

Regional Matters

The Role of Regional Organizations in Promoting Common Security

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Regional and international organizations and forums play a critical role in promoting common and human security and peace. The Indo-Pacific region benefits from several such organizations that facilitate economic trade and human security for their partners and give a collective voice to the idea of regional peace, sending a message which in turn informs international peace paradigms.

In recent decades, many multilateral and regional forums have emerged in the Global South, like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, recently joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates). Other configurations, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), are designed as regional security organizations; the SCO, originally comprising China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics, has grown to include India, Pakistan, and Iran, while Saudi Arabia and Turkey are aspiring members. This essay looks into the common interests of these organizations to match them with the ideals of common security.

Interestingly, all these forums have evolved to be compatible with the ideals of NAM — the oldest such organization and the most representative of the

Global South (as the former European colonies once referred to as the Third World are now known). The transition to independence for former colonies in the wake of World War II coincided with the Cold War and the rise of the bipolar international system. Newly independent countries resisted being drawn into this bipolar competition, joining together as a “non-aligned movement” on the basis of the historic meeting in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 and outlining principles that include: mutual respect for nations’ sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries; equality and mutual support; peaceful co-existence; nonparticipation in military blocs; and non-aggression.¹ Countries that join NAM are expected to adhere to these principles, though there is no treaty to enforce them.

While NAM member countries are seen to be ‘neutral’ in international politics, they do make political choices on most issues that involve countries of the Global South. Despite the volatility of the international system, NAM has stayed together, growing to include 120 countries; stays out of military alliances, and strives not to get involved in rivalries between major powers. NAM members’ common interests, reiterated during the association’s 19th meeting in Kampala, Uganda, in January 2024, are: (i) Assert and safeguard their sovereignty and territorial integrity; (ii) Independent foreign policy whereby they have the right to make strategic choices; (iii) Construct and support a



multipolar global system; (iv) Oppose unilateral economic measures such as sanctions; (v) Look for the best development choice and multiple partners — from both West and East; (vi) Support global peace.²

Managing Differences, Finding Commonalities

Regional organizations in the Indo-Pacific hold similar positions to those of NAM, but have been hampered by differences and disagreements between member states; for example, SAARC is bogged down because of the India-Pakistan bilateral disputes, while ASEAN, despite 50 years of attempting economic integration, has been unable to reach a consensus on economic integration or address many common issues of security and concern like labor migration, rights, and climate change.

Nevertheless, these regional associations meet regularly, engage on common issues, and try and forge consensus; furthermore, they have achieved successes that support common security approaches. ASEAN, despite its shortcomings, is a success story as a regional grouping that acts together on many economic issues of common interest. For example, it has negotiated free trade agreements for a number of countries including India, China, and Australia. ASEAN meets with global powers, in events such as the ASEAN-U.S. Summit and the ASEAN-China Summit, to protect the region's security. ASEAN has also managed and mediated several intra-ASEAN disputes, while others have been submitted to the International Court of Justice. However, several disagreements between member states of ASEAN persist, especially regarding overlapping maritime and territorial claims. Thailand and Cambodia have had border clashes, and there is civil war in Myanmar. But ASEAN provides a forum for managing these disputes.

The SCO, an initiative of China and Russia to foster regional engagements among Central Asian states, has expanded into a regional organization focused on trade and investments, connectivity and regional stability, countering terrorism, and curbing radicalism.

Instability in Afghanistan has been a major concern of the SCO, but the organization is not a security alliance like the Collective Security Treaty Organization, in which an attack on one member state can be taken as an attack on all and can involve a joint response.

Both the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the League of Arab States (known informally as the Arab League) facilitate the resolution of economic and security concerns. Regional organizations with purely economic interests — such as OPEC and the South Asian Free Trade Area — play a focused role in regional trade. Most of these groupings have been lackluster, but Israel's actions in Gaza have activated both the Arab League and the OIC in defending the Palestine cause, calling for a ceasefire and giving humanitarian aid.³

The BRICS grouping of emerging powers, formed at the initiative of Moscow in 2009, is both institutionalizing and expanding — with five new members added in 2024. Collectively, the founding members' economies contributed 36% of world output in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, leaping to 56% of PPP output and 79% of world growth by 2015.⁴ These countries' common interest is in showing that a lens based only on the advanced Western economies is an outmoded tool for viewing the world economy. In its very first meeting (the 2009 BRICS Summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia), BRICS declared twin goals of reviving the global economy and emphasizing the role of the United Nations in maintaining peace. BRICS is committed to U.N. goals on sustainable development, a global commons for trade and development, and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on enhancing women's roles and participation in peace and security. BRICS is committed to international law and fair rules for trade and finance, and established a New Development Bank that is leading initiatives in the use of national currencies among U.N. member countries.

The BRICS international agenda of sovereignty, multipolarity, non-interference, non-intervention, and opposition to sanctions and other coercive economic

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measures reflects key principles of peace. Although BRICS has not taken up any directly security-related projects, it has opposed terrorism and favors holistic peace. BRICS is opposed to all forms of hegemony and unilateralism, favoring instead multilateralism and respect for sovereignty. This BRICS agenda and commitment is endorsed by regional organizations associated with the Global South, including NAM and the SCO. Global South nations look to BRICS to lead, and especially to take developing countries along the growth trajectory.

Conclusion

Regional organizations are an established site for interactions in the Indo-Pacific, just as they are in the Global South. A survey of these organizations shows that their focus is on regional peace, security, and economic development, which they see as interlinked. These organizations have derived strength and vision from the Non-Aligned Movement, the oldest of the

regional organizations of the Global South.

A comparison of the Indo-Pacific's regional organizations shows certain similarities in aims: sovereignty and territorial integrity; nonintervention in each other's domestic affairs; not participating in global military alliances or taking sides in international conflicts; and pursuing independent foreign policy and strategic autonomy. Not one of these regional organizations sees the West or any grouping as an enemy or threat; rather than opposing these powers, regional organizations in the Indo-Pacific seek to co-exist parallel to them. Consistent with this stance, such entities have an interest in the peaceful resolution and negotiation of interstate conflicts; a commitment to development and to reducing poverty; and the desire to carve out a path independent of those traditionally laid down by the superpowers.

Their goals resonate with the paradigm proposed in the Olof Palme International Center's Policies for Common Security and Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future reports.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need for regional common security, and regional organizations like ASEAN should consider this.
2. Any conflict within the region needs to be resolved through negotiations and mediations within the region. Superpowers should keep out of regional disputes.
3. Most Indo-Pacific countries do not want to be part of strategic containment against another country. Such containment leads to an arms race and exacerbates tensions within the region.
4. Introduce a moratorium on all wars for a two-year period as a global trial.
5. Neutral, non-aligned states and regional organizations should follow their own paths, without pressure to choose military alliances.

Endnotes

1. South Centre (2017). Non Aligned Movement and Bandung Principles as Relevant Today as Ever: South Centre. *South Bulletin*, 99 (May 1, 2017).
2. Non-Aligned Movement (2024). Kampala Declaration of the 19th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).
3. Arab-Islamic summit rejects justifying Gaza war as Israeli self-defence. (2023, November 11). *Al Jazeera*.
4. BRICS and G7 countries' share of the world's total gross domestic product (GDP) in purchasing power parity (PPP) from 2000 to 2023. (2024, February 13). Statista.com.