The Need for Confidence Building Measures and Security Cooperation in South Asia

Mohammad Humayun Kabir

1. Introduction
South Asia is a conflict-ridden, and indeed a conflict-prone, region that is not particularly known for cooperation between and among its constituent states. It is a region where political and security factors, not economic considerations, generally tend to dominate the national thinking and policy. In other words, political and security discourse takes precedence over development debate in the region. Consequently, interstate and regional relations in South Asia have been characterized by suspicion and distrust, arms race, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, lack of sustained and substantive cooperation, divergence in security/strategic perceptions and policies and in foreign policy orientations.

Attempts at conflict resolution have been made, achieving security through the route of regional cooperation in socio-economic field has been tried, but peace, stability and development as well as regionalism in South Asia have
remained as elusive as ever. But given the proverbial backwardness in nearly all fields in South Asia, these are again the foremost strategic imperative domestically, bilaterally and regionally.

How do we in South Asia address this strategic imperative? Given the complexities and sensitivities in the issues involved, the approach towards improvement in bilateral and regional relationships can only be modest and incremental in nature. And this can be accomplished through a process of confidence building, which would first reduce tensions and build trust and then lead on to cooperation in various fields including the security realm. However, confidence building measures (CBMs) are often controversial mechanisms or instruments, given their conceptual confusion and their efficacy in real life situations.

The objective of this paper is to deal with the concept of CBMs and relate it to the conditions, and developmental and security needs in South Asia. It is argued here that there are compelling reasons for CBMs and security cooperation in South Asia, as such measures could contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution, socio-economic development, and peace and stability in the region.
Let us now deal with the concept of CBMs.

2. **Confidence Building Measures: Concept, Context and Utility**

Historically speaking, confidence building measures are not new as mechanisms or instruments for improving inter-state relations, but they are relatively new as a concept. The sporadic conceptualization, begun with the establishment of the ‘Hot Line’ between Washington and Moscow following the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, became commonplace with the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975. There have been nearly as many definitions of a CBM as there are scholars engaged in such a field of study. The sheer number of definitions, including those by Johan Jorgen Holst and Michael Krepon, simply defy universality of the concept, context and utility.

However, as it is understood simply and literally from the term, let us have a working definition of a CBM offered by Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. He defines it “as a bilateral or multilateral measure that builds confidence, arrests the undesirable drift towards open hostilities, reduces tensions and encourages the adversaries to make contact for negotiations without taxing too much the operative policy pursuits”.¹

Confidence building is often confused with confidence building measure. While the former is a process, goal and
purpose, the latter is a product, technique, method, means, mechanism or tool. The process may be issue-specific or area-specific, short-term or long-term. The process may include only narrow approach of building confidence or it may have loose construction approach including cooperation in economic and security realms. The whole confidence building spectrum may thus be delineated into three stages, such as conflict avoidance measures (CAMs), confidence building measures (CBMs), and confidence and security building measures (CSBMs). CBMs thus may lead not only to political confidence but to security enhancing measures as well.

Confidence building measures may have negative or positive premises. Negative premise means conflict management or conflict resolution, while positive premise implies not only absence of conflict but also post-conflict cooperation. Arms control is a CBM based on negative premise of arresting arms race. And all arms control measures are CBMs but all CBMs do not involve arms control.

CBMs may be of several categories: Transparency Measures, Communication Measures, Declaratory Measures, Early Warning or Notification Measures, and Consultation Measures. Illustration may not be given here, as these are self-explanatory.
These confidence building measures were applied in the context of Europe/West. Kanti Bajpai refers to three events or developments that facilitated the adoption of such measures there. These are: the Cuban Missile Crisis, strategic parity between the United States and the former Soviet Union, and détente between the two Cold War blocs. This process was mainly characterized by military confidence building measures, including arms control negotiations and agreements. Attempts have since been made to contextualize CBMs in settings away from Europe suiting their specific conditions and requirements.

CBMs in other parts of the world may have different premise and may include non-military aspects as well as cooperation in other fields including the security realm. Thus, a CBM may be defined as a bilateral or multilateral instrument that may be used for building trust, effecting conflict resolution and enhancing mutual cooperation and security. CBMs as a concept must have two attributes: analytical value and political or market value. The market value of CBMs may emanate from their result-orientedness. After all, the utility of a concept depends on its precision, purpose and implementability in a given set of conditions. Confidence building measures are, therefore, issue specific, situation specific and region specific.
Let us now turn to the region of South Asia.

3. The Need for CBMs and Security Cooperation in South Asia

The imperatives for confidence building measures and security cooperation in South Asia are premised on both negative and positive factors. These are conditioned by the existing conflict scenario, security situation, and need to evolve cooperative relations (both political and economic) in the region. The relevant values to be promoted here are democratic peace, stability and development.

As mentioned earlier, South Asia is a conflict-ridden region. Such a scenario is attributable to (1) structural, (2) policy-induced, and (3) issue specific factors. I have dealt with this elsewhere in greater details.³

Structural factors in South Asia relate to its physical and security-political Indo-centricity, the disparity in size and power favouring India, and the Indo-centric cross-border religious and ethnic overlap and affinity. All this tends to affect the inter-state and regional relationships, at times creating conflicts and causing security concerns.

The security dilemma in South Asia is that while India considers the entire region within its security perimeter, its neighbours often tend to think that India is a major source of
their insecurity. This, of course, has definitive policy implications impacting in turn on the realities on ground.

Conflict issues in South Asia are seen at three levels: domestic, bilateral and regional. The examples of domestic security issues or conflicts are the ethnic or tribal insurgencies in India and Sri Lanka. It is to 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 bilateral security issues are: the Kashmir conflict, Indo-Bangladesh common resources management and border problems, Indo-Nepal border and trade conflict, Bhutan-Nepal conflict over refugees, Bangladesh-Myanmar problem over Rohingya refugees, etc. Some of the conflicts or security issues raised above are both traditional and non-traditional in terms of the nature and sources of threat.

Regional security environment in South Asia has been complicated with its nuclearization by India and Pakistan in 1998. While some scholars have attempted to argue that the advent of nuclear weapons has stabilized the security situation in the region, particularly between India and Pakistan, there prevails an equally convincing view that nuclear proliferation has enhanced the possibility of local or limited conventional war between the two regional rivals.
Nuclearization has undeniably vitiated the regional security environment. It has irrevocably altered the security situation and ethos in the region. Nuclear catastrophe could take place due to accident or mistake, or even by unauthorized use. There is also the danger of nuclear waste mismanagement as well as nuclear fall out. And above all, it is a horrifying thought that a compact and densely populated region like South Asia could experience a nuclear winter in the event of an Indo-Pak nuclear exchange, accidental or otherwise. And, indeed, the Indo-Pakistan nuclear arms race is not merely a bilateral issue, it is also a regional and even a global security issue.

The way forward is confidence building, eventuating in security cooperation between and among all South Asian countries, more so between India and Pakistan.

More than a billion impoverished people of South Asia had pinned their hopes on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for pulling them out of the abyss of backwardness and poverty. Even this institutional framework seems to have failed them, as this regional organization has now become virtually effete. SAARC needs to be reinvigorated in order to fulfill its socio-economic objectives under its Charter and to contribute to security of its member states under an amended Charter. This, of
course, cannot be done with a single stroke of a pen but a process of confidence building has to be set in motion that would eventually lead to that goal. The shared desire for peace, stability, security and development ought to be fulfilled by required political commitment and due efforts.

However, there are challenges to the concept of CBMs and its usefulness in the South Asian context. Maqsoodul Hasan Nuri highlights some of them. CBMs are considered a foreign concept and, as such, not suitable to the conditions and requirements of South Asia. Those are also considered merely a 'cosmetic exercise', not relevant to the core or major issues. South Asian problems are deemed more complex, CBMs being unable to do anything about those. CBMs may lead to complacency, as they de-escalate conflicts but freeze the status quo. However, these criticisms would lose their validity if examined through the prism of the imperatives for CBMs and security cooperation in South Asia discussed on the preceding pages.

4. **Concluding Remarks**

Confidence building measures need to be broadly defined in the South Asian context, as development priorities here are different and politico-security problems are more intertwined, complex and endemic. The key question this paper attempted to address was: What is the need or imperative for CBMs and security cooperation in South Asia?
In response to the major query, it has been argued in the paper that CBMs, creatively employed, could arrest the strategic drift and ameliorate the socio-economic situation, conflict and political scenario, and security environment in South Asia.

Endnotes

1. Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "CBMs and South Asia", in Dipankar Banerjee (ed.), Confidence Building Measures in South Asia, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, 1999, p. 29.

