

Replicating Europe's Normative Power: Challenges and Pathways for South Asia's Regional Integration

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Abstract

European nations attained stability and integration by overcoming a turbulent history marked by deeply entrenched conflicts and the profound devastation of two world wars. Europe has evolved into a 'normative power' and the European Union into a 'community of practice' by overcoming statism and establishing responsive institutions and systems of accountability. Europe's transformation reflects the practical application of normative principles. In contrast, South Asia grapples with political instability and geo-strategic challenges that impede regional integration. This paper identifies the key obstacles to political connectivity and adopting normative practices in South Asia. It further explores potential pathways, enabling the region to draw lessons from Europe's experience and develop into a community of practice and a normative power.

Keywords

Normative Power Europe (NPE), South Asian Cooperation, Geopolitical Challenges, Digital Revolution, Regional Integration

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed profound transformations across the political, economic, and environmental landscape, shaped by several pivotal events. These include the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of communism in 1989, the reunification of Germany in 1990, the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the global financial crisis of 2008, the USA's abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Russo-Ukraine war and strategic crisis in the Middle East. These historical and contemporary events have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of global politics (Sarotte, 2015). The influence of identity politics has gradually waxed with corresponding ideational gambits emerging as the main avenues of inquiry in systemic political configuration.

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The linkage between identity politics and ideational gambits in international relations (IR) lies in how identity-based frameworks shape states' behaviors, perceptions, and strategic interactions on the global stage. Ideational gambits, which involve using ideas, norms, and values to influence or manipulate international outcomes, often draw upon the principles and dynamics of identity politics.

The emergence of integrated Europe as a 'normative power' and the European Union (EU) as a 'community of practice' are fundamentally successful civilizational overtures claimed as ideational supremacy over material power (Diez & Pace, 2011). In this backdrop, Whitman (2011) noted that the EU emerged as a *sui generis* agent of regional and global politics on a solid foundation, and Manners (2002, p. 252) mentioned that today, the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is. These geopolitical developments have led the scholars of IR to draw a corollary of the successful European experiment in other contiguous regions of the world.

Meanwhile, the South Asian regional states exhibit diverse economic structures and varying levels of development (Sehgal et al., 2020). Nonetheless, these states have an inherent homogeneity in social and cultural domains and share a common historical legacy. Enduring conflicts and strategic mistrust have been deeply entrenched among South Asian states. A prime example is the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, rooted in a fractious history, a legacy of mistrust, unresolved territorial disputes, and the negative repercussions of colonial policies (Pant & Shah, 2019). Religious and ethnic divisions further exacerbate this animosity.

Despite these challenges, a collective aspiration exists among the moderate political elites and various segments of the general populace for a stable and peaceful region grounded in a communitarian ethos. This aspiration is reflected in the establishment of regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), and South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), advocate for integration across political, social, and economic dimensions (Chakma, 2018).

Additionally, crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and South Asia's persistent smog and recurring natural disasters, underscore the urgent need for collaborative regional solutions to address transnational challenges. During the pandemic, countries initially shuttered borders and restricted cross-border movement, but it soon became evident that joint efforts were essential to combat the virus effectively (Kokudo & Sugiyama, 2020). Similarly, the smog crisis, exacerbated by practices like stubble burning and inadequate emissions controls, continues to wreak havoc on public health and economies in the region, with air pollution causing nearly 2 million premature deaths annually and costing South Asia approximately 7.4% of its GDP (World Bank, 2023). Cities like Lahore and New Delhi, frequently topping global pollution rankings, illustrate how this crisis transcends borders, requiring coordinated action between nations. Proposals such as 'smog diplomacy' and regional frameworks for sustainable practices and clean energy adoption highlight the potential of regionalism to address these pressing issues. By integrating efforts to combat pandemics and environmental crises, South Asia can foster a culture of cooperation, paving the way for broader integration and resilience against shared challenges (Benoît & Hay, 2022).

Research Framework

This study is driven by the central research question: Can South Asia emulate the EU's model of normative power to overcome political and economic barriers, and what specific mechanisms and practices could facilitate regional integration in the context of enduring rivalries? In addressing this question, the study explores the salient features of Normative Power Europe (NPE) as a 'community of practice,' tracing its cultural and normative evolution since the 1940s and its transformative impact on modern Europe and its neighborhood. Drawing lessons from the EU's practices, the study examines potential pathways for overcoming the persistent challenges to regional integration in South Asia.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying primarily on secondary data sources to evaluate the applicability of the EU's normative power model to South Asia. Key references include official documents such as SAARC and SAFTA agreements, international organizations like the World Bank and WTO policy reports, and scholarly literature on regional integration and normative power practices. To provide further depth, media reports are analyzed to capture public discourse and societal perceptions surrounding Indo-Pak trade and broader regional dynamics. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns related to political barriers, economic interdependence, and institutional inefficiencies in South Asia. Additionally, comparative analysis draws parallels between the EU's normative practices and South Asia's unique challenges. These approaches provide nuanced insights into potential mechanisms and strategies for fostering regional integration in South Asia, inspired by the EU's model.

As part of the research framework, the NPE concept provides a foundational lens to understand how the EU shaped global norms through ideational and non-coercive practices rather than traditional military power. By promoting principles such as societal peace, civic liberty, participatory democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, the EU purports itself as a normative actor in international relations. Additional values like equality, sustainable development, and good governance reinforce its framework. Foundational studies, including Adler and Barnett's (1998) work on *Security Communities* and Bellamy's (2004) insights into institutional cooperation, highlight the transformative role of shared norms and trust in promoting integration. Manners' (2013) seminal exploration of NPE further underscores the EU's ability to influence through soft power mechanisms, exemplified by initiatives such as the Schengen Agreement and the European Neighborhood Policy. Complementary works by Cameron (2004) emphasize how the EU's institutional frameworks transcend power politics, offering valuable lessons for fragmented regions like South Asia. These studies collectively establish a robust theoretical grounding for analyzing how the EU's practices can inform strategies for regional integration in other contexts.

To contextualize the theoretical discussion of normative power within the South Asian milieu, region-specific studies provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for integration. Persistent barriers to Indo-Pak trade, including high tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and the prevalence of informal trade routes, are highlighted in recent scholarships (Hussain, 2011; Chaturvedi et al., 2015). The World Bank South Asia Report (2018) underscores the region's untapped trade potential, estimating that bilateral trade between India and Pakistan could reach \$37 billion annually, compared to the current \$2.3 billion (Kathuria, 2018). Institutional inefficiencies within SAARC and SAFTA have also been explored, revealing their limited success in fostering integration due to political and operational constraints.

Contemporary developments, such as the Pulwama attack and India's subsequent revocation of Pakistan's Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, underscore the fragile nature of regional relations (Suneja, 2019). Comparative examples, such as the stabilizing effects of economic interdependence between China and the USA or China and Taiwan, further illustrate the transformative potential of trade in mitigating political conflicts (Cameron, 2004). These studies collectively establish a robust foundation for examining how the EU's normative model can be adapted to address South Asia's unique challenges, bridging theoretical insights with practical realities

Theoretics of Normative Power Europe

As elaborated earlier, the core of this study is the concept of NPE, which emphasizes the EU's ability to shape global norms through ideational and normative practices rather than military might or coercive strategies. Analysts argue that NPE promotes civilian soft power and restrained military power, enabling the EU to shape the conceptions of normal in international relations. This transformative approach is grounded in multifarious norms, including societal peace, civic liberty, participatory democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Additional principles, such as social harmony, equality, sustainable development, and decent governance, are also integral to the EU's normative framework. It promotes the EU's capacity to shape the conceptions of normal in international relations with far greater focus (Janusch, 2016). An incisive insight reveals that the foundation of the normative power of Europe is laid on multifarious norms like societal peace, civic liberty, participatory democracy, the rule of law, and the value of human rights. Besides these, generic norms like social harmony, equality, sustainable development, and decent governance are also important components of European normative power (James, 2016).

While functioning in an ideational-non-material domain, legitimacy is the prime factor that inspires other actors to follow suit. This legitimacy in NPE is derived from established treaties chartered along the lines of UN Covenants embedded in the aforementioned norms (Butler, 2007). The challenges of spreading these norms in the neighborhood and across the globe are confronted by setting personal examples, establishing strategic communications, institutionalizing interactions within states and organizations, economic exchanges and assistance packages, presence of EU special representatives, and reifying the social and political identity.

Europe's normative power policy processes entail frequent interaction amongst an assemblage of key private and public stakeholders present at supra-state, state, and sub-state tiers in a linear cum non-hierarchical setting absent any of the core and predominant authority. In the given solid framework, the EU's institution comes into play to shape the normative interactions. The persistence of rules, norms, and standard operating procedures affects the decision loop in the EU. It wields influence by incentivizing EU accessions, and the spread of civilizational practices depends on accepting standard norms, practices, and institutions (Roos & Westerveen, 2020).

The novelty is in the internal system of governance that the EU has devised and spread of its security community of practice to others. It differentiates between 'governments' as a skewed concept and 'governance,' which dwells on a broader understanding of politics and collectivity for good at all tiers. The EU practices convey that building a security community of practice, currently prominent in Europe, relies fundamentally on the abandonment of power politics. This approach is suggested as a model that could be replicated in other regions (Bicchi, 2022). Hence, normative power practices are diverse and inclusive, transcending traditional power politics.

The softening of borders ‘Schengen area,’ a trans-state zone cooperation amongst civilizations, is an order of the day vis-à-vis clashes as a default setting. The inherent flexibility of the EU allows for the integration of Eurasia and Caucasus. Developing a sagacity of togetherness and regional ‘we feeling’ and ‘we doing’ concepts without formal EU membership through the participatory forums like the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), Barcelona Process, a ‘European Neighborhood Policy’ (ENP), a ‘Mediterranean Union’ (Adler, 2009). Such initiatives helped the EU to translate normative power into real material influence with accompanying political control. Beyond binding treaties, the EU also adopted ‘soft’ law practices under the rubric of the Open Method of Coordination in the shape of non-binding and non-enforceable voluntary obligations. A relevant case is the EU’s support for the global abolition of the death penalty despite risking economic ties and facing opposition from the USA, China, Saudi Arabia, and the European Council (EEAS, 2022).

Evolution of Normative Power Europe

The concept of NPE has historic roots as a community of practice. The way Europe has transformed culturally since the 1940s and moved away from Westphalian statism is considered a significant shift (Manners, 2009). European integration experiment was initially driven by functionalist cooperation, exemplified by pooling coal and steel industries of former rivals France and Germany to prevent future wars and counter communist threats. This approach inspired various cooperative structures worldwide, including leagues, unions, and pacts, addressing post-World War II devastation, decolonization, and economic reconstruction, offering an alternative to traditional realist alliances (Segers, 2023). The transition towards normative practices comprised a set of processes that resulted in the transformation of Europe, leading it towards enhanced integration, complemented by diversity as its strength.

However, the contemporaneous form of NPE is attributable to the EU’s cultural, political, and economic initiatives entrenched not only in the core of Europe but also transgressing to the neighbourhood in the northeast and southeastwards. It acquired the ability to shape the idea of ‘normal’ in international politics, which had purely material underpinnings, and thus dismantled the parochial schisms of centuries between the regional states. Self-restraint and transmitting the positive influence of replication on other actors was one of the major attributes of normative power in Europe (Manners, 2009). The demise of the Cold War also reflected the growing influence of ideational or normative power, which duly manifested in the further cementing of the European Community. With a much stronger ideational base, the reconfigured EU now espouses normative power conveniently exercised while dealing with the outside world with the expanding scope of its internal policies in trade and sustainable development goals (Adler, 2009).

The EU has long been regarded as a proponent of ‘normative power,’ emphasizing the promotion of universal values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in its external relations. However, the EU’s response to the recent conflict in Gaza has raised questions about the consistency of its actions with these ideational principles. In the wake of escalating violence between Israel and Hamas, the EU’s stance has appeared conflicted. While the EU condemned Hamas’s attacks and affirmed Israel’s right to self-defense, it also called for adherence to international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians. Despite these statements, the EU refrained from suspending political dialogue with Israel, even amid concerns over

potential human rights violations in Gaza. This decision suggests a reluctance to leverage its normative influence fully, potentially due to geopolitical considerations and internal divisions among member states.

The issuance of arrest warrants by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others for alleged war crimes further complicated the EU's position (van den Berg & Al-Mughrabi, 2024). While EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell emphasized the binding nature of ICC warrants, the EU collectively did not take a definitive stance, reflecting a cautious approach that some critics view as inconsistent with its normative commitments (Autin, 2024). This ambivalence has led to perceptions of double standards, particularly when contrasted with the EU's decisive actions in other conflicts, such as imposing sanctions in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The EU's hesitancy to apply similar measures in the context of the Gaza conflict has been interpreted as a deviation from its normative power aspirations, suggesting that material and strategic interests may sometimes overshadow its commitment to normative principles (Skordas, 2018).

Can Conflictive South Asia Replicate Normative Power European Model?

The ensuing cooperation and interdependence among European states prevented major conflicts and correspondingly ensured that future relations remained linear and co-efficiently cooperative. The South Asian march towards integration underpinned by normative community practices can materialize if power politics are confronted decisively, as Europe did in post-World War II. An inclusive regional security architecture could promote stability and confidence among regional communities. Without this, the prospect of economic regionalism, particularly in South Asia, remains an elusive goal (Dent, 2016).

European nations demonstrated successful experience of regional integration with strong regional institutional structures. South Asia is a case of 'late regional integration' and can learn lessons from European experiences for regional integration (Sirinavasan, 2011). Active regional institutional mechanisms covering a wide area of regional economic, political, and social aspects, like the EU, can benefit the economic and political interests of South Asian nations. Increased interdependence will pressure regional states to resolve all outstanding conflicts and disputes peacefully, undermining power politics and ensuing conflicts (Cameron, 2010). Management of inter-state or intra-state conflicts is the primary condition to begin with the regional integration process in South Asia, especially the inter-state conflicts that have made South Asia a nuclear flashpoint. The South Asian states must realize that their interests are interlinked, and no regional state alone can achieve the desired economic and political goals.

South Asia faces significant challenges in achieving effective regional integration due to a complex mix of historical, political, and structural factors. The prospects for regional integration and the emergence of normative power in South Asia are undermined by persistent challenges rooted in unresolved disputes, conflicting strategic aspirations, and aggressive policies. The enduring Kashmir issue, exacerbated by India's August 2019 revocation of its unique status, continues to fuel mistrust and acrimony among regional states, obstructing dialogue and collaborative efforts ("India revokes occupied Kashmir," 2019). India's ambitions for regional dominance contrasted with Pakistan's pursuit of sovereign equality, create a fundamental disconnect, hindering efforts to foster mutual cooperation. The competitive arms

buildup, including advancements, reflects a security-driven approach that detracts from a focus on regional integration.

Additionally, embracing hybrid warfare strategies leveraging disinformation campaigns and proxy forces exacerbates mistrust and undermines the environment necessary for regional collaboration (Mirza & Babar, 2020). Technological advancements, including artificial intelligence and hypersonic weapons, further amplify security concerns, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion. The absence of effective crisis communication mechanisms and over-reliance on external mediators also prevent the development of a self-sustained regional framework for conflict resolution. The 2019 Pulwama incident and subsequent tensions underscore the fragility of peace in the region, further highlighting the necessity for sustained dialogue. These entrenched challenges highlight the structural and ideological barriers to South Asia's emergence as a cohesive regional entity and embracing normative power practices.

Without addressing these foundational issues, the region's potential for economic, political, and social integration remains unrealized, and the pathway to fostering a shared regional identity grounded in common norms and values remains obstructed. Overcoming these hurdles requires shifting from security-driven agendas to collaborative and inclusive frameworks prioritizing shared interests and collective progress. Meanwhile, India's dominant size and influence present both opportunities and concerns, as smaller neighbors fear potential hegemony, complicating regional collaboration.

Economic and security cooperation remains limited despite initiatives like SAFTA and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Intra-regional trade has not surpassed 5% due to tariff and non-tariff barriers, weak infrastructure, and non-binding agreements. Security challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of common defense mechanisms within regional organizations like SAARC, leaving cross-border terrorism and maritime threats unaddressed. Although newer frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) offer platforms for engagement, underlying animosities and power imbalances limit their effectiveness. The proliferation of fragmented initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Initiative (BBIN) has diluted focus and resources while pressing issues such as poverty, corruption, and terrorism undermining the region's ability to foster peace and stability (Mirza & Babar, 2020). For South Asia to realize its potential, more substantial commitments to economic regionalism, soft power diplomacy, and addressing governance gaps are crucial steps forward.

The current trajectory of geo-political and geo-economics relations in South Asia reflects curvilinear trends. The legacy of mistrust and lack of socialization has been among the chief constraining factors towards meaningful integration initiatives and the introduction of normative practices. The regional institutions that have the potential to reify normative power practices have not performed optimally to build the desired framework for cooperation and connectivity. Few states of the region have even shown an inclination towards globalization over regionalization. India, the biggest and the most influential South Asian state, is the forerunner of this trend. It has become a vital component of BRICS, a forum and independent international organization promoting commercial, political, and cultural cooperation among five key emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Garcia-Herrero, 2012). Concurrently, India has fostered a successful strategic partnership by joining the

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan, and the USA. (“Quad Summit 2021,” 2021). This Indian inclination to prefer extra-regional linkages with more considerable powers can be attributed to the more significant strategic and economic dividends vis-à-vis meek regional order and concomitant rewards (Hilali, 2001). Jyoti Malhotra (2021, para 9) reflected on this dismal performance and summed it up as follows:

A Brookings study found that India’s total trade with SAARC today hovers between 1.7 percent and 3.8 percent, according to 2017 figures. The study cited protectionist policies, the high cost of logistics, lack of political will, and a broader trust deficit as reasons. For any South Asian reading this, all of this sounds all too familiar.

The lack of belief by the largest state in the region disincentives other states to progressively think of regional integration. The chief restraining factor in the region for any meaningful normative practices and integration is thus an enduring rivalry and non-resolution of chronic disputes between two leading protagonists, India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, the two states failed to achieve any headway on any major disputes. These lurking disputes have generated an environment of mistrust between the two countries (Gul, 2004). No meaningful dialogue toward crisis management and eventual crisis resolution can occur unless the aggrieved parties shape the required environment for the talks. The bedrock of this acrimony is the unresolved issue of Kashmir for almost seven decades. The post-August 5, 2019, steps by India have made the issue further intractable by quashing the special status of Indian-Occupied Kashmir. Such unthoughtful ventures and the consistent intransigent approach taken by India on the other issues have relegated the chances of finding some reasonable solution to all bilateral issues acceptable to all stakeholders.

Adapting Normative Power Practices in South Asia

As a normative power, South Asia must prioritize human security by developing and institutionalizing comprehensive norms. This entails reconfiguring its security architecture and reinforcing its role as a political community. Policies anchored in normative and ideational principles precede securitized national interests, facilitating regional integration. The most significant point in this discourse is the ability of a community of practice to shape behaviors that are termed normal in the international arena (Manners, 2002).

Unfortunately, the leading states of South Asia fall deficient in a “culture of bargaining,” and hence, the processes of formulating shared understandings and expectations remain a non-starter (Mehta, 2009, p. 228). The South Asian normative power practices must build on a new knowledge base, eventually preparing a shared community of practitioners with novel cultural understandings divorced from the region’s conflictive legacy. The concept of *Normative Power South Asia* (NPSA), if adapted from the principles of NPE, could manifest through a range of practices designed to promote regional integration, stability, and development. These practices might pave the way for a desired end state vis-à-vis the prominence of normative power practices through the shared community of practices stipulated in the following discourse.

Promoting Shared Norms and Values

Promoting shared norms and values is foundational to establishing *Normative Power in South Asia* and fostering a cohesive regional identity. By championing collective efforts to address human rights issues, South Asian nations can tackle challenges such as gender inequality, child labour, and the marginalization of minorities. These efforts improve social equity and enhance mutual trust, creating a more stable regional environment. Therefore, establishing regional frameworks for the rule of law enhances stability by promoting transparent governance and facilitating mechanisms for legal cooperation. Furthermore, cross-border dispute resolution platforms, such as a proposed South Asian Court of Justice, could address long-standing issues like trade disagreements and water-sharing conflicts, offering neutral and fair solutions (Dhital, 2021).

Moreover, cultural harmony can also be a significant cornerstone for regional unity. South Asia's rich tapestry of shared languages, traditions, and historical narratives provides an untapped resource for fostering mutual respect and understanding. Cross-border cultural festivals, heritage preservation initiatives, and literary exchanges could celebrate these commonalities while countering divisive narratives. The prioritization of human rights, the rule of law, and cultural harmony would signal a commitment to shared principles, positioning South Asia as a normative power capable of shaping a stable, inclusive, cooperative regional order.

Softening of Border Disputes

Systemically, exponential growth has been witnessed in the movement of people across state boundaries. The leading factors that force or incentivize mass movements are multifarious. Conflicts over the non-natural borders are a bitter reminiscence of colonialism, which displaced hundreds of millions of people. The standoff between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and the dispute between Bangladesh and India are the reflections of unsettled borders that perpetuate to split people and endure conflict in South Asia. Seventy-five years on, these states have now stood at the cusp of heightened conflicts and need to transition beyond organizational statism and concede to modern-day realities. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other nations of South Asia need to realize that notwithstanding unambiguous border demarcations and militarization, masses will continue challenging the border management systems impinged upon them by a question of kinship, daily sustenance, and operational wants for daily life (Jones & Ferdoush, 2018). With this in view, intricate processes can be inclusively developed to soften the existing borders, which facilitate people-to-people contact that is free of political expediencies and not constrained by the geo-strategic environment of the region (Fazal-ur-Rahman, 2012).

Enabling SAARC's and SAFTA's Multilateral Potential

Ironically, SAARC's and SAFTA's true potential as a multilateral forum has been marred by regional power, political domain, and conflictive geo-strategic environments. Despite challenges, there have been notable periods when multilateralism in South Asia gained traction, particularly with Afghanistan's inclusion as a full member of SAARC and the granting of Observer status to major international actors such as China, Japan, South Korea, the USA, and the EU. Similarly, SAFTA came into force in 2006 to revitalize regional trade among SAARC states. Expectations were high that the SAFTA mechanism would become a harbinger of greater regional market access and trade. Nonetheless, trade facilitation indicators in South Asia

remained substantially dismal vis-à-vis other regions and were just ahead of Sub-Saharan Africa. (Raihan, 2012). To outweigh the influence of state power politics, it seems imperative to put prominence on normative practices with human rights as the center of the agenda, integrating communities and initiating civil society-based action plans. Such initiatives warrant the communities to be direct stakeholders in regional cooperation and integration. The potential of SAARC in fostering regionalism in South Asia is immense, as well as socio-economic cooperation and identifying areas like health, education, and digital technology as avenues for reinvigoration amidst political challenges.

Empowered citizenship paradigm and multilateral communitarian practices

Multiple contemporary citizenship practices fall under this rubric. Empowered citizenship entails practices at the state level that have greater legitimacy for the social rights of the working class, equality for all genders and mutually agreed rights, and a peaceful paradigm for dealing with cultural diversities (Kochenov, 2013). Introducing this model of citizenship in South Asia enhances the legitimacy behind its normative power projection within regional and international contexts. This model will ease the strain between nationalistic biases and shared norms in multilateral institutional settings. The contentious interstate issues must be tackled and dealt with bilaterally while promoting multilateral communitarianism.

The parliamentarians, journalists, academicians, entertainers, and masses cutting across the strata of society can gel to generate new norms by creating shared awareness. Institutional mechanisms and processes can further strengthen these new norms. The reinvigorated connections across the region will shape novel South Asian communities for social and cultural exchanges. The cultural co-occurrences and initiatives may fortify the efforts for enduring and mutually inclusive democracies embedded in intolerant and pluralistic societies within the region (Dash, 2008).

Leveraging Global Engagement

South Asia has immense potential to amplify its voice on the global stage through collaborative representation in international forums. The region can exert greater influence by presenting unified positions on pressing global issues such as climate change, trade, and public health. For instance, coordinated efforts to demand equitable climate financing or fair-trade practices could yield better outcomes for all member states. Such collaboration would require regional consensus mechanisms to align interests and formulate common policy stances (Colombo, 2023).

A unified South Asian bloc could emulate the EU's approach in global negotiations, where collective positions on issues like carbon emissions and trade disputes have enabled the EU to wield disproportionate influence relative to its members. Fostering partnerships with neighboring regions is another vital component of leveraging global engagement. South Asia could emulate initiatives like the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to build strategic relationships with China, Central Asia, and ASEAN (Das, 2016). For instance, partnerships with China in renewable energy and infrastructure development could address shared climate challenges and boost economic growth. Collaboration with Central Asian nations on trade corridors and energy pipelines could strengthen connectivity and secure critical resources. Engagement with ASEAN could enhance South Asia's integration into

global value chains, leveraging Southeast Asia's manufacturing and technological expertise.

These partnerships would expand South Asia's strategic depth and position the region as a bridge between diverse geopolitical and economic hubs (Envall & Hall, 2016). By leveraging global engagement through unified representation and strategic partnerships, South Asia can enhance its regional cohesion while asserting itself as a significant global actor. These efforts would require robust institutional mechanisms, political will, sustained diplomacy, and the promise of elevating the region's global standing and fostering long-term development.

Capitalizing on the Digital Revolution

The digital revolution provides a unique opportunity for regional integration in South Asia to overcome conventional barriers and facilitate substantial collaborative efforts in economic, social, and security dimensions. With the rapid growth of digital economies, the region can leverage technologies to bring about interconnected markets, improve governance, and foster inclusive growth. Indeed, revolutionary initiatives in trade and commerce include cross-border digital payment systems. This would cut transaction costs and quicken remittances to create an atmosphere of financial inclusion. A single digital payment gateway for the SAARC nations would facilitate businesses and persons undertaking seamless transactions without dependence on conventional banking infrastructures at an improved level of economic interdependence (Mukherjee & Satija, 2020).

Furthermore, shared cybersecurity frameworks are also of utmost importance in this regard. While digital connectivity and access have increased, exposure to risks of cyberattacks and data breaches has heightened, thereby disrupting regional economies and potentially destabilizing any trust among nations. Such cooperation on cyber protocols, intelligence sharing, and training programs will increasingly help these South Asian states strengthen their defenses against cyber threats while protecting the secure exchange of information in a digital world (Malik, 2018). It indicates the commitment to regional confidence-building: a collective investment in protecting shared digital spaces. In allowing these options to come to fruition, South Asia can let digital integration become a benchmark for regionalism, whereby nations overcome their political rifts and advance together toward prosperity.

Conclusion

Europe's normative power, as Ian Manners posits, has three key drivers. The first is a conflictive historical milieu undergirded by two destructive wars of the twentieth century. Secondly, an amalgam European community that maintains statism, albeit with a robust support system of institutions. Thirdly, institutionalized and legalized processes of the EU lend adequate legitimacy to the practices and processes (Neuman & Stanković, 2019). The resultant integration of Europe as an ideal 'normative power' and the emergence of the EU as a 'community of practice' has also incentivized other actors and regions to venture and follow suit. South Asia is one such region that can imitate the normative practices of Europe. However, the South Asian region faces multifarious challenges and cannot yield the dividends of geographical contiguity. The region has remained deficient in achieving the required level of transformation in the domains of political, social, and economic integration.

The legacy of enduring conflicts and mistrust has flipped high politics as one of the leading features in interstate relations. Especially the two leading states of the

region, India and Pakistan, have long been butting for the fulfilment of fleeting strategic dividends at the regional and sub-regional levels. This enigma between regional and strategic environments has placed the regional actors in a problematic truce situation wherein enduring peace seems to be a distant objective. The prevailing mindset tends to dismiss diplomacy, viewing the willingness to engage in dialogue as a concession that implies strategic parity or diplomatic equivalence. This perspective is often seen as a sign of weakness, carrying reputational costs for political actors on the domestic front. The given scenario poses serious compulsions vis-à-vis reflection of normative practices in South Asia and the emergence of a community of practice to replicate the European model of peace and stability.

The likely pathways that can translate in South Asia, becoming a community of Practice and normative power have been underscored. To practically realize these ideational prospects and normative practices, the daunting political resolve of all stakeholders is indeed a *sin qua non*. The EU's rise as a normative power underscores the transformative potential of shared norms, institutional accountability, and ideational influence in shaping a cohesive and peaceful regional order. For South Asia, marred by mistrust, unresolved disputes, and a fragmented political landscape, the EU offers valuable lessons in regional integration. However, replicating the European model requires addressing deep-rooted conflicts and fostering a culture of dialogue and cooperation. The successful adoption of such a framework could pave the way for a stable, integrated South Asia, transcending its historical challenges and fostering a resilient regional order.

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