through its

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<sup>5</sup> Stacey White. “A Critical Disconnect: The Role of SAARC in Building the DRM Capacities of South Asian Countries.” Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Role-of-SAARC-in-DRM-South-Asia-May-5-2015.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Sharad Lamichhane. “Enhancing SAARC Disaster Management: A Comparative Study with ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.” Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2016. [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar\\_Lamichhane\\_Sharad.pdf](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar_Lamichhane_Sharad.pdf), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). “Charter of the SAARC.” 8 December 1985. [http://www.internationaldemocracywatch.org/attachments/436\\_Saarc\\_Charter.pdf](http://www.internationaldemocracywatch.org/attachments/436_Saarc_Charter.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Naseer Memon. *Disasters in South Asia: A Regional Perspective*. Karachi: Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> SAARC Centre for Disaster Management and Preparedness (SDMC). “SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management.” [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968\\_framework.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968_framework.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Stacey White, “A Critical Disconnect: The Role of SAARC in Building the DRM Capacities of South Asian Countries.” Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Role-of-SAARC-in-DRM-South-Asia-May-5-2015.pdf>, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

disaster management trainings and awareness programmes.<sup>12</sup> In November 2016, the SAARC Programming Committee merged the SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC) in Bhutan, the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) in Maldives, and the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC) in Bangladesh, with the SAARC SDMC in India,<sup>13</sup> now hosted by the Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management (GIDM). The streamlining and reorganisation facilitated greater integration and alignment of the various programmes and agendas. Although it was conceived as a multi-national entity, the SDMC has been unable to attract personnel and experts from other South Asian states, and as such, is viewed simply as an extension of India's NIDM.<sup>14</sup>

## **SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND)**

In 2011, the SDMC developed and approved the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND). The Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM) is largely modelled on the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)<sup>15</sup> to facilitate a more coordinated, cooperative, and planned approach to disasters in the region.

The agreement contains protocols for disaster relief and emergency response, use and mobilisation of resources, as well as coordination of response operations.<sup>16</sup> It calls on countries to “ earmark assets and capacities for regional standby arrangements on a voluntary basis”.<sup>17</sup> The provisions also include the

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<sup>12</sup> SDMC. “SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management.” [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968\\_framework.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968_framework.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> SDMC. “SAARC Disaster Management Centre – Interim Unit (IU).” [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session\\_5\\_Nisargkumar\\_Dave\\_SAARC\\_Disaster\\_Management\\_Centre.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session_5_Nisargkumar_Dave_SAARC_Disaster_Management_Centre.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> David Shanahan. “South Asia.” In *Disaster Response Regional Architecture: Assessing Future Possibilities*, edited by Jessica Ear, Alistair D. B. Cook, and Deon V. Canyon. Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2017, p.21.

<sup>15</sup> Stacey White. “A Critical Disconnect: The Role of SAARC in Building the DRM Capacities of South Asian Countries.” Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Role-of-SAARC-in-DRM-South-Asia-May-5-2015.pdf>, p. 12; The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA) Centre. “ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response.” <https://ahacentre.org/publication/asean-agreement-on-disaster-management-and-emergency-response-aadmer/>

<sup>16</sup> Sharad Lamichhane. “Enhancing SAARC Disaster Management: A Comparative Study with ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.” Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2016. [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar\\_Lamichhane\\_Sharad.pdf](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar_Lamichhane_Sharad.pdf), p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Stacey White. “A Critical Disconnect: The Role of SAARC in Building the DRM Capacities of South Asian Countries.” Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Role-of-SAARC-in-DRM-South-Asia-May-5-2015.pdf>, p. 12.

setting up of a dedicated rapid action force for disaster management. However, SAARC leaders have thus far “failed to gather consensus on the issue, and this remains a point of contention”.<sup>18</sup>

## South Asian Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx) 2015

In November 2015, all eight SAARC countries gathered to undertake a massive simulation and field training exercise known as the South Asian Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx). Organised by India, it sought to “test inter-governmental coordination efforts, create synergy and synchronise efforts to institutionalise regional cooperation on disaster response among the member countries”.<sup>19</sup> One of the joint field exercises involved an earthquake scenario. This allowed participating teams to gauge their own capabilities in disaster response, while enhancing coordination efforts with other stakeholders.<sup>20</sup> Although envisioned as an annual event, the exercise has neither been repeated nor scheduled in the immediate future.<sup>21</sup>

## Interactions with ASEAN

SAARC has periodically sought to learn from the ASEAN experience in terms of institutionalising and capacity building in disaster management. In January 2015, personnel from the various SAARC member states, the SDMC, and the SAARC Secretariat visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta for a one-week study exchange.<sup>22</sup> This included visits to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) to learn more about ASEAN’s regional disaster response mechanisms. The purpose was for

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<sup>18</sup> Saneet Chakradeo. “Neighbourhood First Responder: India’s Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.” New Delhi: Brookings Institution India Centre, August 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HADR-Policy-Brief.pdf>, p.17.

<sup>19</sup> Government of India. “SAARC Member Countries Assemble to Discuss Preparations for the First South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx) to be Held in November 2015.” Ministry of External Affairs, 3 September 2015. <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?25788/SAARC+Member+Countries+assemble+to+discuss+preparations+for+the+First+South+Asian+Annual+Disaster+Management+Exercise+SAADMEx+to+be+held+in+November+2015>.

<sup>20</sup> Press Trust of India. “SAARC Nations Undertake Maiden Disaster Combat Exercise in NCR.” *Business Standard*, 24 November 2015. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/saarc-nations-undertake-maiden-disaster-combat-exercise-in-ncr-115112400962\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/saarc-nations-undertake-maiden-disaster-combat-exercise-in-ncr-115112400962_1.html).

<sup>21</sup> Saneet Chakradeo. “Neighbourhood First Responder: India’s Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.” New Delhi: Brookings Institution India Centre, August 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HADR-Policy-Brief.pdf>, p.17.

<sup>22</sup> ASEAN. “ASEAN Shares Experience to SAARC in Setting Up Regional Disaster Response Mechanisms.” *ASEAN Secretariat News*, 27 January 2015. <https://asean.org/asean-shares-experience-to-saarc-in-setting-up-regional-disaster-response-mechanisms/>.

SAARC officials to learn from ASEAN's experience in setting up and operationalising the AHA Centre, as well as conducting effective and coordinated responses to disasters.

Two of the SAARC member states, Bangladesh and Nepal, have also participated regularly in the Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific. This includes interactions with humanitarian networks and militaries from the various ASEAN member states. Forums such as the RCG provide an avenue where ideas and best practices on disaster management can be exchanged between different regions.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts Working Group (EWG) on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) offers another entry point for South Asian states to engage with ASEAN to facilitate practical cooperation on HADR. The ADMM-Plus is a platform for ASEAN and its dialogue partners to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region.<sup>24</sup> India and Indonesia are co-chairs of the HADR EWG for 2021-2024, providing the opportunity to craft an agenda for inter-regional cooperation between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>23</sup> Lloyd Michael Puckett. "Civil-Military Coordination in Disaster Preparedness and Response." *Natural Hazards Review* 22, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>24</sup> ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). "About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)." <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>.

# Alternative Regional and Sub-Regional Approaches to HADR Cooperation

## Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

An alternative platform for disaster management in the region is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The Bay of Bengal has a long history of cyclones and storm surges and consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand as BIMSTEC members.<sup>25</sup> The initiative came into existence on 6 June 1997 and is viewed as a way to foster inter-regional cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>26</sup> BIMSTEC has identified 14 priority areas, including “Environment and Disaster Management” led by India.<sup>27</sup>

In the absence of substantial financial commitments from member states, BIMSTEC’s activities related to disaster management were largely dormant from 2007–2014.<sup>28</sup> Progress was mainly limited to the domain of early warning. It was only from 2015 that BIMSTEC started to refocus on “Environment and Disaster Management”. This was largely due to a shift in India’s foreign policy, which emphasised on strengthening connectivity with neighbouring states through collaborations in HADR.<sup>29</sup> India’s maritime cooperation doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) provided additional impetus for BIMSTEC’s HADR-related collaborations. In recent years, scholars have observed that India is gradually prioritising BIMSTEC over SAARC,<sup>30</sup> and BIMSTEC is attributed as the “only forum that brings together India’s strategic peripheries (South, East and North) under one single grouping”.<sup>31</sup> The perception served to alleviate geopolitical concerns, as China and Pakistan are not members of BIMSTEC.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Government of India. “Brief on BIMSTEC.” Ministry of External Affairs, February 2014. [http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BIMSTEC\\_Brief\\_February\\_2014.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BIMSTEC_Brief_February_2014.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Pia Krishnankutty. “What is BIMSTEC & Why it has Emerged as the Preferred Grouping of Countries in South Asia.” *ThePrint*, 18 March 2021. <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/what-is-bimstec-why-it-has-emerged-as-the-preferred-grouping-of-countries-in-south-asia/623535/>.

<sup>27</sup> Government of India. “Brief on BIMSTEC.” Ministry of External Affairs, February 2014. [http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BIMSTEC\\_Brief\\_February\\_2014.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/BIMSTEC_Brief_February_2014.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Sohini Bose. “BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation.” *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief* no. 383 (July 2020). [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF\\_IssueBrief\\_383\\_BIMSTEC-Disasters.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF_IssueBrief_383_BIMSTEC-Disasters.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> K. Yhome. “BIMSTEC and India’s Shifting Diplomatic Calculus.” *Observer Research Foundation*, 3 October 2016. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bimstec-india-shifting-diplomatic/>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

## **BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise (DMEx)**

The first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise (DMEx) was conducted in October 2017 in India, and comprised a Table Top Exercise (TTX), Field Training Exercises (FTXs) on earthquake and flood, and an After Action Review (AAR). All seven member states participated in the four-day exercise.<sup>33</sup> The second and most recent BIMSTEC DMEx was conducted in February 2020. Representatives from five BIMSTEC countries participated in the event, with Bhutan and Thailand being the exceptions.<sup>34</sup>

## **Interactions with ASEAN**

BIMSTEC is actively looking to adopt the model of the AHA Centre to improve its own disaster management capabilities.<sup>35</sup> With two ASEAN members (Myanmar and Thailand) among its member states, BIMSTEC allows India to pursue its foreign policy priorities – in particular, its “Act East” policy of improving relations with ASEAN and other East Asian countries.<sup>36</sup> Hence, at least from India’s perspective, the possibility of inter-regional cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN positions BIMSTEC as an attractive alternative to SAARC.<sup>37</sup> This provides a potential opportunity for greater collaboration between the two regional entities.

## **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**

Established on 7 March 1997, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an alternative regional grouping that includes disaster risk management within its mandate.<sup>38</sup> Four South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka) and four Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) are IORA members. “Disaster Risk Management” was one of six priority

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<sup>33</sup> National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) India. “BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise - 2017: Concludes.” Press Note, 13 October 2017. <http://www.ndrf.gov.in/pressrelease/bimstec-disaster-management-exercise-2017-concludes-13102017newblinking>.

<sup>34</sup> ANI. “Patnaik Inaugurates BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise in Bhubaneswar.” *Business Standard*, 11 February 2020. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/patnaik-inaugurates-bimstec-disaster-management-exercise-in-bhubaneswar-120021100991\\_1.html#:~:text=Chief%20Minister%20Naveen%20Patnaik%20on,of%20the%20Government%20of%20India](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/patnaik-inaugurates-bimstec-disaster-management-exercise-in-bhubaneswar-120021100991_1.html#:~:text=Chief%20Minister%20Naveen%20Patnaik%20on,of%20the%20Government%20of%20India).

<sup>35</sup> Dinakar Peri. “BIMSTEC to Boost Connectivity.” *The Hindu*, 18 November 2018.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bimstec-to-boost-connectivity/article25532597.ece>.

<sup>36</sup> Nazia Hussain. “BIMSTEC: Re-modelling for a Bigger Role?” *RSIS Commentary*, 12 November 2018. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/bimstec-re-modelling-for-a-bigger-role/#.YEseVmgzZPb>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). “A Guide to IORA.” April 2020. <https://www.iora.int/media/8249/guide-to-iora-2020.pdf>.

areas and two focus areas identified during India's tenure as IORA Chair (2011–2013).<sup>39</sup> This was part of a concerted attempt to strengthen institutions and capacities within the association.<sup>40</sup> The IORA secretariat and member states acknowledge that the management of disaster risks is particularly urgent in the Indian Ocean region, due to the presence of many small island nation states and developing littoral countries.

However, disaster risk management initiatives are still at a nascent stage within the organisation. The organisation held the First IORA Expert Group Meeting on Disaster Risk Management on 19 January 2021 to “provide a concrete roadmap for member states to establish an IORA Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM)”.<sup>41</sup> The aim is to create a mechanism to engage and promote cooperation among disaster and emergency response officials and experts across the region, and to facilitate practical coordination among relevant stakeholders.

The meeting was also set to finalise the IORA Guidelines for HADR, aimed at “developing a speedy, responsive, coordinated, and effective HADR strategy for IORA member states when required, and serving the purpose of establishing a common understanding of HADR operations”.<sup>42</sup> However, this was constrained by the forum's relatively large and diverse participants — 23 member states bordering the Indian Ocean. One interviewee stated that the number of countries in IORA meant that it was a “difficult vehicle to steer”.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, IORA is still predominantly focused on fostering economic cooperation, as opposed to dealing with other non-traditional security issues such as climate security and natural hazards.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> IORA. “Priorities and Focus Areas.” <https://www.iora.int/en/priorities-focus-areas/overview>.

<sup>41</sup> IORA. “First IORA Expert Group Meeting on Disaster Risk Management (EGMDRM).” 19 January 2021, <https://www.iora.int/en/events-media-news/events/priorities-focus-areas/disaster-risk-management/2021/first-iora-expert-group-meeting-on-disaster-risk-management-egmdrm>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Interview with an academic.

## Assessment of Regional Disaster Management Mechanisms in South Asia

Disaster management is codified in various policy mechanisms at the regional level, yet implementation so far remains a challenge. South Asia still lacks a functional and effective regional HADR mechanism, and efforts to improve coordination and integration have been a slow and uneven process. This is evident from the fact that there has been no collective deployment of any SAARC- or BIMSTEC-level contingent during regional emergencies in the past few years.<sup>44</sup> For instance, in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, assistance from six South Asian countries were provided bilaterally, with very little coordination at the regional level.<sup>45</sup>

While the SDMC has attempted to produce guidelines and conducted technical disaster response training for SAARC member states, scholars point towards the lack of political support from its members as one of the factors preventing it from fulfilling its mandate effectively.<sup>46</sup> Opinions about SAARC and/or the SDMC range from them being highly bureaucratic entities which results in decisions being made at a glacial pace, to them being dysfunctional organisations with very little operational value and unable to deliver on their mandate.<sup>47</sup> A multi-stakeholder approach towards disaster governance is also absent in SAARC and BIMSTEC. Collaboration and dialogue mainly take place at the government-to-government level, with UN agencies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Other non-governmental, civil society, and private sector actors are often not included in these discussions.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, according to the SARRND, only countries are considered “assisting parties”<sup>49</sup>, while civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders are framed as “service providers”.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Saneet Chakradeo. “India Needs to Invest in Regional Disaster Relief Mechanisms.” *Hindustan Times*, 13 September 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/india-needs-to-invest-in-regional-disaster-relief-mechanisms-opinion/story-NavRg25BXpH0sUf0AmMXYP.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> David Shanahan. “South Asia.” In *Disaster Response Regional Architecture: Assessing Future Possibilities*, edited by Jessica Ear, Alistair D. B. Cook, and Deon V. Canyon. Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2017, p.22.

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.

<sup>49</sup> SAARC. “SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters.” [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/61014\\_254.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/61014_254.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> SDMC. “SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management.” [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968\\_framework.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/60968_framework.pdf), p.3.

In comparison to Southeast Asia, regional cooperation in South Asia is not an easy endeavour. Some scholars attribute this to India's complicated relations with its neighbours.<sup>51</sup> Geopolitical factors, such as the India-Pakistan rivalry and unresolved disputes regarding river management, serve to create a culture of distrust within the region.<sup>52</sup> One interviewee highlighted that India is wary of Pakistan and other smaller South Asian countries coming together to "gang up" and exert pressure on India.<sup>53</sup> Trust among South Asian states seems to be extremely low, which hinders the institutional capacity of SAARC.<sup>54</sup> Hence, while individual South Asian countries have set up their own national disaster management frameworks and structures, this has not yet translated to tangible cooperation at the regional level. In fact, several of our interviewees indicated that South Asian states preferred ad-hoc bilateral engagements.

The absence of tangible regional cooperation on disaster management can also be explained by pragmatism. As mentioned before, BIMSTEC had experienced a period of dormancy in its approach to disaster management from 2007–2014. One interviewee postulated that this was because there was no large-scale disaster during this period, which meant that there was no catalyst for regional disaster management processes and cooperation.<sup>55</sup> Other interviewees attributed the lack of progress at the regional level to the way HADR is viewed by South Asian governments and communities. They expressed the view that regional HADR capacity still ranks lower on the list of priorities as compared to more traditional governance concerns such as national security and the need for economic development. This explains the absence of a coherent strategic vision on disaster management at the regional level. South Asian countries remain more concerned with their domestic affairs.

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<sup>51</sup> Sharad Lamichhane. "Enhancing SAARC Disaster Management: A Comparative Study with ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management." Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2016.

[https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar\\_Lamichhane\\_Sharad.pdf](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/48545/16Mar_Lamichhane_Sharad.pdf), p.75.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with an academic.

<sup>54</sup> Florian Krampe, Roberta Scassa, and Giovanni Mitrotta. "Responses to Climate-Related Security Risks: Regional Organizations in Asia and Africa." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Insights on Peace and Security*, August 2018. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/sipriinsight1808\\_igos\\_and\\_climate\\_change.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/sipriinsight1808_igos_and_climate_change.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a think tank analyst.

## The India Factor

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Throughout our research, it was evident that any regional or inter-regional initiative on disaster management would require significant buy-in from India. This was because India continues to dominate the regional landscape in South Asia due to its economic weight and geographic size. In the non-traditional security arena, regional commentators and experts have indicated that India has been signalling its intent to be a leading actor during emergencies in the South Asian region, which it views as its neighbourhood.<sup>56</sup> One interviewee stated that India wants to project itself as a security provider to the other South Asian states.<sup>57</sup> It is now expected that India would take the lead in any regional initiatives involving disaster management and governance, including HADR efforts. In BIMSTEC, for example, developments in India's "Act East" foreign policy as well as the perceived value of the Bay of Bengal region, has led to increased vigour in the "Environment and Disaster Management" sector.<sup>58</sup> Resultingly, there have been more collaborative disaster management initiatives under BIMSTEC in recent years.<sup>59</sup> Any attempt to build up a regional or inter-regional architecture or community of practice on disaster management would therefore significantly involve India.

One way to engage India (and the larger South Asian region) could be through its National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). The NDRF is a specialised task force established under the Indian National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA).<sup>60</sup> From a Southeast Asian perspective, engaging with the NDRF offers a way to (i) share technical expertise on disaster response and tap into niche capabilities from countries outside the region, (ii) nurture relations with South Asia's de facto security provider, and (iii) potentially create an inter-regional cadre of first responders.

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<sup>56</sup> Saneet Chakradeo. "Neighbourhood First Responder: India's Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief." New Delhi: Brookings Institution India Centre, August 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HADR-Policy-Brief.pdf>, p.6.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with an academic.

<sup>58</sup> Sohini Bose. "BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation." *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief* no. 383 (July 2020). [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF\\_IssueBrief\\_383\\_BIMSTEC-Disasters.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF_IssueBrief_383_BIMSTEC-Disasters.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> NDRF India. "About Us." <http://www.ndrf.gov.in/about-us>.

## **Policy Recommendations**

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The following steps could be considered to facilitate future cooperation between South Asia and Southeast Asia on disaster governance:

- (i) Encourage ASEAN to extend access to its disaster management training programmes and joint simulation exercises to South Asia.
- (ii) Establish an inter-regional forum of HADR experts to bring together technical experts, practitioners, and disaster management specialists from South Asia and Southeast Asia for the sharing of experiences and best practices.
- (iii) Explore the establishment of a South Asia Disaster Management and Emergency Relief Fund and a South Asia Emergency Response and Assessment Team, drawing on the experience of ASEAN, to build up regional disaster management capacity in South Asia.
- (iv) Invite ASEAN to explore partnerships with sub-regional groupings such as BIMSTEC, BBIN, and IORA on issues of disaster management and emergency response.
- (v) Establish linkages between regional disaster management hubs such as the AHA Centre, SAARC Disaster Management Centre, and BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate.
- (vi) Facilitate inter-regional cooperation through tracks 1.5 and 2 such as academic exchanges, practitioner engagements, and country-level knowledge sharing.
- (vii) Explore the ADMM Plus platform as an avenue to engage the South Asian defence ministries and militaries on HADR cooperation.

## About the Authors

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