

## Book Review

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Mohammad Humayun Kabir (ed.) *National Security of Bangladesh in the Twenty-first Century*, Dhaka Academic Press and Publishers Limited, 2000, pages: x+279, Price Tk 295.

The end of one millennium and the onset of other leave us pondering at the crossroads of time. Particularly students and analysts of international relations are absorbed in studying the changing focus of many of the basic trends of their subject. Basically it is a subject of transition and change. As times change, so do society and polity and with them, change ideas, concepts thoughts and theories.

In this epoch of flux perhaps one of the concepts which has undergone major rethinking and reorientation is the concept of security. And it is particularly for this reason among others, that the publication of the book is noteworthy and deserves our attention. This book is a compilation of the research papers presented at a national seminar on "National Security of Bangladesh in the Twenty-first Century" organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies in 1998.

The book probes into the sources of threats to the national security of Bangladesh and identifies the likely challenges to its security in the twenty first century and also suggests some possible strategies and options for Bangladesh to meet such security challenges. As the editor states, the purpose of this book is to contribute to the ongoing debate over the concept of national security and to offer food for further deliberation on

the security of a rim country like Bangladesh, operating in the context of post cold war globalization process. And the other objective is to sensitize the concerned policy and decision making community in Bangladesh to the insecurities the country is facing and is likely to confront in the days ahead, with the view for them to adopting appropriate policy instruments.

The first article of the book is thematic in nature dealing with the conceptualization of the term security. The author has pointed out that the rethinking of the term security essentially began with the end of the Cold War, when it shifted from a narrow militaristic meaning to a wider plane, encompassing a plethora of socio-economic and environmental areas. According to the author, reconceptualization was a result of the recession of physical danger personified by the East and a positive impact of the cessation of the Cold War has been the transformation of the term security.

But in fact the term security like development has always been in transition, particularly in terms of meaning and application. Rethinking of these terms has resulted in shifts in strategic thinking often with very important results. We can mention particularly the period of "detente" which was a result of rethinking of security perspectives. The author has identified the security shifts in its paradigm and application entirely from the perspective of the West. In fact it would have been better if he had brought in alternative perspectives, thus giving his analysis a wider application and meaning. Though the crucial significance of the end of the Cold War cannot be underrated, giving it such exclusive over-importance tends to ignore other perspectives and thinking.

Again the author has mentioned that all this rethinking of security has had very little impact on the South Asian security

scenario. Then where does the relevance of reconceptualization of security lie in terms of the identification of possible security threats to Bangladesh in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?. Does not it mean that we have to look for alternative meanings of security away from Western textbooks to find solutions to our Eastern security problems?

The author has also dealt with the likely threats to the security of Bangladesh. Starting with environmental threats, the author lists linkages rather than sources of threat. In the part where socio-political threats are mentioned the author suffices by mentioning that it is the single most important source of threat to a country's stability. The part which should have received the most receives the least in terms of attention and elaboration. The author reveals his preference for his career background when he argues that defence expenditure is justified on the grounds of cost benefit analysis. He does not take cognisance of the dichotomy between defence and development, perceiving them to be not issues of conflict but themes that needed planning in accommodation.

The second article elaborates on the defence forces approach to dealing with conventional security threats. The author maintains that the way to meet these is by eventually adopting a rigid approach which he rationalizes by stating that terrorists, drug and arms smuggling are the sort of problems that need rigid and firm handling.

The third article examines the linkages between defence and development in the context of society. The authors examine defence expenditure and puts forward certain recommendations to deal with the problem which leaves us thinking about its possibilities.

A different type of presentation is made in the fourth paper where we are offered an insight into the minds of a freedom fighter who reveals his understanding of the nature of our war of independence, the factors behind the rapid success of the freedom fighters and also talks about some of the possible future threats. He calls for national consensus and a realistic application of the lessons of the liberation war.

The next article is rather technical in nature dealing with the specialized topic of trade liberalization. The author says that many of the producers of basic commodities will lose out and the price of agricultural commodities will fall to uncompetative low levels. The author has not been able to establish credible and practical linkage in his deliberation between trade liberalization issues to the security scenario of Bangladesh in terms of the threat to the economy and trade regime of this country in the future.

The sixth article is also based on economic theme where the author deals with the growing relevance and importance of the WTO which the author describes as the third dimension of the World system based on the philosophy of free trade. The author cautions against the too rapid liberalization of the import regime in Bangladesh and offers valuable projections about the possible threats to the trade and economy security scene.

The seventh article focuses on a very critical part of the economic scene of Bangladesh analysing on the level of energy security in terms of the present and the future. The author has aptly diagnosed the causes of the power crisis but it is felt that it would have been better if he had discussed the future options and possible threats more thoroughly.

The next article deals with an altogether different topic but a very critical one. The author considers two interlined issues - political instability and its resultant security implications. The author has bifurcated his paper in two parts, dealing with the conceptual and empirical themes of his paper in separate discourses. The author has drawn an alarming conclusion about the future of politics and its security implications by pointing out that political instability has the possibility of becoming a source of multi-dimensional source of insecurity for Bangladesh in the days ahead. This type of warning is not to be taken lightly and should draw the attention of all concerned.

The next article deals with the proliferation of small arms and its linkages to societal insecurity, and concludes that extensive use of small arms is contributing to societal insecurity. In fact, this article bears out the inevitable result of what the author has pointed out about political instability and its resultant security implications in the preceding article.

The tenth article deals with the threat of poverty and examines the implications of marginalization in Bangladesh and its potential for instability. It discusses the processes and gives us useful insights and analyses. The author has also offered important advice about reducing the potentiality of political instability in Bangladesh.

The eleventh article deals with the critically important issues of resource management in the context of sustainability. The author discusses these issues while taking the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a case study, stressing on the need for a cooperative approach based on human ecology.

In the article on natural disasters, the author discusses how it is linked to national security. The author maintains that

proper monitoring of disasters and adequate well formulated plans for managing pre- and post- disaster situations are absolutely necessary. He also suggests certain measures to deal with the natural disasters that frequent our country. This is indeed an important facet of the overall security scenario of Bangladesh, one that demands attention now and in the future.

The next article happens to be very interesting one, if a little unconventional. The author focuses on the arsenic problem terming it as a crisis and linking it to the security concern of the people and the state. The author calls for the broadening of the term security by encompassing human security within its limits. Indeed this approach which happens to be part of the recent trend of thought that calls for rethinking of the entire gamut of the conventional thoughts regarding security and development offers us some interesting options which should be included as legitimate security concerns of the state and society.

The last or concluding article written by the editor himself happens to be a comprehensive one which perhaps could have been the initiating one of the book. The author probes the meanings of the term security and seems to have realized unlike the author of the introductory chapter that rethinking of the terms like security or development did not suddenly begin from the 1990s, but is rather a part of a continuous process. The author has correctly related reconceptualization with the levels of analysis in theory making. He maintains that the national interests of Bangladesh would be best served if its security policy and strategy could combine its own national components with selective elements of cooperative security arrangements involving the regional countries. But since many of the security problems of Bangladesh stem from regional, particularly its geo-political contexts, it would have been

better if the author had suggested some means of achieving this sort of understanding. However, the author deserves credit for salvaging the study of the term security from being an academic exercise, with little relevance to the prevailing and future security concerns of Bangladesh.

The book makes interesting reading for those interested in international relations and strategic studies. It will hopefully fill a vacuum that exists in the field of publication of international relations material. As a teacher I feel that the book can be a good reference for students and analysts of international studies and politics. The editor deserves to be thanked for contributing something that will help rethink security because as one of the authors of the book points out “conventional security approaches have changed not by choice but because they have become redundant.”

To conclude, I would like to add that unfortunately the book does not fulfill its promise as indicated by the title to deal with the future security scenario or threats. Almost all the articles remain confined in their analysis to the immediate past and the present. Finally, a word of appreciation to the editor and publisher for the very few printing errors in the book which has made enjoyable reading possible.

**Ashequa Irshad**  
Assistant Professor  
Dept. of International Relations  
Dhaka University, Dhaka.