CBMs and Security Cooperation in South Asia: Nepal's Security Concerns

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Introduction
There can only be lack of fulfillment when we see the progress of our own regional cooperation efforts in the last two decades. Not only the official but equally the track II approach has yielded results far from satisfactory. Four years ago, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) member countries agreed to address regional security in the realm of military and non-military issues, which is one essential constituent that we in South Asia must at least aim for in the years ahead. South Asia can hardly boast of any informal mechanism by which political and security issues can be discussed by academics, journalists, businesspersons, senior ex-army officials and other prominent members of the track II approach.

There exist, however, a small number of institutions that have been providing a forum for South Asian professionals to mutually and collectively examine the major issues pertaining to security, regional stability, CBMs and thereby facilitate alternative thinking and promote collective consideration of
workable options. The Colombo-based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), the Dhaka-based Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and a host of other think tanks in India and Pakistan must be facilitated and encouraged. But even these institutions lack coordination and have yet to evolve a mode of exchange and linkages among themselves. On the whole, models from other regions do show us that a breakthrough for initiating CBMs and security cooperation in South Asia can only get nearer when there is a basic agreement that building military prowess is not the answer to existing problems and only through a cooperative mindset can there be a breakthrough of the ongoing impasse.

1. **South Asia: A Question of Political Will**

When we come to our region, only the reverse is true. Hostility and antagonism between India and Pakistan - the two largest countries in the region - has been the central problem of inter-state relations since the British left in 1947 and Jammu and Kashmir has been the core issue between them. Kashmir is "an unfinished agenda of partition" and the "core issue", in one view, while it is subjected to an "unvacated aggression" and "continuous externally-sponsored terrorism", according to another. There is no middle ground. Both are fanatically convinced that they and they alone are entirely right and
determined to prove it to the last Kashmiri. Heavy artillery duels, close quarter fighting across the Line of Control, routine terrorist attacks and strong countermeasures continue to be the daily chore". It has been the core issue in two of the three wars fought between India and Pakistan since 1947. The Simla agreement of 1972 did provide the two the modus vivendi on the Kashmir question, Nevertheless, the dreadful arms race continued without restraint and finally turned nuclear in 1998, further poisoning the political and strategic environment in the sub-continent. Introduction of the nuclear factor has, to analyze from a different angle, clicked a sharper focus on the need to erase tension before a horrifying calamity takes place.

The Lahore Declaration, signed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in February 1999 incorporating both military and non-military CBMs, was a landmark in the long history of mistrust, suspicion and one-upmanship. That this Declaration, along with the MOU signed by the Foreign Secretaries of the two countries, was a significant move in the right direction is evident by the provisions such as: 1) a commitment to take immediate steps for reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons and discuss concepts and doctrines with a view to elaborating measures to
confidence building in the nuclear and conventional fields, aimed at prevention of conflict, 2) bilateral consultations on security concepts, and nuclear doctrines, with a view to developing measures for confidence building in the nuclear and conventional fields, aimed at avoidance of conflict, 3) undertake a review of the existing communication with a view to upgrading and improving these links, and to provide for tail safe and secure communications etc. Furthermore, the two countries agreed to intensify efforts to resolve all issues including the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. The MOU commits the two sides to "periodically review the implementation of existing CBMs and, where necessary, set up appropriate consultative mechanisms to monitor and ensure effective implementation of these CBMs."

Unfortunately, the Declaration has since been stocked up inside the foreign offices of the two countries due to the military, political and diplomatic fall out of the Kargil conflict. Before the Agra Summit in early 2001, there was much euphoria in the entire South Asian region that expected Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf to produce results in the interest of peace, stability and a better future for the one-fifth of the world's population living in destitute and poverty. There was a widespread 'hope against hope' that somehow the romance of the Taj Mahal would fascinate the
two leaders, although both Vajpayee and Musharraf indicated before the start of the Summit that there was no basic change in their negotiating positions on Kashmir. Vajpayee claimed "Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and the issue of Pakistan occupied Kashmir has to be on the agenda of the Summit". Musharraf stated on the contrary, "resolving the future status of Kashmir is an unfinished task of the partition". The conclusion was an anti-climax as the Summit failed to encourage Indians and Pakistanis to think in new ways.

Although, both have much to gain from a normal relationship and lose from the persisting hostility, there does not appear to be any serious cost-benefit analysis and awareness about the appalling economic consequences of continued militarization, obstructing the very process of economic development of their respective countries. What is even more lamentable is that because of this ceaseless hostility between India and Pakistan, regional cooperation efforts too have been greatly undermined.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), launched 16 years ago amidst great hopes and with a dream for a bright future of peace and stability through mutual understanding, cooperation and good neighborly relations, has only been able to make little progress. South
Asia, which presents a varied, multi-faceted fabric of inter-ethnic, religious, disparate language groups, tribes and races, should have exerted more fervently to develop "a distinct and dynamic regional identity in a future where regions are asserting their rightful place the world over. The bond will pull together into attaining our shared destiny."

Lots have been written and deliberated on why SAARC has not succeeded in intensifying cooperation under its aegis and areas where it could have done better. But one aspect that analysts tend to miss is the achievement of the organization in generating, albeit gradually, a South Asian consciousness among the people so vital for creating an order embedded in mutual respect, trust, harmony and shared benefits. People to people contacts have been increasing but not to the desired extent. Moreover, South Asia is not sufficiently studied in our universities to the level of grooming our future diplomats, leaders and academics with a proper South Asian orientation. SAF games attract more people, stitch more citizens of individual countries into the regional necklace and generate much more excitement than the SAARC summits, hence the latter needing political, administrative and other support on a continuous basis. Promoting cooperation in areas such as health, science, weather forecast, environment, tourism, arts and sports is
ultimately forcing ripples on stagnant minds and building pressure on the leaders and bureaucrats.

Although the SAARC Charter prevents contentious bilateral issues to be raised in its forums, the retreat part of each SAARC Summit does provide an opportunity to discuss informally the crucial cruxes that generally hinder the very process of the regional grouping. There has been a thinking in perpetually institutionalizing the retreat part of the Summit because according to many, it is the most crucial and practically the most watched not only by the people of the region but also by the international media. In itself, it could serve as an apt CBM mechanism on the track I level in descending the curtains of misperceptions. If British Prime Minister Tony Blair could visit Delhi, Islamabad, Tehran and Riyadh recently without any fanfare, pomp and ceremony and without the issuance of joint communiqué why can't our leaders go in for exchange working visits when distance between one South Asian capital to the farthest is not more than 2 to 3 hours flight? They need to be aware of each other's chemistry, which alone would be a step forward in warming the unpredictable political situation in South Asia.

In its entirety, SAARC has been focusing and taking steps in addressing common concerns like environment,
energy, drug trafficking etc. The SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, Implementation of the Integrated Programs of Action, Establishment of a South Asian Food Security Reserve are examples of cooperation intended to mitigate the overriding political and security concerns of the region. The Special SAARC Travel Document has exempted Supreme Court Judges, Members of Parliaments, Heads of National Academic Institutions, their spouses and children. Introduction of visa exemption to all South Asians while traveling inside their region can also be done. While initiating this, starting off visa exemption between Nepal-Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka-Nepal, Nepal-Maldives and other dyads enjoying warm and hassle-free relationships would substantially reduce anxieties and apprehensions. The same holds true for the establishment of a regional disaster management force.

There is no doubt that the SAARC process needs to be sustained because it can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap created by mutual mistrust, the shortcomings of which need to be addressed at the political level. Non-military CBMs are far easier to negotiate and, in a region like South Asia labeled as "the most dangerous place in the world", putting military CBMs first could only result in further wasting valuable time. Track II initiatives have not been appropriately exercised, hence have generated cynicism on whether they really work. But it must be
recalled that it were the people of the track II that kept SAARC alive during the phases when the summits could not be held. It takes time, honesty and coordinated efforts of cross border civil societies towards shaping a more cooperative frame of mind.

2. Indo-Nepal Relations: Stipulation of Changed Mindsets

India is the only country sharing borders with the rest of the six countries of SAARC. Her dealing with each of these countries is more decisive and psychologically more effective than relationships worked at by the countries with each other minus India. Seamed by shared history, religion and common culture, Indo-Nepal relations retain yet another unique characteristic - an open border. As between two very close neighbors, India and Nepal too face occasional disputes ranging from border and water management to trade and transit, from security of Nepal from the vice of incessant migration from U.P and Bihar to the safety of India from periodic sneaking in of terrorists via Nepalese territory. To look at it from a positive point of view, more than confidence building mechanisms, both countries should work at creation of an outline consistent with the perils and possibilities of the new era.

Both Nepal and India keep on flipping back to the pages of history whenever they talk about Indo-Nepal relations. They
tend to recall with devotion the nurturing the relations received from towering personalities like Late Jawaharlal Nehru, Late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Late B.P Koirala and Late Kings Mahendra and Birendra. Looking back to the glorious past of 50 years, the first notable feature has been the impact of this influence on the attitudes, approaches and obstacles in their bilateral relationship. This high moral ground, sometimes distant from realpolitick, did create problems because not always does the rhetoric of 'sharing a great cultural past and a common heritage' explain the urgent cruxes and crucial problems.

Clearly, retrospection is essential not only because of the changing global scenario obtained by the collapse of the Soviet Union but because of the danger of moving on into the 21st century with the hangovers and accumulated experiences of the past. Why should the two countries remain prisoners of the past while mindsets in both the countries have changed to a remarkable degree? A new generation has emerged and they demand a new meaning, purpose and direction to the relationship and justification to the deeds and decisions of their political masters. They are no longer inspired by the fact that Nehru supported the Nepalese to oust the Ranas in 1950 or by the passionate solidarity the Nepalese politicians showed to end the British rule in India. The grandfathers of today's generation of Nepal may have obeyed Mahatma Gandhi to cram inside Indian prisons and the fathers might have studied
in Banaras developing close intimacy with late Jay Prakash Narayan but the new Internet generation with their free spirit and education in Europe and America are no longer emotional about these ties of warm friendship. Therefore, the Indo-Nepal relationship today stands at a crossroads, searching for a new purpose and a new goal. It requires courage, steadfastness and vision.

The purpose here is not just to energize the existing characteristics but also to make a decisive turning point at which instant nitty-gritty will no longer pester the overwhelming prospects brought about by the new developments in economic and technological fields. Though emphasis must be placed on clearing off the cobwebs of the past, one is tempted on many occasions to compare Indo-Nepal relations with traffic lights. No sooner the green light appears and a smooth flow of visits and joint action takes place, already the orange light cautions us on the approaching roadblock. In fact, red lights have been more common and will continue to halt the process of accords and agreements if there is the same old mindset navigating the future journey.

Nevertheless, despite odds like the unwanted Hritik Roshan episode, the last 5 years have seen a steady advancement in consolidating and de-politicizing the friendship
between India and Nepal. All would agree that as both India and Nepal move towards a liberalized economy, it is high time that the two began focusing on trade, harness the vast water resources potential, collectively augment tourism prospects and bring the private sector on the forefront. India is a big market of energy and Nepal has a huge potential for energy. Obviously, both countries will gain collectively if they can overcome the assumptions of the past and start focusing on the economic dimension of their relationship. The emphasis therefore should be on the change in perception. There is also a need for a broader understanding at the highest level and to keep the confidence built up at all levels and if this is achieved, accounts of narcotics, smuggling, counterfeit currency and even terrorism will be the tales of a by-gone era. The external world at large is fast changing and it will be unrealistic to operate on assumptions of the past two or three decades. Both India and Nepal ought to realize and comprehend this fact and must boost up their close and strong ties to augment and supplement regional cooperation efforts.

3. Relations with Bhutan: Beyond the Refugee Issue

In the early 1990s, the Royal Bhutanese Government adopted a discriminatory policy and began expelling thousands of citizens of Nepalese origin out of its territory. Those Bhutanese, though of Nepalese origin, had been living in Bhutan for generations. Moreover, most of them owned
houses, land and other property in Bhutan that was brusquely confiscated by the Bhutanese authorities. This ethnic cleansing has led to one of the worst humanitarian tragedies in the history of South Asia. Eleven rounds of ministerial level talks along with a number of diplomatic exercises have until now failed to repatriate the refugees. The one hundred thousand innocent people have still been living in makeshift huts without proper conditions of living for the last one decade in eastern Nepal. Social tension arising from unemployment and prostitution, scuffles between refugees and non-refugees, environmental degradation in the neighbourhood, damage to the tranquil atmosphere in Jhapa and Morang districts have created multi-faceted problems for Nepal. The recent assassination of R.K Budhathoki, President of Bhutan Peoples' Party in Jhapa, further muddled up the already grimy and uncertain scenario. Nevertheless, it has been a consistent Nepalese stand that the refugees are bonafide citizens of Bhutan and should be allowed to return to their motherland. A joint verification exercise has been going on. However, “the pace of the process is too slow, the present speed in fact could even take ten or more years to complete the verification of all the refugees.”

The Kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan, both landlocked and belonging to the same geographical region, do not however share a border. India on its part has, by choosing to keep itself out of this issue, tacitly aided Bhutan government's
efforts to buy time and wait for the refugees to permanently mingle with the larger Nepalese society. In fact, India's dependence on Bhutan has increased with the latter determined to utilize its water resources for exporting power to the neighboring Indian states. With an installed electricity generating capacity of around 3530 MW, of which 97 percent is hydroelectric, the completion of the construction of the Tala hydropower plant by 2003 will furthermore enable Bhutan to export surplus power to India. It is in the interest of Bhutan to safely land this issue once and for all so that it can fully concentrate on its developmental efforts, which could even make it the most prosperous country in South Asia by 2010.

Lok Raj Baral, former Royal Nepalese Ambassador to India and Bhutan has suggested Personal CBMs (to and fro visits of the monarchs and Prime Ministers of Bhutan and Nepal), Information CBMs, Regime CBMs, Declaratory CBMs, Economic CBMs and Domestic CBMs to solve the refugee entangle and pursue a broad-based relationship with Bhutan. The two kingdoms should strive towards better understanding and cooperation in the days ahead and, looking from a longer-term perspective, the two neighbors have no other irritants except concern about the one hundred thousand refugees.

Nepal's security concerns emanate not only from several disputes with India and Bhutan. The rise of Muslim population
in the Terai, symptom of national disintegration with the rise of various ethnic and religious groups and the vicious Maoist insurgency, now officially named "terrorism" by His Majesty's government of Nepal, are some other problems that have a direct bearing on the stability of Nepal. Environmental degradation, malgovernance, migration, religious fundamentalism, etc are additional worries that need to be addressed in cooperation with other countries.

4. Conclusion

The Human Development Report of 1997 libels our region by stating, "South Asia is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, the least gender-sensitive -indeed, the most deprived region in the world. Yet it continues to make more investment in arms than in the education and health of its people." True to its smearing, the full prospects for partnership amongst the nations of South Asia still remain uncultivated basically due to overriding suspicion, mistrust and misgivings among the states with respect to each other. However, the European, South East Asian and other models have shown us that under the very same circumstances, there can still be breakthroughs in changing the exasperating status quo. Indo-Nepal and Nepal-Bhutan relations do not disrupt in any manner regional cooperation efforts in South Asia. But, the same cannot be
stated with regard to India and Pakistan. That is why there is a need now like never before to synchronize all our efforts and apply all available methods to normalize Indo-Pakistan relations to the level and extent of facilitating the SAARC process in its entirety.

The fast vanishing cushion of time to sort out their dreary bilateral problems must at the same time be mulled over by all the South Asian governments in view of formation of coordination committees, such as the CCOMPOSA, created in order to coordinate the Maoist rebellious activities in the region. It is high time that they constructively cooperate with each other considering how the dissonance in security perceptions transforms into arms build-up, evolves into full-fledged conflicts, raises defense expenditures and sends serious repercussions to their ailing economies.

Notes


See website [www.aseansec.org](http://www.aseansec.org)

Refer CSCAP website [www.cscao.org/revised.htm](http://www.cscao.org/revised.htm)

Michael Moodie, See OSCE website [www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)

Dipankar Banerjee (ed.), *Introduction: "CBMs In South Asia: Potential and Possibilities"*, (RCSS, Colombo 2000).


Nishchal Nath Pandey, 'Reaffirming Indo-Nepal Relations' paper presented at a seminar organized jointly by the Editors Guild of India and the Press Institute of India at Gurgaon, India from (March 30-31, 2000).


Lok Raj Baral, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Quest for New Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)," "Nepal's Foreign Policy: Issues and Options", (Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1999.)