

The Regional Stabilizer: The Protests of Institutional Resilience and Fragmentation in South Asia

Souzatya Dutta¹

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Abstract

The Arab Spring of 2010-2011 sparked a worldwide debate on whether or not a wave of political contagion could sweep through other parts of the world, especially where there are similar socio-economic and political vulnerabilities. South Asia, with its common problems of corruption, youth unemployment, and political instability are compelling reasons for such a comparative analysis. This paper deals with a crucial question of research or enquiry: Why is there no uniform, region-wide "Spring" in South Asia even though we have the same grievances? What has been the role of institutional resilience and leading power of India in determining these outcomes? Employing a comparative case study methodology, spanning the countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, and based on a Realist theoretical framework (Waltz 1979, pp. 88-112; Gilpin 2001, pp. 45-69), this analysis goes beyond descriptive analyses to argue that despite the fact that there are many similarities between South Asia and the Arab Spring in terms of the drivers of change, the analogy is fundamentally complicated by the power structure of the region. The findings suggest that India's institutional durability is a powerful counter-force that blocks systemic collapse. However, its stabilizing role is contested. India's security-driven behavior towards its smaller neighbours gives rise to a 'Perception Dilemma', meaning its actions are often interpreted as hegemonic, reducing its influence in the subcontinent and creating opportunities for competitors such as China. The key contribution of the study is a nuanced comparative perspective that bridges the gap between area studies and international relations theory, and thus addresses a significant gap in the academic literature on South Asian politics.

Keywords

South Asian Geopolitics; Institutional Resilience; Regional Stabilizer; Comparative Political Analysis; Arab Spring Analogy

¹MA Politics and International Relations, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

Introduction

1.1 'South Asian Spring' The Spectre of the Arab Spring Analogy

The Arab Spring, a wave of anti-government protests that swept across the West Asia and North Africa beginning in 2010, had a common grievance: rampant corruption and high youth unemployment under authoritarian rule which was compounded by digital communication (Bellin 2004, pp. 139-157). This phenomenon raised an important question to scholars of comparative politics: could similar "political contagion" occur in other parts of the world with similar socio-economic and political vulnerabilities? South Asia, a region marked by its own history of political instability along with a vast population of disaffected youth, seemed to be a likely candidate for such a wave of systemic change. Recent political upheavals in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, though all very different, have sometimes been hailed by some as a regional manifestation of the Arab Spring-p. - Angenieux et al. (2020). (in Asian Survey 2020, pp. 650-678), South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 2023 (pp. 120-145). This paper provides a critical look into how true this analogy is.

1.2 South Asian Geopolitics Paradox and the destiny of India

The geopolitics of South Asia has an incredible paradox. On one hand India as a vast, diverse and complex democratic state has been able to assure a relative level of political stability on the basis of its constitutional and institutional framework (Jalal 2013, pp. 12-35). On the other, its immediate neighbours, i.e. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal have been marred by persistent and profound instability (Cohen 1998, pp. 22-57; Haqqani 2005, pp. 110-136). This report is a comparative analysis of how the presence of underlying domestic fragility in these states results in a self-perpetuating cycle of instability, vis-a-vis the institutional resilience of India. In doing so, it explores the controversial role of India in the power dynamics of the region.

1.3 Research Questions and Thesis Statement

This paper deals with a central research question: Why there has not been a similar, region-wide "Spring" in South Asia despite the similar grievances? What contributions do India's institutional resilience and primary power make to these outcomes? The existing literature has largely been focused on individual case studies which provide a descriptive account of regional instability (Gause 2011, pp. 73-101). This study seeks to partially address a significant gap by presenting a comparative analysis based on a theoretical framework that helps explain why the spectre of a "South Asian Spring" has not fully realized.

This paper suggests that although South Asia shares many of the socio-economic and political causes of the Arab Spring, the analogy is fundamentally complicated by South Asia's power structure. India's

post-independence institutional durability provides a powerful counter-model to regional volatility, but its actions, motivated by a complex amalgam of self-interest and power projection, make its role as a regional stabilizer contentious and ultimately a source of anxiety to its smaller neighbours. The analysis concludes that the status of a regional power and the strength of its institutional bulwark prevent India from a uniform and region-wide political contagion which makes any comparison with the Arab Spring incomplete. World Bank Governance Indicators (2023) reveal the PII goes into India being fourfold that of Pakistan (-1.12), Sri Lanka (-0.25) and Nepal (-0.58) which go into quantitative support for the argument of relative institutional resilience for India.

2. A Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Regional Instability: A Realist Approach

To examine this complex regional dynamic, this paper draws on a Realist theoretical framework, which argues that international relations are an eternal struggle for power and security in an anarchic system where there is no overarching authority to enforce order (Waltz 1979, pp. 88 - 112). In this context, the security of a state is intrinsically connected with its position in the regional power structure.

2.1 the security dilemma and the primary power of the region.

Realist scholars, such as Kenneth Waltz, argue that in a state of anarchy, states put their self-interest and survival first, and thus perpetually find themselves in a "security dilemma" (Waltz 1979, pp. 95-98). Efforts by one state to increase its security, for example by building up its military or pursuing strategic alliances, are frequently viewed as a threat by its neighbours, who respond in turn by increasing their own capabilities, and this response feeds back into a cycle of mutual distrust and arms races. This dynamic is especially marked in South Asia because of the natural power imbalance between India and its neighbours, especially Pakistan (Cohen 1998, pp. 32-40).

With a Neoclassical Realist perspective, this analysis recognizes that if India is the region's preeminent power, its foreign policy is less based on coercive power projection and more so based on a complex dealing of national interest which also includes stability in the region (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009). India's role, it seems, can be interpreted as the role of a regional stabilizer, whose actions are influenced by the dichotomy that exists both between the anarchic international system and India's democratic institutional restraints. Its interventions in this respect, such as those in the Maldives (1988) and Sri Lanka (during the peace process) lie in keeping with this dual objective for an orderly region, providing security for its interests.

A 'Perception Dilemma' thus poses itself such that India's legitimate efforts at security and stabilization arising from the enormous power imbalance in the region, is often read by its small neighbours as

heavy-handedness. This perception is certainly not indicative of India's intention but is a natural consequence of the fact that asymmetric relationships are characterized by the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978). That is further complicated by the existence of other extra-regional powers who offer the smaller states strategic alternatives and can influence their perception of India's actions.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Drivers of Instability --> Risk of Regional Contagion --> Counter Forces --> Outcomes

This paper privileges a Realist lens as it does a good job of explaining the fundamental dynamics of power, security, and self-interest that have characterized South Asian geopolitics since independence. A Liberal perspective focusing on cooperation and international institutions is challenged by the history of persistent conflict the region has experienced and the low effectiveness of institutions such as SAARC (Keohane 1984, pp. 33-54). While the liberal institutionalist perspective may look to SAARC as a sphere of co-operation, its chronic ineffectiveness is a reason why Realism offers a far better explanatory frame. Similarly, a Constructivist approach, which emphasizes common identities and norms, has a difficult time explaining the serious rivalries and competing nationalisms that have fueled regional instability (Wendt 1992, pp. 401-431).

3. Comparative South Asian Instability Analysis

3.1 Pakistan: The Military Prerogative, and the Institutionalized Crisis of the Civilian Rule

Pakistan's political history has been characterized by a fundamental imbalance in civil-military relations, in which a powerful military-bureaucrat alliance has worked to undermine tenuous civilian institutions. Since its birth, the country has been ruled by the military for nearly half of its existence with a history of coups and interventions as far back as 1958. This military establishment has a powerful and pervasive hold on important spheres of government, particularly in areas of foreign policy and national security, in which civilian governments have struggled to exercise their authority. This institutional decay is compounded by internal dysfunction in the hands of civilian leaders, whose rivalries as factions and inability to establish control in their hands have created a power vacuum that has been readily filled in by non-elected institutions.

3.2 Afghanistan: Collapse of the State & Lack of Authorized Power

The collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan in August 2021 was not a result simply of the U.S. pulling its troops out of the country, but of the former government's failure to obtain popular support because of the rampant corruption and ineffectiveness. A legitimacy crisis years in the making was at the heart of the government: a centralised system of Kabul-centric government alienated tribal and local loyalties. Widespread corruption, nepotism and creation of "ghost soldiers" to syphon off

funds, seriously eroded the public trust and the capacity of the state. The fast return of the Taliban was therefore a product of the power vacuum created by the weakness of the government and not solely their military prowess.

3.3 Sri Lanka: Economic Collapse, The Crisis of Trust

The 2022 crisis in Sri Lanka was initially triggered by an extreme economic crisis, which was characterised by a collapse in foreign reserves as well as a lack of essential goods (Crawford School 2025). This economic slump was a catalyst for a mass uprising called the "Aragalaya" movement which led to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stepping down. While the precipitating cause of the protests was economic collapse, they mobilized longstanding systemic problems, including a toxic combination of unsustainable borrowing, weak exports, and a series of disastrous policy errors. These included "swingeing tax cuts" in 2019 which decimated government revenue and a "ill-conceived" ban on chemical fertilizers in 2021 which resulted in a dramatic collapse in rice and tea production.

3.4 Bangladesh: politicization of institutions & democratic precarity

In August of 2024, Ex Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina was ousted by a revolt of students bringing about a major political change (International Crisis Group 2023). The protests, which had begun in response to a Supreme Court decision to restore a controversial job quota system, quickly turned into a larger movement, stoked by anger at corruption and economic mismanagement. The government's violent reaction, comprising the "July massacre" and the blackout of the internet, only added to the public outrage. The crisis underscores the history of fragile democracy and deep political polarization between the two major political parties, which has frequently brought institutions like the judiciary into play as a means of acquiring power and limiting the scope of democracy. India's strategic intervention in January 2012, when a coup attempt was thwarted through intelligence sharing (India Today 2012) throws into focus, its role as a regional stabilizer albeit through actions sometimes perceived as domineering.

3.5 Nepal: Political Disunity & Generational Discontent

Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, Nepal experienced the dramatic breakup in the political scene, with the recognition of 13 Governments in a row, with the failure of bringing about any long-term stability (South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 2023, pp. 120-145). Protests in 2025, led by "Gen Z," were provoked, at first, by a social media ban, but were fueled by deeper structural grievances. A viral "Nepo Kid" social media campaign had already highlighted rampant corruption, nepotism, and elite capture at the expense of the youth grappling with a hopeless job market and mass unemployment and the luxurious lifestyles of the children of politicians. This echoes the role of youth-led movements during the Arab Spring and emphasizes the impact that generational dynamics have on

political mobilization.

Table 1. A Comparative Architecture of Instability Drivers in

South Asia and Institutional Fitness in India.

Country	Drivers of Instability	Contrast with India's Stability
Pakistan	Military dominance, weak civilian institutions, political corruption	Firm civilian supremacy over military
Afghanistan	State collapse, weak governance, civil-military conflict	Robust state capacity and popular support for governance
Sri Lanka	Economic mismanagement, foreign debt, ethnic tensions	Stable economic policy and self-reliance
Bangladesh	Fragile democracy, political polarization, politicized military	Institutionalized civilian control over military
Nepal	Political fragmentation, institutional fragility, youth unemployment	Consistent democratic governance and institutional endurance

4. India's Contested Role

4.1 the Basis of Indian Durability

India's political stability stands in great contrast to that of its neighbours. It is its institutional strength, the cultural pluralism, and the endurance that is anchoring its durability (Jalal 2013, pp. 12-35). The democracy system owes legitimacy to its Constitution, independent judiciary and civilian control of the military. India's foreign policy towards its neighbours is driven by its "Neighbourhood First" approach which looks at regional stability as the cornerstone for its global leadership aspirations. This

policy works on the idea of "widening concentric circles" with the immediate neighbourhood being the centre. While India preaches democracy in the region, it also realises that it cannot impose its political model on others. Historically, this has been based on its own security concerns as well as on the deeply interlinked economic and cultural ties it shares with its neighbours.

4.2 Interventions as a Form of primary power

India, as a primary power in the region, is engaged in stabilizing smaller neighbouring countries, as with the originating events in the Maldives (1988) and Sri Lanka but this leads to an on-going 'Perception Dilemma' of smaller neighbouring countries, which readily view India's security-driven behaviours as domineering, thus hindering its regional leadership while creating opportunities for Chinese activity strategically. These actions, that are couched under the strategic interest, generate regional apprehension together with the cooperative outcomes. One notable example is the military intervention of India in 1971 which led to the liberation of Bangladesh which became an important turning point in the regional power balance. More recently one can see the importance of India as a regional partner, but also of a destination for exiles with the political upheaval in Bangladesh in 2024, in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India. India has also dealt with instability by showing increased vigilance, such as with its increased border security following the protests in Nepal in 2025.

4.3 Challenges Remain, Regional Perceptions

Even with substantial economic support, there is a 'Perception Dilemma' in some neighbouring states where India's leadership is distrusted for reasons, often sharpened by outside strategic competition. Good-faith efforts are sometimes misinterpreted as efforts to create greater leverage or dependency. This is being compounded by the increasing influence of China, which through programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has gained an economic and political foothold in countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. This strategic competition with China poses a great challenge to India's regional influence. Smaller states often prefer to do business within multilateral forums such as SAARC so as to collectively balance against the power of India in bilateral relations, where their bargaining capacity is less. India's preference for the bilateral approach, which derives from a fear of "unreasonable collective leverage", makes these relationships even more complicated. This presents the challenge, therefore, for India to balance power and patience and influence and trust.

4.4 Addressing Critical Perspective

A critical view might argue that India's pre-eminence and size of India itself and inherently causes the structural friction in the region. Still, this approach has had the effect of downplaying India's proactive role in its 'Neighbourhood First' approach, the provision of much needed economic support, including the creation of infrastructure and disaster management assistance to partnering states. The fundamental

causes of instability in neighbouring states, including economic crisis, civil-military tensions, and political fragmentation, are indigenously generated. So while India is not a pull factor in this neighbourhood, when it tries to play the role of a net security provider, it gets deep beset by a frustrating conundrum called Perception Dilemma and the sovereign decisions of its neighbours-Just Atoms that make up the Powerful Neighbourhood.

5. Conclusion and Theoretical Contribution

As the analysis confirms, even though South Asia and the Arab Spring countries are similar in many socio-economic causes of instability such as the rampant corruption and the high rate of unemployment in the youth, the analogy falls short because of the overwhelming pro-forma pressure that comes as a result of the stabilizing system of the area, which is based on the institutional and military sustainability of India. But the most interesting thing about the study is the challenge of the purely stabilizing preventive to this leading and the big political paradox identified by the token at the regional level, and a theoretical shift of the purely realist evaluation into a theoretically critical evaluation of political global economy understanding.

5.1. The Paradox of Contested Primary Power: Stabilizing the Instabilities.

This paper identifies a 'Stability-Perception Paradox': while India's institutional resilience prevents regional collapse, its security strategies create a dilemma. Its legitimate stabilization efforts are often perceived as dominance by neighbours, complicating its leadership. This paradox highlights that regional stability depends not just on power, but on managing complex perceptions.

It does not mean that India is the main contributor to instability among its neighbours because the source of instability is by far internal that is, corruption, poor economic management and institutional corruption. Instead, it implies that the organization of engagement, which is typically bilateral to deal with the immediate security issues, may become obstructive to the elite entities that are rooted in creating the discontent among people. The ubiquitous issue with Indian foreign policy is that in its attempt to convey its apparent stability, it is its own core problem as it attempts to create perception driven backlash and in the era of intensified geopolitical rivalry.

The population explosion of such misrule, cushioned by the geopolitical interests of the primary power, forms a pressure cooker inside the country, which ultimately bursts like a volcano into anti-systemic, youth-led uprisings. The abrupt collapse of the Hasina government in Bangladesh in 2024 resulting from a student-led "Monsoon Revolution", driven by widespread anti-corruption and anti-management feeling, revealed the underlying fragility of this co-option strategy. The Gen Z-led

movements in Nepal in 2025, spurred by long-held hostility towards elite capture and nepotism ("Nepo Kid" campaigns), similarly demonstrate a legitimacy crisis beyond traditional political hard divisions. The political price of the preference of the leading power to the strategy rather than democracy builds up to the point where the outcome is instability. India's containment of external contagion not only unleashes a new kind of legitimacy crisis, that is undermining the structures of its own influence, but also creates chances for its competitors such as China and Pakistan to achieve volatility in India. The localized form of Pre-eminence is thus perhaps described as contested power in which measures are supposed to be taken to stabilize, which are viewed as an infringement, thus creating local instability and political backlash.

Table 2: Theoretical Paradox India's Leading Role in South Asian.

Dimension	Original Realist Thesis (Section 2/3)	Refined Theoretical Contribution (Section 5.1)
Stabilizing Role	Stabilizer and counter-force to systemic collapse (HST)	Paradoxical source of localized instability (Contested Leader)
Primary Mechanism	Institutional durability and military strength	Strategic co-option of regional elites, enabling institutional decay in neighbours
Nature of Instability Prevented	State collapse / military coups (Arab Spring Analogy)	Youth-led, anti-corruption, anti-elite (Gen Z) movements (BD 2024, NP 2025)

5.2. Future Directions: Structure of Vulnerability and Policy Reorientation:

This contested stability is structurally fragile in the sense that it cannot be maintained over a long period of time. This paper cannot take it for granted that Indian institutions will balance out the volatility of the region forever, especially given empirical evidence of democratic regression in India with the rise of crony capitalism and the declaration of India as an "Electoral Autocracy" by some international agencies. This causes the phenomenon of Contested Institutional Resilience, whereby not only the risk of a sustained stabilizing counter-force is a danger to the political integrity of the region, but the stabilizing counter-force itself is losing the ability to project legitimate counter-stabilizing influence.

The aforesaid structural deficiency is further aggravated by India's continued insistence on maintaining

the bilateral approach in desire to have maximum leverage and to avoid perceived threat of "unreasonable collective leverage". This preference perpetuates the security dilemma and has been a direct reason for the near-paralysis of the regional bodies like SAARC since 2014. Consequently, smaller states are forced to externalize their developmental and security concerns and very actively use the geopolitical competition between India, China (through the Belt and Road Initiative), and the US, in their efforts to attract development finance and hedging strategies.

Future research therefore needs to move beyond correlational analysis and utilize methodologies that follow through the years to delineate causal paths between India's internal political economic dynamics (e.g. changes in governance accountability) and subsequently its capacity for maintaining legitimate influence in the area. Thus, the key conclusion for policy suggestions is that regional stability cannot be achieved through partisan backing of incumbents. To turn from the primacy, contested leader to a multi-trusted regional Pre-eminence, a shift in policy is required that focuses its efforts on structural reforms indicating inclusion of multilateral mechanisms. The revitalization of a multilateral platform would require a necessary diffusion of bilateral power in India, in return for promoting a sincere trust and institutionalized justice within the region. This return to policy is the most feasible long-term antidote to the structural vulnerability and generational alienation that form the breeding ground for the new wave of anti-elite revolt.

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