A. K. M. Abdus Sabur

INTRODUCTION

The demise of Cold War politics has led to a shift of security discourse from traditional state-centric and military security to non-traditional and non-military sources of insecurity. Painful democratisation processes in developing regions like South Asia are often accompanied by intolerance, lack of continuity, rise of disruptive social forces and politicisation of religion leading to sectarian and communal feuds and consequential violence. Borders have become more porous and, in the process, the dichotomy between inter-state and internal security has largely got blurred. However, the impact of domestic political, religious and social processes on regional security is yet to be adequately addressed and analysed. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in South Asia.

Over the recent years, South Asian countries have been undergoing difficult, at times, even painful processes of socio-economic and politico-cultural development. The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era of democratisation in the region, as in many parts of the world. However, the process of democratisation in Nepal and Pakistan is facing severe tests. Sri Lanka is undergoing a painful process of nation-building that impinges upon its democracy. Indian democracy is faced
with multiple challenges. Institutionalisation of democracy in Bangladesh as well is undergoing difficult processes.

One of the significant characteristic features of the ongoing political processes in South Asia is the prevalence of a high degree of intolerance and social violence. Similarly, the process of governance is characterised by corruption and lack of accountability. Amidst these, religious and cultural identities are increasingly being instrumentalised for the purpose of mobilisation along parochial lines to the extent of creating severe divisions within the society and polity, and, in cases, generating violent intra-state conflicts. Thus, most of the regional countries have been torn, in varying degrees, by intra-state conflicts along ethnic, linguistic, religious and sectarian lines with cross-border reverberations. While the foreground of security and strategic thinking is being preoccupied with high stake politics of nuclearisation and global war on terrorism, the roots and vitality of South Asian states are being corroded by the internal political and social processes impacting on internal and inter-state security.

Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in collaboration with the German Embassy in Dhaka organised a Regional Conference on POLITICS AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA: SALIENCE OF RELIGION AND CULTURE during October 8-10, 2002.

The Conference has been aimed at providing a forum for deliberation on the Politics and Security in South Asia with a focus on the religious and cultural dimensions. Suggested approach has been a focus on the region as a whole but individual presentations also reflected country perspectives. Attempts have also been made to
INTRODUCTION

explore and synthesise the inter-linkage among the issues as well as
the experiences at the domestic and regional levels.

The Conference has met with keen interest on the part of a wide
range of representatives from academia, media and concerned
professionals from South Asia and beyond. The participants in the
Conference included twenty very distinguished foreign participants
from all the SAARC countries barring Bhutan as well as from
Germany and the US. Throughout the conference, policy makers,
various government officials, representatives from academia, media,
civil society, NGOs as well as diplomatic corps and international
agencies in Dhaka have contributed significantly to its academic
content.

It is the profound success of the Conference in terms of
generating interest among academia, media, and professional and
policymaking circles that has encouraged BIISS to publish its
proceedings in a book form entitled POLITICS AND SECURITY
IN SOUTH ASIA: SALIENCE OF RELIGION AND
CULTURE. The articles included in the book are the revised
versions of papers presented in the Conference.

The book is divided into six thematic Chapters and contains a
total number of nineteen articles. Chapter I entitled Domestic
Political Dynamics in South Asia: Inter-state Relations and
Security contains four articles. The chapter deals with turbulent
political processes in multi-cultural South Asian societies,
consequential domestic conflicts and their cross-border
reverberations. Bertram Bastiampillai and Citha D. Maass dealt with
the issues more in a general framework. Both the authors, Bertram
Bastiampillai in particular, highlights the failure of South Asian elites to deal with the process of nation-building, particularly institutionalisation of democracy and a culture of tolerance. While dealing with the multifarious conflicts generated in the process of nation-building and their cross-border reverberations, both the authors, Citha D. Maass in more specific terms, suggested the paramount role of domestic actors as the conflicts are generated in the process of domestic dynamics. Asghar Ali Engineer and A. K. M. Abdus Sabur dealt with two specific issues. Asghar Ali Engineer, while dealing with the rights of minorities in India emphasised on the dichotomy between the rights guaranteed to the minorities by Indian constitution and the tragic plight of minorities, particularly the Muslims. He specifically depicted the plight of Muslim community starting from discrimination in terms of education, job and income to anti-Muslim riots. In a rather departure from other articles that dealt mostly with conflict, A. K. M. Abdus Sabur dealt with post-conflict peace-building with a focus on ethnic conflicts. A. K. M. Abdus Sabur, while arguing that post conflict peace-building is a highly difficult undertaking, emphasised that there is also a positive side. The process of peace-building, like that of conflict, at a certain stage of its development, creates necessary material as well as emotional-psychological foundation for its sustenance and generates a dynamism of its own, which becomes difficult to reverse. Viewed in this light, the process of peace-building is also an opportunity to create necessary material as well as emotional-psychological foundation for sustainable peace.

Chapter II entitled Politicisation of Religion in South Asia: The Security and Political Dimensions contains four articles. The
chapter deals with the ongoing process of the politicisation of religion in South Asia, its underlying reasons, nature and dynamics as well as the politico-security implications. All the authors have, in one way or the other, agreed, as Mohammad Hamid Ansari emphasised, that religions go beyond faith and worship in terms of individual conduct and cover a wide range of acts and actions considered as righteous and having an impact on society. Similarly, Ross Masood Husain analysed how religion has always played a powerful and profound role in politics in South Asia. While analysing from different perspectives, the authors underscored that the way religion is being politicised in South Asia is generating conflicts, including violent ones, notwithstanding the positive potentials of religion. Hence, they have emphasised the need for de-politicisation of religion. In this regard, Mohan P. Lohani put specific emphasis on the role of civil society. Unlike other authors, Mohammad Hamid Ansari concluded his article with a rather pessimistic note: it is better to recognise that we are in darkness than to pretend that we can see the light.

Chapter III entitled Inter-Cultural Dialogue contains three articles. The chapter deals with the cultural conflict and the role of dialogue among divergent cultures for establishing mutual understanding and peaceful relations. Gunter Mulack and M. Shamsher Ali dealt with so much talked about conflict, apparent or real, between the Western and Islamic cultures. While M. Shamsher Ali treated the West as a single cultural entity, Gunter Mulack emphasised on the difference between the American and the European perceptions with regard to dealing with conflicts. He explained that the United States is less patient with diplomacy and
tend to see the world divided between good and evil, between friends and enemies while Europe visualises a more complex picture and believe in trans-national negotiations and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Both the authors emphasised that the globalised world of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is facing many challenges and problems, which can only be resolved together in a non-violent way through dialogue. Ataur Rahman explored the role of leadership in dialogue among cultures and civilizations highlighting the context of South Asia with a focus on four issues. First, the current debates and discourse on the ‘clash of civilization’ and ‘cultural reconfigurations’ of world politics are examined. Second, the history of interaction among cultures, particularly in Asian and European context, is reviewed. Third, the roots of conflict and cooperation based particularly on cultural identities of ethnicity, religion and language are examined. In this regard, the crucial importance of political leadership is evaluated especially in the context of South Asia.

Chapter IV entitled The Media and Security in South Asia contains three articles. The chapter deals with the role of media, the pattern of regional coverage within South Asian, its impact on security and highlights the need for media co-operation for building confidence among the regional countries. Enayetullah Khan deals with the status and the role of media in the contemporary global context. The article reflects the author’s critical views on the current international system that is being dominated and manipulated by a single global power and a few of its allies. In the circumstances, the international media has virtually become an instrument in their hands and serves their interests in a very distorted manner. As he envisages, the proper functioning of media, both international and national, is
possible only if a new peaceful order based on good governance and harmonious international relations takes shape. Thomas J. Mathew deals with the current trends in South Asian media that is characterised by extremely limited mutual coverage and that too is very negative in nature. The phenomenon is explained mainly by the media’s vulnerability to political and security related issues in the region, particularly in view of the perennial animosity between India and Pakistan and consequential media warfare between the two. All these are distorting the facts about the true nature of issues confronting the region and public opinion about them strengthening the prevailing climate of suspicion and hostility. Any change in the situation, as the author visualises, does not look to be anywhere on the horizon. While quite aware of the difficulties and challenges as depicted by Thomas J. Mathew, Jamshed Ayaz Khan is more optimistic about the potential of media to serve as a vehicle of confidence building in the region. This, however, would not be an easy undertaking. Therefore, the author suggests a host of media interventions so as to prepare the media to play its role in building mutual confidence among the regional countries.

Chapter V entitled Role of Civil Society in Security and Confidence Building in South Asia contains three articles. The chapter deals with the role of civil society in security and confidence building in South Asia in some of its ramifications. Mohammad Humayun Kabir emphasises the need for exploring the role of civil society in the area of cooperation and security building in South Asia, as most of the attempts made at the official and non-official levels for confidence building ended in failure. Thus, he explores various pathways to peace, stability, development, cooperation and
security in South Asia focusing on the role of civil society in improving the current situation in the region. Moonis Ahmar explored the role of civil society in creating conditions for linking official Track I and non-official Track II initiative in confidence building. He emphasises that civil society groups like political parties, workers, students, journalists, artists, and other segments of the society can play an assertive role if the state structure is democratic in nature and is amenable to the voice of the people. Syed Ashraf Ali, while dealing with women’s rights in Islam, emphasised that Islam has been the first religion to confer legal status of honour and responsibility upon women making them *Sui Juris*, ensuring their economic independence and providing them opportunities in every sphere of human activity and in every domain of thought, guaranteeing their rights in the properties of the deceased parents, the husband and the children. In the case of marriage and divorce also, a Muslim woman enjoys rights and privileges, which have never been granted to the women by any other religion.

Chapter VI entitled Governance and Accountability: Security Challenges and Vulnerabilities contains three articles. The chapter deals with a number of specific issues under the theme like, corruption, transparency, rule of law and human security. Dushyantha Mendis analysed the entire spectrum of governance in the light of three issues, corruption, accountability and transparency. The author emphasised that since corruption is deeply entrenched in South Asian societies mostly as a result of political factors, it can only be eradicated once the political factors giving rise to it are eliminated. However, he admits that this is a long and painful process, which could come only with the progressive development of
INTRODUCTION

civil society and a process of economic growth, which would strengthen civil society institutions. While both, Hans-Joachim Heintze and Ashutosh Misra, dealt with human security, their perspectives have differed significantly. Hans-Joachim Heintze concentrated his focus on the legal system, rule of law and human rights while dealing with human security. Ashutosh Misra, on the other hand, focused more on the material and cultural (education) aspects of human rights in the context of India highlighting the problems of synthesising the government and non-governmental efforts to achieve optimal results.

Chapter VII, the final one, contains the Summary of the Proceedings of the Conference. Along with the papers, the chapter summarises the discussions, comments and questions by the participants as well as remarks by the Session Chairs.

The central motive behind organising the Conference and publishing its proceedings in a book form has been to initiate candid discussions on the subject in an academic spirit. The subject of our book and a host of issues related to it are quite complex. Most of the topics remain relatively less explored, despite their urgency. Yet, a host of divergent or even contradictory perspectives persist on a number of issues that the book dealt with. We have assembled a host of experts from a variety of academic disciplines, professional background and socio-political orientation. Our main purpose has been to let the diverse ideas come into creative interactions so that the issues could be analysed from different perspectives. If the book generates some new interests among the scholars and practitioners, and invigorates their academic pursuit on the subject, we would consider our efforts a meaningful exercise.
I would like to thank the authors of the articles included in this volume and all who participated in the Conference for their valuable contribution. I am particularly thankful to Ambassador Mufleh R. Osmany, Chairman, Board of Governors, BIIS, and Major General Md. Abdul Mubeen, ndc, psc, Director General, BIIS for their guidance. I also express my deepest gratitude to H. E. Mr. Dietrich Andreas, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Bangladesh, and his staff for their generous support in organising the Conference and publishing the book. My special thanks are due to the Session Chairs and rapporteurs. Last, but the most, I would like to put on record my deepest gratitude to H. E. Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MP, Honourable Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and H. E. Mr. Reaz Rahman, Honourable Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh for gracing the Conference as the Chief Guests in the Inaugural and Concluding Sessions respectively, and H. E. Ambassador Dr. Gunter Mulack, Commissioner for the Dialogue of Civilisations, German Foreign Office, for gracing the Conference as Special Guest in the Inaugural Session.