

**Asoka Weerasinghe**

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**From:** "Asoka Weerasinghe" <weerasin@magma.ca>  
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**Sent:** Tuesday, April 10, 2012 2:19 PM  
**Subject:** India's Monroe doctrine

## Saarc reality check: China just tore up India's Monroe doctrine

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**C RAJA MOHAN Posted: Nov 14, 2005 at 0000 hrs IST NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 13**

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- Blogs

As the curtains came down today in Dhaka on the 13th SAARC summit, the event will be remembered only for the extraordinary demonstration of China's new political clout in the sub-continent.

It was a long time coming. But when it did in Dhaka over the weekend, China's diplomatic big bang left in tatters India's long-standing claim of an exclusive sphere of influence in the sub-continent.

That Nepal's King Gyanendra could hold up the consensus at the summit on Afghanistan's membership for two days by linking it to China's request for an association with the SAARC, heralds a new paradigm in the sub-continent's geopolitics.

Without even being present at the summit, China has significantly influenced the outcome of the Dhaka debate on expanding SAARC membership.

On the eve of the summit, an invitation for Afghanistan to become the eighth member of SAARC was

considered a done deal. That the decision on Afghanistan could not be taken without a simultaneous one on China is a wake up call to Delhi from Beijing.

India can no longer treat the sub-continent as its little backyard and have to reckon with the reality of Chinese power south of the Himalayas.

In demanding a procedural delay on the Chinese request for association with SAARC, India gained support only from Bhutan, which does not have diplomatic relations with China. Given the growing engagement between Thimpu and Beijing, India would be unwise to expect Bhutan to maintain the current position.

The five other members of SAARC—Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—were all more than eager for China's immediate association. While there was a consensus on inviting Afghanistan as the eighth member of the SAARC, only Nepal, however, appears to have openly pressed for a linkage with the China question. King Gyanendra's power play at Dhaka, however, is less important than the long-term implications for the sub-continent from China's rise on the global stage.

For decades, Delhi has claimed primacy in the sub-continent much in the vein of the US Monroe Doctrine, named after President James Monroe who told the European powers in 1823 to stay clear of the internal politics of Latin America.

In recent years, China has been explicitly suggesting its strong interest in joining the SAARC as either an "observer" or a "dialogue partner". Chinese interest in South Asian multilateralism, however, is only the icing on top of a layered but powerful engagement with the sub-continent.

Like in all its other neighbouring regions, China is keen to deepen its cross-border economic and transportation links with South Asia. India can hardly object to that, given China's long border with the sub-continent. Just as Beijing cannot stop India from developing abiding economic and political links with China's neighbours elsewhere in Asia, Delhi should not smugly believe it could forever keep China out of the sub-continent. While India's relations with each of its South Asian neighbours is weighed down by a different degree of complexity, China has had a free hand in expanding economic, political and military links with them.

Amidst new questions over the sustainability of its Monroe Doctrine, India needs a three pronged strategy—expanding regional cooperation with China, globalising South Asia, and accelerating the sub-continent's economic integration.

The longer Delhi takes in addressing these imperatives from the rise of China, the stronger will be the temptation for India's neighbours to draw Beijing deeper into the sub-continent's politics.

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