5
Conclusions: Competing Regionalism and Panchsheel Multilateralism in South Asia and Beyond

As the process-tracing conducted for the four regional organizations has demonstrated, regional multilateralism has been subject to the process of norm localization, with India’s foreign policy authoritatively determining the extent to which the norm of regional multilateralism has finally been implemented. The final chapter of this book summarizes the findings of the foregoing analysis and provides a tentative outlook of future developments: First, the phenomenon of competing regionalism in South Asia and beyond is examined; next, recurring patterns of regional multilateralism vis-à-vis Indian foreign policy are extrapolated. The final section of the chapter deals with the question as to whether India now has a new ‘tryst with destiny’ in the form of regional multilateralism and provides policy recommendations.

The explanatory power of norm localization and competing regionalism in South Asia and neighbouring regions

The concept of norm localization enabled the author to incorporate elements of a particular foreign policy culture while analysing the implementation process of regional multilateralism. This norm conflicted with deeply ingrained cultural beliefs of the normative hegemon. Although the original initiative for the formation of SAARC, IOR-ARC, BIMST-EC, and MGC always came from smaller states, India in due course took the reins in her hand, influenced the negotiations, and was responsible for crafting the respective founding documents and for determining the exact institutional set-up of the organizations. Owing to India’s insistence on implementing a pre-existing (Nehruvian) cultural structure, the norm was then localized and sublimated right from the start.
Considering the above, the fact that India has agreed to become a member of four regional arrangements requires an explanation that transcends the confines of realist arguments and the latter’s focus on power. In theory, India as the regional hegemon could make use of a regional organization to discipline states of the region (SAARC), or to bind states that are located farther away (IOR-ARC) or that are members in other regional organization (BIMST-EC) closer to it. However, India’s insistence on this particular ‘minimal’ regional multilateralism in no way furthers this goal. On the contrary, the institutional set-up of the organizations does not allow for political manoeuvrings or strategic scheming.

The process of norm sublimation applied in the four case studies has the advantage of explaining the lack of certain components of what constitutes the essence of regional multilateralism. Norm sublimation can explain why, in the Panchsheel form, the norm suffers from achieving its normative ‘push’ and has noticeably remained under-institutionalized. The explanatory power of norm localization in its modified form can thus be verified for the South Asian regional context.

As a consequence, the current state of affairs of regional multilateralism in South Asia and neighbouring regions is that each country fends for itself, and cooperation takes place in the bilateral, but not in the multilateral field. However, by founding the IOR-ARC, BIMST-EC, and MGC alongside the SAARC and by deliberately excluding certain countries from joining these organizations, India has also started a process of competing regionalism.

A time gap of 12 years existed between the founding of the SAARC and the IOR-ARC. With the genesis of the latter, India clearly had the opportunity to start a fresh process of regional multilateralism. As the evolutionary phases of the IOR-ARC described above have demonstrated, it is beyond doubt that India was heavily involved in shaping the newly created IOR-ARC; India eclipsed Australia as the initial prime mover and norm entrepreneur of the process of Indian Ocean regional multilateralism. From the beginning of negotiations way back in 1994, there were two obvious differences, one relating to the scope of the membership and the second relating to the scope of objectives of such an Indian Ocean organization. These two were the core issues in the debates between 1994 and 1997. During the early deliberations, an Indian Ocean Rim cooperation was envisaged by Australia in 1994 to eventually lead to an inclusive regional organization, with particular emphasis on economic cooperation, security matters, and mutual confidence-building.