A new grouping of South Asian nations is shaping up as a potentially important vehicle for regional integration in an area where such a force has been badly lacking. The bloc could provide great support for advancing peace, progress and prosperity and play an important role in linking the Association of Southeast Asian Nations with South Asia.

The grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal can be a building block for wider integration. The Indian government is keen to connect Central Asia with ASEAN through South Asia, opening up the region for the free movement of skilled workers and capital. The next step will be to educate the public and show them how an open market in the region would benefit all.

With political opinion polarized about regional integration in South Asia, engaging the public is quite necessary. Everyone should welcome the jobs, technology and easier movement that better cross-border links would bring. Regional cooperation should not remain confined to the government-to-government level -- it must also encompass ordinary citizens to make it a success.

South Asia has long confined its efforts at regional integration to within the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. But under the SAARC, the veto of even one member can derail any prospective project. As a result, even 31 years after
its establishment, regional cooperation in South Asia remains very shallow given the lingering suspicions between the different members of the bloc.

Rejections in recent years by Pakistan of proposed projects such as a satellite to provide communications links and meteorological data and a motor vehicle agreement to improve connectivity and trade have given momentum to the idea of subregional cooperation. This tendency has been reinforced by the shifting of Pakistan's attentions away from the region and toward China, which is building up its own transport links to the country.

In this context, the grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal has gained some traction at a subregional level after first surfacing in 1996 in the form of the South Asian Growth Quadrangle, a mechanism intended to help integrate South Asia with ASEAN.

**CARS DRIVE PROGRESS**  The first concrete BBIN measure was a motor vehicle agreement that allows vehicles registered in any of the four countries to travel freely within the bloc. The agreement came into effect in January, and expectations are growing for more measures, helped by the enthusiasm of the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has often struggled to produce tangible results in its 31-year history. © Getty Images

In a recent bilateral initiative, India agreed to provide 100 megawatts of electricity to Bangladesh. In return, Bangladesh is to provide India's northeastern states with internet connectivity bandwidth of 10 gigabits per second. India is also providing a $2 billion line of credit to improve bus and waterway links with Bangladesh.

All these deals were set in motion when Modi visited Dhaka last June and reached an agreement to settle India's longstanding border dispute with Bangladesh, overcoming the anti-India sentiment that had built up there over the past several years. Ties between India and Bhutan have also advanced with the development of joint hydroelectric power generation projects.
To succeed, the BBIN countries need to learn from the experiences and mistakes of similar integration experiments. The group should continue to focus on areas that can bring quick results, including reducing tariff and nontariff barriers, facilitating trade and improving border infrastructure.

BBIN initiatives are advancing through two joint working groups, one focused on water resources and power and the other on connectivity and transit. The first group is exploring hydropower projects that would be undertaken jointly by at least three countries on an equitable basis and on developing grid connectivity.

The second working group, which produced the motor vehicle agreement, is looking at ways to improve cross-border movements of cargo and tourists by road and rail as well as how to strengthen actual border infrastructure. One result is the well-equipped Phulbari road crossing between India and Bangladesh. A future initiative could involve visa reciprocity.

The success of the BBIN cooperation model could show the way forward for strengthening and deepening economic partnership across the entire South Asian region. While China is building its own links into several South Asian states, it is even more important that connectivity inside the region is improved from its current sorry state.

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