

Meaning, Political Systems, and Democratic Trends in South Asia

1. Regional Context and Significance: South Asia gained global attention particularly after India and Pakistan became nuclear powers, highlighting persistent regional conflicts and tensions.

- The region is marked simultaneously by **conflict and cooperation**, including border disputes, insurgencies, ethnic tensions, and resource-sharing issues.
- Yet, there exists a shared recognition that **regional cooperation is essential for prosperity and development**.

2. Defining South Asia: South Asia commonly includes **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka**.

- Natural geographic boundaries—**the Himalayas in the north and surrounding seas**—create cultural and linguistic distinctiveness.
- Despite immense diversity, the region forms a **single geopolitical space**.

3. Diversity of Political Systems

- **Stable democracies:** India and Sri Lanka have maintained democratic governance since independence despite limitations.
- **Interrupted democracies:** Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced cycles of **civilian rule and military intervention**, though democratic governance re-emerged in the post-Cold War era.
- **Monarchical transition:** Nepal moved from constitutional monarchy to **democratic republic in 2008**.
- **Gradual democratisation in smaller states:**
 - Bhutan evolved into a **constitutional monarchy with multi-party democracy (2008)**.
 - Maldives transformed from **Sultanate to republic** and adopted a multi-party system in 2005.

4. Popular Support for Democracy: Surveys across major South Asian countries reveal:

- Widespread **public preference for democracy** over authoritarian rule.

- Positive attitudes toward **representative institutions** among rich and poor, across religions.
- This challenges earlier assumptions that democracy survives only in **economically prosperous societies**, expanding the **global imagination of democracy**.

Country-Wise Democratic Experiences and Internal Conflicts

5. Pakistan: Military Dominance vs Democratic Aspirations

- Repeated **military coups** interrupted democratic rule (Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, Musharraf).
- Structural causes of instability:
 - Dominance of **military, clergy, and landed elites**.
 - Persistent **conflict with India**, strengthening pro-military narratives.
 - External support from Western powers for strategic reasons.
- Despite instability, **press freedom, human rights movements, and pro-democracy sentiment** remain strong.

6. Bangladesh: From Liberation to Democratic Consolidation

- Originated from **East Pakistan's resistance to political, linguistic, and economic domination** by West Pakistan.
- **1971 war and Indian support** led to independence.
- Post-independence instability: constitutional change, assassination of Sheikh Mujib, and military rule.
- Since **1991**, functioning **multi-party representative democracy** has been established.

7. Nepal: Monarchy, Insurgency, and Republican Transition

Long-standing **monarchical control** limited democratic development.

- Maoist insurgency created **triangular conflict** among monarchy, democrats, and rebels.

- **Mass democratic movement (2006)** restored parliament.
- **Republic declared in 2008** and new constitution adopted in 2015.

8. Sri Lanka: Democracy Amid Ethnic Conflict

- Continuous democratic system since independence.
- Major challenge: **Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict** and LTTE's armed struggle for **Tamil Eelam**.
- Indian intervention through **IPKF (1987–90)** and eventual **defeat of LTTE in 2009**.
- Despite conflict, Sri Lanka achieved **high human development and economic growth** while retaining democracy.



Regional Conflicts, Cooperation, and External Influence

9. India–Pakistan Conflict

- Core dispute: **Kashmir**, leading to wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971) and continued division by Line of Control.
- Strategic tensions: **Siachen, arms race, nuclearisation (1998 tests)**, and mutual allegations of cross-border militancy.
- Water disputes moderated by **Indus Waters Treaty (1960)**, though minor disagreements persist.

10. India's Relations with Other Neighbours

- **Bangladesh:** disputes over migration, water sharing, trade, and security; yet growing **economic and environmental cooperation**, including enclave exchange (2015).
- **Nepal:** open borders and deep ties alongside suspicions of interference and geopolitical concerns.
- **Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives:** generally cooperative relations involving **trade agreements, development aid, security assistance, and reconstruction support**.
- Smaller neighbours often fear **Indian dominance**, while India worries about **instability and external influence** in the region.

11. Regional Cooperation and SAARC

- **SAARC (1985)** represents multilateral regional cooperation but has limited success due to political tensions.
- **SAFTA (2004; effective 2006)** aims to create a regional free-trade zone and reduce tariffs.
- Debate persists:
 - Some fear **Indian economic dominance**.
 - Others argue **trade promotes political cooperation and regional peace**.

12. Role of External Powers

- **China and the United States** significantly influence South Asian geopolitics.
- China's ties with Pakistan and growing India-China economic relations shape regional dynamics.
- Increasing **US involvement after the Cold War**, driven by strategic, economic, and diaspora interests.
- Ultimately, **regional peace depends more on South Asian governments and peoples** than on external actors.