



China-led South Asian Initiative

Why in News

Recently, **Bangladesh has invited India to join the China-led South Asian initiative** for [Covid-19](#) vaccines and poverty alleviation.

- It includes the creation of the China-South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve, and a Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre set up in China.

Key Points

▪ About China-South Asian Initiative:

- **Members:** China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
 - India, Bhutan and the Maldives are the other [SAARC countries](#) that are not part of this initiative.
- **Intended Vision:** China has different kinds of strategic, maritime, political and ideological interests with different South Asian nations so it is increasing its engagements with each country on equal footing to counterbalance India.
- **India's Stand:** Given continuing tensions over Chinese PLA aggression at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, India's stand is that other bilateral relations **cannot move ahead without a resolution of the [boundary stand-off](#).**

▪ Associated Issues: This initiative seems to be China 's strategy to contain and undermine India's role in South Asia. This can be reflected in the following arguments:

- **Minus-India Initiative:** Combinations of all SAARC member countries (other than India, Bhutan and Maldives) led some experts to suggest this was meant to be a **“Minus India” initiative.**
- **Diluting India's Role in South Asia:** This initiative is one of China's attempts to make inroads into South Asia.
 - The Chinese push to this regional grouping comes also at a time when India has been reluctant to [revive SAARC](#), turning its focus more on yet [another regional bloc-BIMSTEC](#).
- **Countering Quad:** The China-led bloc could be its plan to create what some call a northern Himalayan Quad aimed at countering the [US-led Quad](#) of which India is an active member.

▪ India's Initiatives for South Asia:

- In early 2021, India - driven by its [‘Neighbourhood First’ policy](#) and in its understanding of its **role as the ‘net security provider’ of the region** began providing Covid-19 vaccines on a priority basis to its immediate neighbours ([Vaccine Diplomacy](#)).
 - India is also **helping with the training of health workers** in some of these countries and the setting up of the infrastructure to administer the shots.
- Recently, India, Japan and Australia have formally launched the [Supply Chain Resilience](#)

Initiative (SCRI).

- It aims to reduce dependence on China amid a likelihood of reoccurring of supply chains in the Indo-Pacific region amid the Covid-19 pandemic.
- However, **India for years has struggled to match the pace of Chinese investment in countries** such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, where China is building ports, roads and power stations as part of its **Belt and Road Initiative.**
- Recently, the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, a mega trade bloc comprising 15 countries led by China has come into existence. It has kept the doors for India open.

Way Forward

- **Establishing a Border Commission:** Demarcation of Indian external boundaries is yet to be completed. Resolution of border disputes will pave way for stable regional integration.
 - Thus, India must strive for resolution of borders by establishing a border commission.
- **Broader Lens of Foreign Policy Goals:** Integrating India's regional economic and foreign policy remains a major challenge.
 - Therefore, India should resist compromising bilateral relationships with neighbours for short economic interests.
- **Improving Regional Connectivity:** Regional connectivity must be pursued with greater vigour while security concerns being addressed through cost-effective, efficient and reliable technological measures which are in use in other parts of the world.
- **Implementing Gujral's Doctrine:** India's neighbourhood policy should be based on the principles of **Gujral Doctrine.**
 - This would ensure India's stature and strength cannot be isolated from the quality of its relations with its neighbours and there can be regional growth as well.

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