

OVERLAPPING ORGANISATIONS AND EMERGING POWERS: INDIA'S SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF FORUM SHOPPING

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Abstract

The post-WWII era gave rise to not only an expansion in international organisations but also in regional organisations, resulting in the proliferation of overlapping organisations at both the global and regional levels (Panke and Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). This overlapping phenomenon also opens a room for forum shopping that leads states to navigate themselves among different organisations according to their interest (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). India, as an emerging power, has a dual approach with committing to global organisations, while actively engaging with regional organisations. Hence, India actively participates in international organisations such as the UN and WTO, while simultaneously taking an active role in shaping regional institutions such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and RCEP. Thus, the study contributes to overlapping organisations literature focusing on the forum shopping strategy to understand how India, as an emerging power, navigates itself between overlapping organisations to contribute to regional and global efforts while maximising its national interests. This paper argues that India's foreign policy behaviour reflects a strategic manoeuvre of forum shopping that selectively engages with overlapping organisations based on institutional design, membership, and issue-specific utility. The study employs process tracing since the early 1990s to map India's historical and strategic shifts in organisational engagement, such as the move from SAARC to BIMSTEC or its withdrawal from RCEP, to uncover the causal mechanisms and motivations behind India's institutional strategies. The findings demonstrate that India's foreign policy rationality is neither a retreat solely from multilateralism nor a simple alignment with major powers, but rather an adaptive strategy to advance national interests through institutional diversity and regional substitution.

Keywords

Overlapping regionalism, forum shopping, institutional balancing, regionalism, India.

Resumo

O período pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial deu origem não só a uma expansão das organizações internacionais, mas também das organizações regionais, resultando na proliferação de organizações sobrepostas, tanto a nível global como regional (Panke e Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). Este fenómeno de sobreposição também abre espaço para



a escolha do foro mais favorável, levando os Estados a navegar entre diferentes organizações de acordo com os seus interesses (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). A Índia, como potência emergente, tem uma abordagem dupla, comprometendo-se com organizações globais e, ao mesmo tempo, envolvendo-se ativamente com organizações regionais. Assim, a Índia participa ativamente em organizações internacionais como a ONU e a OMC, ao mesmo tempo que desempenha um papel ativo na formação de instituições regionais como a SAARC, a BIMSTEC e a RCEP. Assim, o estudo contribui para a literatura sobre organizações sobrepostas, com foco na estratégia de forum shopping, para compreender como a Índia, como potência emergente, navega entre organizações sobrepostas para contribuir para os esforços regionais e globais, maximizando os seus interesses nacionais. Este artigo argumenta que o comportamento da política externa da Índia reflete uma manobra estratégica de forum shopping que se envolve seletivamente com organizações sobrepostas com base no desenho institucional, na adesão e na utilidade específica da questão. O estudo emprega o rastreamento de processos desde o início da década de 1990 para mapear as mudanças históricas e estratégicas da Índia no envolvimento organizacional, como a mudança da SAARC para a BIMSTEC ou a sua retirada da RCEP, para descobrir os mecanismos causais e as motivações por trás das estratégias institucionais da Índia. As conclusões demonstram que a racionalidade da política externa da Índia não é nem um recuo exclusivo do multilateralismo nem um simples alinhamento com as grandes potências, mas sim uma estratégia adaptativa para promover os interesses nacionais através da diversidade institucional e da substituição regional.

Palavras-chave

Regionalismo sobreposto, forum shopping, equilíbrio institucional, regionalismo, Índia.

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OVERLAPPING ORGANISATIONS AND EMERGING POWERS: INDIA'S FORUM SHOPPING STRATEGY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

India's international policy post-1990s is characterised by strategic multi-alignment with several overlapping global networks instead of a rigid alignment to one bloc (Hall, 2021; Kumar, 2024; Majumdar, 2024). This entails that India actively alternates among forums in what is colloquially termed as forum shopping in order to further boost national interests. International relations scholars define forum shopping as the strategic choice of one institution, or arena, over another based on that forum's membership, mandate, decision rules, and enforcement capacity (Murphy & Kellow, 2013; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021, p. 802). As outlined by Murphy and Kellow (2013), the actors consider these characteristics in the arena's design, and a system of overlapping institutions can enhance policy results by providing multiple options for achieving objectives. Rüland (2012) explains this as a type of 'diminished multilateralism,' in which an emerging power like India initiates or accentuates other regional or transregional forums to work around the limits of global structures.

Amongst such shifting governance frameworks, scholars show that states have started increasingly engaging in what is termed forum shopping, the movement through institutional settings in pursuit of an advantage to serve national interests (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). In the case of emerging powers like India, such practices go beyond mere reactions to external forces and become an essential facet of its multi-layered international policy. Most literature centres on dissatisfaction emerging powers have with Western institutions and their bid for status through new forums (Rüland, 2012; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021). India's balancing participation in the WTO with SAARC, BIMSTEC, RCEP, and even Quad reflects a careful measurement of inclusion, autonomy, and influence.

India's behaviour indicates a far more blended approach, including a more flexible version of institutionalism and pragmatic multialignment, at both the regional and international level. For clarity, this study treats "multialignment" as a comprehensive concept while also recognising that India's regional foreign policy often manifests itself as flexible and pragmatic institutional forms. Hence, this multialignment approach is, in India's case,



certainly pragmatic, driven by national interests, but also not a rejection of globalisation since India remains active in the UN, WTO and G20 while engaging with numerous other groupings. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has noted, India's "multi-alignment or multi-vector" policy allows it to collaborate with different partners on different issues in what optimises India's position (Garg, 2024). Simply put, Upadhyay (2022) notes India's perspective is to "weigh their own side" rather than succumb to either U.S. or China hegemony. This standpoint also serves as a pivotal indicator that motivates us to trace forum shopping within these overlapping organisations. In doing so, India exemplifies how emerging powers strategically engage overlapping regionalism to assert agency, mitigate constraints, and shape the evolving architecture of international order. Therefore, the question of "how does India strategically navigate itself within the increasingly overlapping regional and global organisations" lies at the heart of this study.

Accordingly, this study aims to map and explain India's forum shopping using process tracing and contribute to overlapping regionalism, institutional balancing, and the adaptive responses of emerging powers to a fragmented global order. Thus, this paper analyses how India has implemented this strategy in the context of economic and security priorities within the overlapping phenomenon. In this vein, the study uses a qualitative process tracing method to analyse India's forum shopping strategy within overlapping regional and global contexts. The rationale is to uncover motivations, mechanisms, critical turning points, and India's strategic shifts in relation to institutional engagement since forum shopping entails a complex decision-making process that involves multi-layered international and domestic competing factors. Indian forum selection behaviour and explanatory frameworks can be best captured through process tracing.

Within this scope, this paper advances the existing literature by linking forum shopping to institutional balancing and overlapping regionalism in different mechanisms based on mandate, membership, enforcement, and decision rules. The study does this by applying process tracing to India's institutional alignment since 1991. We analyse, accordingly, India's participation within overlapping regional frameworks such as SAARC vs BIMSTEC, and supra-regional-global ones, particularly BRICS, RIC, SCO, RCEP, UN, and WTO from 1991 to present. We present some instances, like India's pivot from SAARC to BIMSTEC and its subsequent withdrawal from RCEP and study the underlying motivations in terms of forum shopping, considering membership composition, mandate, decision rules, and enforcement. India's approach, we argue, exemplifies an interest-maximising approach to spatial institutional diversity, and it shifts between fora to pursue preferable results achieved through engagement, albeit limited multilateralism.

Theoretical Framework: Overlapping Organisations, Institutional Balancing and Forum Shopping

The post-World War II period saw the emergence of a growing number of regional organisations, which spearheaded academic research on the drivers of regionalism and institutional integration, particularly in Europe (Haas, 1958; Deutsch et al., 1957). Studies of regionalism subsequently expanded theoretically and conceptually, emphasising globalised and multidimensional processes that extend beyond geographical



boundaries (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995; Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005). For example, Acharya (2012) referred to regionalism as a "global heritage" with diverse trajectories in different regions of the world, transcending Eurocentric models (Acharya, 2012, p. 3; Söderbaum, 2015). This pluralistic understanding of regionalism and the rapid proliferation of regional organisations have also paved the way for overlapping regionalism discussions (Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023).

The expansion of global and regional organisations has not been strictly progressive or singularly focused. This has led to overlapping memberships, mandates, functions, and boundaries, which are described as overlapping regionalism (Panke & Stapel, 2018). This is closely related to the complexity of governmental systems where multiple institutions with similar objectives exist, resulting in redundant abundance and functional rivalry (Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). As stated by Panke and Stapel (2018, p. 239), overlapping regional organisations occur when states join more than one organisation under a similar mandate or enforcement that provides both opportunities and constraints for states. This gives states the opportunity to use multifaceted strategies to strengthen and protect their interests, primarily when centralised global institutions such as the UN or WTO are in political deadlocks or unresponsive. These overlapping dyads also echo this reasoning and explain that "institutional balancing", often known as the creation or sponsorship of new forums, is a response to the dominance of stubborn, outdated multilateral frameworks. Institutional balancing, as He (2015) argued, relies on the use of international institutions to counter a relationship of more than one power and constrain their influence.

Reinsberg and Westerwinter (2023) further suggest that the design of frameworks and institutions with overlapping functions is intentional and the product of powerful countries aiming to prevent the diminishing of their influence in existing forums. These overlapping organisational forms provide less powerful or emerging states with a greater range of institutional options, which is particularly useful in Asia, where there are many competing institutions vying for the same policy spaces. Hence, Panke and Stapel (2023, p. 10) found that Asia stands out as a form of "comprehensive overlap" that is rarely nested based on the percentage of overlapping dyads within the region. Hofmann (2018) states that these overlapping associations permit states many tactical options, especially hostage-taking, forum-shopping, and brokering, that have been designed to change the result of some process. Consequently, forum shopping takes place when a state, facing opposition in one organisation, seeks out another organisation to which it can present the same issue, expecting a warmer welcome. By all means, forum shopping is a useful approach for emerging powers who are attempting to escape structural dependency in the global hierarchy (Stephen, 2017).

Forum shopping is particularly relevant for emerging powers that try to sidestep structural dependency in the global order so as to reproduce their preferences across multiple institutional venues, remould existing coalitions, or abandon unproductive fora. While forum shopping concentrates on the micro-level tactical behaviour of states, broader strategic frameworks such as institutional balancing and multi-alignment capture the rationale behind such decisions. India, for example, can shift between global and regional forums to reproduce or restructure existing alliances, reproduce their preferences across institutional venues, or exit unproductive forums. Such behaviour is



rational and adaptive (Hofmann, 2018), especially in areas with high institutional density. Studies of India's foreign policy confirm this pattern. O'Donnell and Papa (2021) argue that India deliberately overlaps its policy agenda across the RIC, BRICS, and SCO alignments, selectively reinforcing one while the others stagnate in advancing its security objectives. In this case, India's forum shopping is a calculated strategy that allows policymakers to change the venue of an issue to a different space when progress is terminating in a given forum (Murphy & Kellow, 2013; Garg, 2024; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

Jamali & Liu (2024) build on this framework in the context of India, claiming India employs institutional balancing to achieve its diplomatic objectives concerning China while sidestepping rising power conundrums like overcommitting to the U.S. or getting mired in bloc politics. It demonstrates how India attempts to sway contested regional forums in a bid to retain strategic autonomy, a concept rooted in Indian foreign policy since Nehru's nonalignment (Kaura, 2021). Rather than global institutions, it is India's turn to approach them that comes off as instrumental. This strategic flexibility stems also from Jaishankar's words, "*India is determined to 'practice strategic autonomy'*" refraining from aligning exclusively with any single power and instead cultivating a plethora of partnerships (Garg, 2024; Upadhyay, 2022). Hence, rational multi-alignment described India's behaviour, as the state participates in and interacts with varying rival powers contingent on non-loyalty, issue-driven interests, instead of on ideological fidelity. O'Donnell and Papa (2021) reinforce this perspective in their examination of India's participation in RIC, BRICS, and SCO, wherein India is shown to selectively mimic its counterterrorism policies as forum shopping for burgeoning BRICS and after the SCO.

International relations and political economy scholars have studied overlapping organisations and institutional balancing, focusing on global institutions and regional organisations (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). There is a gap, however, in research exploring how emerging powers such as India navigate overlapping regional and global institutions through forum shopping. Even though there are some analyses of India's institutional balancing (Jamali & Liu, 2024) and its multi-alignment diplomacy in BRICS, RIC, and SCO (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021), most of these studies are disconnected and lack an interwoven storyline of India's strategic oscillations across numerous institutions. This study aims to address that gap by conducting a meso-level comparison of India's forum shopping behaviour in South and Southeast Asia, examining the mechanisms of cross-participation among overlapping institutions at both the regional and international level.

Mapping India's Overlapping Membership and Engagement

The study mapped India's institutional relations with regional and international bodies from 1991 to 2024. The timeline is divided into three phases to capture the most relevant changes in the country's political leadership, foreign policy doctrines, and the global environment. The first phase (1991-2004) is marked by India's economic liberalisation and late engagement into global structures with multilateral enthusiasm, such as the WTO and early regionalism, epitomised by SAARC.



Table 1. The map of India's Engagement with Overlapping Regional International Organisations (RIOs)

RIO	Name	Year	Mandate	Scope
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	1985	Regional	South Asia- 8 States (including Pakistan)
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	1997	Regional	Bay of Bengal- 7 states
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership	2012/ 2019	Economic	Asia Pacific-16 Countries
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	2005	Security	Eurasia- 10 members
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue	2007	Security/Strategic	Asia-Pacific-4 states
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa	2009	Economic	Mini-lateral
RIC	Russia-India-China Strategic Trilateral	2001	Strategic	Mini-lateral
ASEAN Dialogue	Association of Southeast Asian Nations-India Dialogue	1992	Regional	ASEAN-India
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association	1997	Maritime	Indian Ocean/ 23 members
ASEAN-India FTA	Association of Southeast Asian Nations-India Free Trade Agreement	2010	RTA	ASEAN/India
India-Japan CEPA	India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2011	RTA	Bilateral
India-Korea CEPA	India-Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2010	RTA	Bilateral
India-UAE CEPA	India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement	2022	RTA	Bilateral
India-Australia ECTA	India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement	2022	RTA	Bilateral

Sources: The table has been created by authors considering the Regional Organisations Project (CROP) and the OVREG database from Panke and Stapel (2023).

The second phase (2005-2014) portrays, to some extent, an era of 'dismantlement' of institutional limits with India's deeper participation in the RCEP, BRICS, and ASEAN-centred trade frameworks, along with the growing discontent with SAARC. The post-2014 as the third phase formally begins with Prime Minister Modi where strategic divergence and forum shopping prevail, withdrawing from RCEP, shifting from SAARC to BIMSTEC, increased participation in the Quad, and selective revival of RIC indicating a move away from normative multilateralism towards interest-based institutional maneuvering (Gupta et al., 2019; Hall, 2021; Kumar, 2024; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021). In the realm of India's foreign policy, the forum shopping approach makes it possible to link the outcome of key events like the shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC, the withdrawal from RCEP, or attending



the SCO and Quad simultaneously, with strategic choices, institutional frameworks, and global geopolitical pressure. In this vein, the following table presents India's institutional presence across overlapping regional, bilateral, and global platforms. It shows that not only multialignment, but also mini-lateral and issue-based platforms, gain importance in India's engagement strategy, which opens a room to forum shopping strategies through overlapping organisations.

Forum-shopping in Regional Deadlocks: SAARC vs. BIMSTEC

In South Asia, the SAARC (1985) historically included all eight countries of the region: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. SAARC's mandate covers broad socio-economic cooperation that includes the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) but operates on strict consensus rules. Over time, India grew frustrated by the perennial India-Pakistan frictions that repeatedly blocked SAARC progress. For instance, the disputes over Kashmir and terrorism, as well as other bilateral grievances, have repeatedly derailed SAARC meetings or common initiatives (Gurjar, 2017; Bishwakarma & Hu, 2022; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

In the 2010s, Pakistan notoriously withdrew from SAARC infrastructure projects and staged a military parade in 2016 on the eve of a summit, which led to a subsequent boycott of the 2016 SAARC Summit in Pakistan by India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan (Anwar, 2022, p. 17). India's government and media branded Pakistan as the biggest "deadlock" to South Asian cooperation (Waggy & Hassan, 2023; Gurjar, 2017). Consequently, SAARC activity virtually came to a standstill, and there were no summits from 2014 to 2022. In response to this deadlock, India turned to alternate regional bodies, implementing "forum shopping" strategies. These regional economic bodies are highlighted in the Table above alongside India's engagement, reflecting India's strategic participation.

Both SAARC and BIMSTEC share the characteristics of weak enforcement and lack of treaty obligations, but the modified membership of BIMSTEC stands out as an important structural feature. In practice, India uses BIMSTEC for connectivity, power projects, and security dialogues while SAARC remains moribund (Anwar, 2022). BIMSTEC (1997) captures parts of the SAARC geography but leaves out Pakistan. Its members include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and later Myanmar and Thailand (ASEAN members) (Gurjar, 2017). India has found a more flexible framework to pursue its objectives of South Asian and Southeast Asian integration without Pakistan. Modi's India has convened BIMSTEC heads of government summits, the first one in Goa in 2016, chaired meetings of the security chiefs, and sparked new projects under BIMSTEC like connecting the power grid of Bangladesh and India and counterterrorism dialogues regionally (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

Indian policy pronouncements make clear the reasoning. India pointed out Pakistan as opposed to the possible regional integrations under SAARC that also show a strategic shift toward BIMSTEC, which offers India a chance to engage with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours without being weighed down by Pakistan (Gupta et al., 2019; Gurjar, 2017). To summarise, India swapped forums: it pursued its South Asian agenda



through BIMSTEC instead of SAARC. Pakistan's veto power in SAARC turned the region into a forum of unwanted competition in the eyes of other members, classic forum shopping, while BIMSTEC's composition without Pakistan and comparatively looser enforcement welcomed progress on trade, connectivity, and security, which are fundamental to India (Murphy & Kellow, 2013).

Economic Forum Shopping: WTO, RCEP and Trade Agreements

India additionally utilises the forums of the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions. For example, IORA promotes India-ASEAN connections for trade and maritime security free from South Asian political encumbrances. India also engages bilaterally, like with "Act East" ties with ASEAN, when regional collectives fall short. These patterns also demonstrate forum shopping: India seeks integration in the Bay of Bengal, East Asia Summit or Indian Ocean initiatives, unencumbered by South Asian logjam politics.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was one of the more prominent Asia-Pacific FTAs with 16 member nations: ASEAN-China, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India. India entered the negotiations in 2012 but withdrew in 2019 during the summit. This illustrates India's options among economic forums. India's domestic interests clashed with RCEP's strict free-trade commitments and large membership, including China. Modi stated that the present form of the RCEP agreement does not fully reflect the basic spirit and the agreed guiding principles of RCEP and further stated that it did not satisfactorily address India's outstanding issues and concerns (Gupta et al., 2019; Gupta & Ganguly, 2020). Indian experts argue that India would have been compelled to drastically reduce tariffs on a wide range of goods, including mobile phones and agricultural products, to 2014 levels, endangering the 'Make in India' initiative (Kadekodi, 2018). More importantly, the massive trade deficits India faced with the RCEP countries, especially China, coupled with the surge of low-cost goods, influenced the decision (Rawat et al., 2020). This also highlights India's attempts at forum shopping with regional institutions.

Instead of locking itself into a rigid Asia-Pacific FTA that India deemed unfavourable, they sought to trade through different avenues. These include existing bilateral agreements, the ASEAN plus agreements, and the WTO approach. In withdrawing, India anticipated self-relegating to RCEP-15 and missing out on the chance to integrate its economy, but Indian leaders determined that adopting "strategic withdrawal" to protect domestic producers and strategic sectors was more advantageous (Gaur, 2022; Siew, 2019). Domestically, India measured access to the market vis-à-vis protection of the market and opted for the latter, ultimately deciding to participate in the RCEP forum. India's post-2014 trade policy was heavily reliant on protectionist measures fueled by the perception that previous Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) permitted an unrestrained flow of Chinese imports without adequate protective measures (Gupta & Ganguly, 2020).

Consequently, shifting focus to India's economic relations, there is evidence of forum shopping wherein India rejects one set of venues (RCEP) in favour of others (bilateral FTAs, WTO) that more closely align with its decision criteria and mandate preferences, as shown in the Table above. India's multilateral engagement with global issues has been



active and steadfast where its interests intersect, as in the case of the WTO, where India has been an outspoken advocate of the developing countries' special and differential treatment, food security, and flexibility concerning intellectual property rights. There are times also when Indian negotiators have chosen to boycott WTO packages when Modi threatened to derail the WTO 2013 Bali package due to its potential impact on India's public food distribution system (Erixon, 2014, p. 4).

India has allied with some other countries of the Global South in demanding deeper reform as well. India stays primarily committed to the WTO as a forum, even with the understanding that leaving would entirely sacrifice negotiating ground, and despite protectionist rhetoric at home. In effect, India maximises the use of the WTO enforcement as dispute settlement in cases where benefits are clear while exercising caution on fully liberalising trade (Chakraborty, 2023). There are two distinguishing characteristics of important economic trade forums. RCEP had a strict free-trade mandate, whereas the WTO is broad-based with an enforceable dispute system. India opted out of RCEP because its decision rules and content clashed with national interests, but remained committed to the WTO (Chakraborty, 2023; Hopewell, 2022).

Forum Shopping in the Security Realm: RIC, BRICS, SCO, QUAD

India's strategic forum shopping is also pronounced in the overlapping security domains. Within the context of Eurasia, the trilateral RIC (Russia-India-China) grouping was created in 2001 as a response to unilateralism and an early step toward what eventually became BRICS. India was a co-founder of RIC, but for a long time, it considered it merely a diplomatic talk shop. From the mid-2000s, both Modi and Putin appeared to agree that with the addition of Brazil and South Africa, BRICS was a more useful multilateral platform (Cecchi, 2025; Upadhyay, 2022). India also focused on bilateral relations, such as with the U.S., because of tensions with China. After the 2020 Galwan border clash with China, India controversially reactivated RIC meetings in 2018 and 2020, including unprecedented meetings between defence ministers (Cecchi, 2025; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021).

This sequence is also explained by O'Donnell & Papa (2021) as classic forum-shopping. It is shown that India deprioritised counterterrorism and security matters to stagnate within BRICS and SCO, which has been an important incentive to revive RIC and impose the same agenda there. To put it differently, India aims for overlapping convergences in policy goals among RIC, BRICS and SCO, and when discontented with one place, shifts focus to another. As noted in the article, India's example illustrates that policymakers, when facing challenges in their preferred policy space, often look for alternative locations to implement policies.

As in the Table, the SCO with 8 members, including China, Russia, Pakistan, and now India, is largely focused on counterterrorism and political-security cooperation. India became a member of the SCO in 2017 in order to have a say in Central Asian security issues and work on cross-border terrorism. However, the overlap of China and Pakistan in the SCO means India faces quite difficult dynamics. While India has sustained a selective engagement in the SCO, the border clashes with China have also pushed it to



enhance its involvement in the Quad as a balancing mechanism (Ali, 2023). Hence, the Quad's informal shape as an Indo-Pacific forum (U.S., Japan, Australia, India) is a minilateral counterbalance to China, although lacking formal rules to make decisions or a secretariat, is far more flexible (Kumar, 2024; Thakur, 2024). Thus, India adopted the revived Quad to strengthen its naval and technological partnership with the Western democracies, counter China's belligerence, and advance the vision of an "open and inclusive" Indo-Pacific region.

India also continues to actively participate in broader global frameworks. In the United Nations, India pursues its security-development strategies and aims to receive a permanent seat on the Security Council, which China and Russia oppose. Doing so, they actively engage with South Africa and Brazil, both of which are also pursuing permanent seats on the Security Council, through the IBSA Dialogue Forum and the G4 coalition (Stuenkel, 2019; Touthang, 2024). India's engagement with the IBSA Dialogue Forum demonstrates a further example of forum shopping, which enables these rising powers to coordinate their positions on Security Council reform and global governance (Alden & Le Pere, 2023). India's engagement with IBSA further underscores its selective engagement that supports the country's ambition to gain legitimacy and recognition in the global order.

Beyond the regional manoeuvres, India also hosts one of the world's largest UN peacekeeping operations to strengthen its legitimacy and claim as a global leader. Moreover, India is a member of the G20, which it chaired in 2023, as well as the Commonwealth, and uses these fora to advocate for infrastructure financing and climate-and-health initiatives (Touthang, 2024). More importantly, India compartmentalises issues by forum that can bring up counterterrorism at the UN because it needs to consider Pakistan's votes at the UNGA, or at ASEAN+ meetings, but then use BRICS or RIC for different emphases on multilateral reform (Chandra, 2020). This too can be viewed as a form of forum shopping, not only to hedge against regional powers, but also to pursue legitimacy and project status in the changing global order.

Overlapping Institutions and India's Forum Shopping Patterns

Based on these cases, India seems to have a systematic way of dealing with changing institutional elements in relation to a region's forum shopping behaviour. To begin with, India tends to select forums that either include important partners and/or exclude critical foes based on membership compositions. India is explicitly sidelining SAARC for BIMSTEC to exclude Pakistan. On the other hand, India partially joined the SCO because of its Central Asian and Russian members, who are important for their security purposes, even if China and Pakistan are also members. India also turned its face to the Quad, which is without China or Russia when it seeks China-free maritime dialogues (Waggy & Hassan, 2023). Thus, Membership formulations dramatically determine the forum preferred by India.

Second of all, India has pushed its agenda in forums where the charter does best fit the agenda. Emphasis on terrorism in the SCO and RIC is clearly defined within the charter and has an explicit focus of sorts on the SCO (Kumar, 2024). Also, India focuses on



economic development in BRICS and trade liberalisation in the WTO/FTAs. India may change venues if the mandate of the forum is overly broad or too narrow. India did not fulfil development goals with RCEP's limited trade scope. However, India does prefer the multi-sectoral BIMSTEC that allows security and trade discussions, which far better aligns with India's regional agenda (Gaur, 2022; O'Donnell & Papa, 2021; Roy, 2022).

Thirdly, India devises a meeting room with the structures. India often resorts to SAARC, BIMSTEC, or forums that permit unilateral and bilateral coalitions when consensus groups are stagnant. The BIMSTEC is also consensus-based, but it is easier for India to get approval there since Pakistan is absent and the other members have aligned priorities. The Quad and RIC have no formal voting regulations at all, which gives India leeway (Anwar, 2022; Gurjar, 2017; Waggy & Hassan, 2023). India usually invokes binding dispute resolution, but also blocks results if the group is deadlocked. India's exit from RCEP shows that even in consensus-based systems, a single member can effectively veto membership by withdrawing.

Finally, the organisational enforcement mechanisms and resource capacity are other things that impact forum shopping related to India. With India, stronger forums are utilised when binding outcomes are needed and weaker ones when more flexibility is needed. India opts for WTO litigation for winning disputes like on cotton subsidies because once won, they can enforce trade rules (Chakraborty, 2023; Erixon, 2014; Waggy & Hassan, 2023). On the contrary, SAARC and BIMSTEC declarations are mostly unenforceable, which is why India moves things there that do not require strict adherence. The SCO has some institutional heft, but little to no actual enforcement. Since the Quad is completely informal in structure, India has no obligations to participate but serves as a unilateral counterbalance to China (Thakur, 2024). This is why India's forum selection often coincides with whether it prefers formal commitments, such as the WTO, or informal dialogue like the Quad, RIC (Kumar, 2024).

To summarise, these identified patterns indicate that forum shopping sheds light on India's stance in the geopolitical theatre. It evaluates the character of each institution and shifts locations to exploit the most favourable arrangement. As Murphy & Kellow (2013) point out, overlapping arenas provide multiple redundant chances to increase flexibility or marginalise opposition, which is exactly what India does. After the BRICS consensus failed (e.g., not reaching minimum agreements on basic measures and designating certain figures as terrorists) or stalled due to SCO-gatekeeping, India sought alternative gatherings (e.g., RIC ministerial sideline meetings (Cecchi, 2025; Cooper, 2021). When the terms of RCEP posed a threat to domestic producers, India withdrew and strategically opted for bilateral agreements along with pathways through the WTO. After progress stagnated within SAARC, India formed BIMSTEC and "ignored SAARC" even during the 2016 BRICS outreach summit (O'Donnell & Papa, 2021; Burakowski, 2025). Such actions are not ideologically motivated but calculated moves to optimise interests.



Discussion and Conclusion

The case of India after the Cold War illustrates how India pragmatically and selectively blends together different institutions with a pragmatic touch. It mirrors India's aspiration of being a shaper of global rules rather than a mere follower, alongside its carefully crafted geopolitical manoeuvres within overlapping multilateral frameworks. This study illustrates with a process-traced timeline, along with the comparative institutional analysis, that India's global engagement is not linear or uniform. Instead, it reflects a forum shopping reasoning where India participates in or opts out of global or regional institutions based on issue alignment, strategic autonomy, and power asymmetries.

Forum shopping as a concept used theories on how states decide on certain institutional venues to achieve maximum gains in policies (Busch, 2007; Hofmann, 2018). It is observable in India's conduct, especially with respect to its exit from RCEP and shift towards bilateral and mini-lateral agreements like the India-CEPA and the Quad (Hall, 2021; Kapoor, 2023). Instead of rejecting global governance systems entirely, India has filled many interdependent institutions, which often function as systems of cross-framework governance, and adeptly navigates within and between them. From time to time, India's leaders tend to invoke some form of forum shopping logic that looks for or designs ways to advance proposals in Indian-dominated ecosystems. India's external affairs officials, for instance, have stated that they encourage the use of the multilateral system to improve the governance of inter-institutional relations so that all operate in support of the system. This is celebrated in India as a form of 'internationalism' which enables India greater autonomy to (Chatterjee & Maitra, 2024; Roy, 2022). Unlike the classical approach to forum shopping that focuses on the existence of overlapping venues in a trade framework, India's model integrates strategy, economics, and geopolitics, blurring the domains of polity and security, thus also broadening the rationale of forum shopping.

Simultaneously, the literature on overlapping regionalism is also helpful for understanding the context of India's forum shopping around multiple memberships (Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023). While SAARC has stagnated due to structural veto problems stemming from the Indo-Pakistani conflict, India has vigorously supported BIMSTEC in order to circumvent such deadlocks (Haokip, 2014; Pant & Passi, 2017). This form of selective regional prioritisation illustrates India's geopolitical pragmatism and a tendency shared with other rising powers, preferring low-constraint, high-flexibility environments. Geopolitically, this is how India has managed to obtain collaboration on important matters while hedging against tensions. Hence, India has shifted the regional framework by preferring BIMSTEC to SAARC and transformed India's position regarding global frameworks by placing itself outside of RCEP but active in WTO, BRICS, and UN.

The interplay between the RIC, the SCO, and the Quad also highlights the layered nature of India's forum shopping strategy. Complementing this, the IBSA Dialogue Forum highlights another coalition of India, Brazil, and South Africa seeking legitimacy and reform in global governance, particularly the expansion of the UN Security Council. The findings remind us that India is not rejecting international frameworks, but it takes advantage of strategic overlap to advance its objectives. In this way, India utilises and



also contributes to the regime complexity of contemporary global governance. As scholars warn, many overlapping organisations increase the complexity of governance, which Indian policymakers have used to their advantage to maximise their interest and power (Hofmann, 2018; Panke & Stapel, 2018; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2023).

To sum up, India has executed a hybrid approach, scratching out merging forum shopping, institutional balancing, and overlapping regionalism into one core design. The study advances the debate of this literature by illustrating that emerging powers, particularly India, practice strategic forum shopping not only to preserve autonomy, norms, and mitigate risks, but also to hedge against uncontrolled results. Further research could be directed at exploring the impact of India's forum shopping on organisational change, norm diffusion, and the overarching structure of global governance.

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