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REGIONAL SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA: A BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The paper attempts to reflect on the security environment and issues in South Asia to lay emphasis on enhanced confidence building and regional cooperation in the region. The framework encompasses both realist approach to include conventional threats and moderate approach to include certain threats to communities and individuals that are not necessarily military in nature. It attempts to see the security problems in the region at five levels that are structural, policy-induced, attitudinal, historical and issue-specific. These problems reflect on security issues in South Asia that are seen at three levels: domestic, bilateral and regional. The paper concludes with sets of measures that could be undertaken for regional security management again at three levels of domestic, bilateral and regional initiative. Domestic initiative basically emphasises on the improvement of overall governance process for ensuring social cohesion, economic progress and stable political order, while stressing on negotiation for the resolution of bilateral problems and on political dialogue and confidence building measures between and among the regional countries under a security-oriented regional co-operative framework for the management of regional security issues.

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Introduction

Contrary to appearance, South Asia is a complex and diverse region, in terms of stages of development, political culture and nature of political regime, social cohesion and values, security perceptions and compulsions, foreign policy imperatives and orientation, etc of its constituent 7 nation states. The South Asian nations are economically backward, requiring foreign aid and assistance. Political institutions in most of them are not well developed and societies are bedeviled by ethnic and religious conflicts, making them internally unstable and externally vulnerable. What features, however, stand out in South Asia are the Indo-centricity in the region and the huge disparity between India and its regional neighbours. India constitutes the centre or core of South Asia, while the six other countries are on its periphery. The physical size, resources and power of India are just colossal – the other regional countries even combined together do not match up to it. This leads to certain perceptions, self-image and state policies in each of the seven states of the region.

As such, South Asia is a region where one may witness a sort of a perennial conflict between 'big power syndrome' and 'small state syndrome'. One of the inevitable implications of this is that the pre-eminent power tends to dominate in the region, while the weaker states in South Asia tend to seek extra-regional support to redress the power imbalance vis-à-vis the regional giant.

What constitutes Bangladesh perspective? There are two elements in it: the author's individual ideas and views on security in South Asia and Bangladesh's country perspective as the author understands it as a citizen. This perspective relates to Bangladesh's self-image as a small state/rim state, non-nuclear weapons state, lower most riparian state, and as a nation that is a champion of regional cooperation in South Asia.

The objective of this paper is to reflect in brief on the security environment in South Asia and to lay emphasis on enhanced confidence building and regional cooperation in the region. The paper first explores the security discourse and security problematic in South Asia. Then it highlights the security issues in South Asia – both traditional and non-traditional. The paper then focuses on the management of regional security. It is argued in the paper that regional cooperation will not only lead to economic development but will also contribute to regional security in South Asia.

Security Discourse and Security Problematic in South Asia

While security as a reflex is intrinsic in the state as well as in the human, the concept of security is about six decades old, coined by the West and having been in use since the 1940s. This concept used to have military connotation and external-orientedness. In other words, threats were understood only in terms of armed conflicts and the sources of threat were considered possible only from across state border or from across alliance frontier. And the subject or object of security was the state. This is conventional or traditional security thinking.

Indeed, in the Western context, the state was a developed democracy with social cohesion and elite consensus delivering good governance and internally guaranteeing a stable social, economic and political order. The state was the provider of security to all – state structures, communities and individuals. Hence the rationality of the traditional concept of security. The context in the Third World was obviously different, apparently making the Western security concept unsuitable there. However, due to Western influence on and intellectual poverty in most of the non-communist world, security discourse in the developing world was informed by conventional concept and ideas of security. Of course, there were scholars in the

developing world who had attempted to define security in the light of their own realities. For understandable reasons, the mainstream Western security thinking paled such attempts into insignificance.

However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and European socialism, the surge of ethno-religious wars and conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Balkans and the fast spreading environmental degradation and its cross-border nature, there has been a trend in the West to redefine security. As Western ideas travel fast and are usually venerated, most scholars and analysts in the developing world are seen to be competing with one another in borrowing such ideas and concepts. South Asia, like any other region of the world, is no exception.

As there are hardcore realists, there are also post-modernists in the field to define or redefine security. Security is considered by some as something that is to be analysed at three levels: the state, the community/group and the individual. Security threats may be military, political, economic, social and environmental and these may emanate from both within the state and from across the border. There is, thus, both vertical and horizontal expansion of the concept of security. Indeed, there is a tendency of securitizing every problem a man or a society or a state faces. This is understandable in a context where the state does not guarantee the safety and well-being of its citizens, where the society and polity are not cohesive and stable, and where the state itself is at times repressive. However, security as a concept must not be stretched too far to lose its utility, while at the same time it must not be oblivious of the changing realities. The concept of security therefore is to be realist enough to appreciate the persisting conventional threats and at the same time moderate enough to include certain threats to communities and individuals that are not necessarily military in nature and that might eventually affect the state structures and the people's welfare and fundamental rights.

South Asian Security

The security problems in South Asia are (1) structural, (2) policy-induced, (3) attitudinal, (4) historical, and (5) issue specific.

As mentioned earlier, the Indo-centricity and the disparity factor in South Asia often create a natural sense of insecurity in the smaller countries of the region. All South Asian states are more or less bound by ethnic and religious ties. Problems facing a minority community (ethnic or religious) in one country may have serious cross-border repercussions, thereby affecting inter-state relations and engendering security concerns.

India's regional security policy is based on its assumptions that South Asia is one single strategic as well as civilizational unit and her neighbours are integral to it. The policy objective of this view is to establish India as the custodian of the region's security. Failure of the neighbouring states to agree to fall in line is likely to trigger India's sanctions of various types and at various levels. Similarly, India's neighbours, which perceive security threats from India, tend to enlist extra-regional counterbalance against her. These policy divergences often create security problems between the regional giant and her South Asian neighbours. India's neighbours in their attempts to redress the power imbalance used to depend on the support of the United States and China. But now, given the Sino-Indian normalization and the increasingly deepening and expanding Indo-US ties, the neighbours' options in their India policy appear to be limited.

The roots of some conflicts in South Asia may be found in the history of some of its constituent member states in terms of the manner of their emergence and the territorial division of their religious and ethnic minorities. Some of the conflicts between India and Pakistan and between Bangladesh and India belong to this category.

Let us now turn to the specific security issues in South Asia.

Security Issues in South Asia

Security issues in South Asia are seen at three levels: domestic, bilateral and regional. Regional security issues relate to the India Doctrine, Nuclearization of South Asia and the Indo-Pakistan arms race.

The India Doctrine: India's structural advantage in South Asia engenders in her an attitude and policy of dominance in the region. This has been encapsulated in what has come to be known as the 'India Doctrine'. Bhabani Sen Gupta, a leading Indian scholar, has specified the parameters of this doctrine. He writes: India will not tolerate external intervention in a conflict situation in any South Asian country if the intervention has any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implication. No South Asian government must, therefore, ask for military assistance with an anti-Indian bias from any country.... If a South Asian country genuinely needs external help to deal with a serious internal conflict or an intolerable threat to a government legitimately established, it should ask help from a number of neighbouring countries including India. The exclusion of India from such a contingency will be considered to be an anti-Indian move on the part of the government concerned...¹ The essence and implications of the Doctrine have not been lost on India's neighbours.

The "Gujral Doctrine" appears to be new in recasting India's pre-eminent position in South Asia in the post-Cold War era but it is old in essence. The Doctrine is based on five principles. Firstly, "with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India does not ask for reciprocity, but gives and accommodates what

¹ Bhabani Sen Gupta, "Regional Security: The India Doctrine", *India Today*, New Delhi, 31 August 1983, p. 20.

it can in good faith and trust. Second, we believe that no South Asian country should allow its territory to be used against the interests of another country of the region. Third, that none should interfere in the internal affairs of another. Fourth, all South Asian countries must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. And finally, they should settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations. These few simple ideas, if implemented, will result in a positive impact on the security situation in our region and a fundamental recasting of South Asian regional relationships and our role in the world".² The essence of the Doctrine is: India is to befriend all South Asian neighbours, except Pakistan, eventually marginalize the latter if it does not fall in line, and consequently establish absolute sway in the region.

Nuclear Issue: This is not only an Indo-Pakistan bilateral issue but also a regional and even a global security issue. There is an interesting debate in South Asia on the nuclear issue. Some say that nuclearization has stabilized the security situation in the region, particularly between India and Pakistan, while some others tend to believe that nuclear proliferation has enhanced the possibility of conventional war between the two regional rivals. Remarkably, the Kargil war serves as an example of both. It may be argued that it is due to the possession of nuclear weapons that the Kargil conflict would not escalate into a full-scale war between India and Pakistan, while at the same time it may be said that now the probability of limited, localized, conventional wars and armed clashes is much more than ever before.

However, Bangladesh, as a non-nuclear weapon state, is concerned over the nuclearization of South Asia. First of all, it has

² Taken verbatim from I K Gujral's Inaugural Address. See *USI Journal*, New Delhi, Vol. CXXVII, No. 527, Jan-March 1997, p. 3.

vitiating the regional security environment. It has irrevocably altered the security situation and ethos in the region. Secondly, nuclear catastrophe could take place due to accident or mistake. Thirdly, there is the danger from nuclear waste mismanagement. And finally, due to physical proximity, Bangladesh, like the other neighbours, will equally experience a nuclear winter in the event of an Indo-Pak nuclear exchange, accidental or otherwise. Bangladesh has made its position clear on the nuclear issue to the regional antagonists as well as to the rest of the world. It has signed the CTBT and is vocal on the non-proliferation issue and on the nuclear weapons free zone concept. A related regional security problem is the nuclear and conventional arms race between India and Pakistan.

Great Power Role in South Asia: As mentioned, the smaller states of South Asia used to cultivate close relations with great powers, like the United States and China, as counterpoise vis-à-vis India. As such, the gradual warming and normalization of India's relations with the USA and China is a development that is being carefully watched by India's South Asian neighbours. It is only hoped that the strengthening of the Indo-US and Sino-Indian relationships will not be at the expense of the two external powers' relations with the other South Asian countries.

Bilateral security issues: These are the Kashmir conflict, Indo-Bangladesh common resources and border problems, Indo-Nepal border and trade conflict, Bhutan-Nepal conflict over refugees, Bangladesh-Myanmar problem over Rohingya refugees, etc. The examples of intra-state security issues or conflicts are the ethnic or tribal insurgencies in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. It should be borne in mind that intra-state (domestic) conflicts may often turn into bilateral or even regional issues. The insurgencies in India's Northeast and the LTTE insurgency in Sri Lanka are two of the

examples of such security issues in South Asia. Some of the security issues raised above are both traditional and non-traditional in terms of the nature of threat and the source of threat.

What is the way ahead?

Management of Regional Security

Certainly, the way forward is meeting the security threats and concerns, and conflict management leading to conflict resolution.

Again, this can be done at three levels: domestic, bilateral and regional.

Domestic level: management of security would involve reaching negotiated settlement of the existing armed and other conflicts, equitable economic development, participation in governance process, accommodating minorities, establishing the rule of law, respecting human rights, mitigating environmental problems. Particular attention must be focused on those intra-state conflicts that have cross-border ramifications. In other words, socio-economic and political space has to be expanded and created, with a view to generating economic opportunities, ensuring social cohesion and establishing political order and stability.

Bilateral level: Inter-state relations are affected most by bilateral conflicts and problems. The most glaring example is the Kashmir dispute, over which India and Pakistan have fought two wars. The other sets of bilateral problems in South Asia are also quite bedeviling. What is needed at this hour is their peaceful, negotiated settlement so that the focus of national efforts could be directed to more pressing socio-economic issues. Channels of communication, direct talks, and other confidence building measures are likely to lead to confidence management and then on to conflict resolution.

Regional level: As mentioned, there are nuclear as well as non-nuclear security threats at the regional level in South Asia. However, there is no regional security forum where the security issues could be addressed. It is perhaps time to think about having such a forum where all the seven South Asian nations could deliberate upon the issues that impinge on their individual security and the security of the region. There should be more and more of political dialogue and confidence building measures among the seven. What is more important is to effect a decisive shift away from conflict to cooperation in the region – both political and economic as well as at the civil society level.

Indeed, there is no alternative to regional cooperation in South Asia. Needless to say, the more the extent of cooperation, the lesser the possibility of security threats bilaterally and regionally. The level of underdevelopment and backwardness in South Asia is so high that all attention and efforts should be focused on the socio-economic well-being of the poor, teeming billion of the region. Therefore, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) needs to be reinvigorated for the socio-economic development of its seven member states. This would, in turn, contribute to national and regional security.