CHAPTER IV

THE MEDIA AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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MEDIA AND SECURITY

The lexicon of politics, international relations and social sciences has acquired an ever-newer array of entries with an ever-widening range of meanings and usages. In the current context, the word security extends beyond the conventional connotation as associated with territorial integrity of the state or the threats coming both from within and outside. It now applies to non-strategic realms of human needs and aspirations, natural resources and the environment in a vast globalising world of the rich and the poor alike.

In the post-Cold War deconstruction of half-a-century of world order that was sought to be sustained through the multilateral dynamic of the United Nations in a relative balance of peace despite the upheavals of decolonisation and a touch-and-go superpower contest for hegemony and control, the security paradigm, in the conventional sense, has drastically shifted in favour of certain power(s). The emergence of a single superpower after the fall of the Soviet Union has also thrown up newer doctrines like the Project
New American Century in a one-way-street globalisation of the world economy.

The most unforgiving among them is the doctrine of unilateralism of testing a techno-war to sharp and swift victory, somewhat tempered though by the moral compunctions of the world over the 9-11 tragedy when it came to the war on terror in Afghanistan. The security sensitivities of the sole superpower, with the United Kingdom and Spain in tow, have become so obsessive and the pace of events so accelerated that 9-11 already seems a long time ago. Besides, what has been happening in Palestine, Saddam after Osama, two manifestations of a single malignancy, must now go in a pre-emptive strike and that too over the head of the United Nations Security Council. The dangers inherent in the doctrine and in such unilateral actions threaten global security in terms of peace and also human security of the affected people becoming the helpless fodders to carpet bombing from the auto-piloted bombers in the safe and secure distance of the sky.

The war on Afghanistan in the wake of the 9-11 tragedy was of a different order and had the moral sanction of world opinion to some extent. But the gathering storm over Iraq grievously portending another techno-war in the gulf region is altogether of a different order. It seeks to redefine security and invent justification in weapons of mass destruction that has eluded the inspectors so far. The doctrine of regime change adds another definitive twist to it.

The Bangladesh media has been rather lukewarm on the security issues emanating from the Afghan war. If the front or the op-ed pages of the leading newspapers in Bangladesh are scanned, the
focus on the post-Afghanistan cataract of events in Palestine and Iraq is of an indifferent nature. Those hardly find front-page coverage, although the western print and electronic media are astir with the developments and the prognoses.

The American way of defining terror is also being stretched to an absurd limit by some powers to suit their security perceptions or designs, as the case may be in the region and elsewhere. In this, the media in some metropolises in the South Asia region is adding fuel to the fire of jingoism among the ordinary masses whose security itself is threatened by any possible or simulated outbreak of conflicts. Whereas the military, including that of Bangladesh, is now in the reverse-role of peacekeeping here and there, these metropolises are bent on going back to the old classics of war.

Since the two world wars, particularly the second, a set of multilateral institutions has been painstakingly constructed to promote trade, open economies and establish democratic governance. Those institutions, particularly the UN were increasingly seen to be addressing the human security issues, coupled with the economic development of the countries of the South and also in restoring peace in the Balkans and parts of Africa, overseeing democratic transition as in Cambodia and supporting poverty reduction and the human rights issues in different parts of the world.

Before the 9-11 and the brewing Iraq crisis, the media would critically examine, comment on and report the diverse security issues involving the humankind and nature, and informing the readers and the audience of the facts and events bearing on the issues. But 9-11 and what is painted as radical Islam, thanks to the primitive rule of
the Talibans and Messianic power of Osama, have imparted it a subjectivism depending on which side of the terror-divide it would find itself. This hurt media objectivity in projecting the facts on the ground and the events that followed. The media was, as if, soldiering alongside the troops, welcoming wars and lionising victories of the ‘good’ over the ‘evil’. The media also became oblivious that the preemptive strike or the gory romance of a new empire did not just happen overnight.

The unilateralist US worldview surfaced way back in 1992 when a leakage of some excerpts from a Pentagon paper to the New York Times foretold a world in which US military intervention would come to be seen ‘as a constant fixture’ of the geopolitical landscape. The 9-11 tragedy has only hastened the process and helped empower the neo-cons undermining the more traditional policy pursuing the two grand strategies of (a) a realistic policy organised around containment and deterrence, and maintaining a balance of power and (b) a more liberal, internationalist policy based on constructing a set of multilateral institutions to promote free trade, open economies and democratic values. The NYT commentary said that while various past US administrations have emphasised one strategy over the other, none since the Second World War had abandoned both at the same time. The “draft policy guidance” (DPG) that created an uproar in the US was toned down at the insistence of the then National Security Adviser Bent Scowcroft and the Secretary of State James Baker. Now it has finally won the day. ‘Contempt of multilateralism, a similar disdain and distrust of the Europeans and a conviction that radical Islam is a threat to the US and the West and that Israel must
be considered a strategic ally in the Middle East for Washington’ are inherent in the DPG.

Assuming that US unilateralism in its pre-emptive strike on Iraq has its way with or without the UN and the dissenting trio of France, Germany and Russia looking the other way under duress, what kind of world as well as human security are likely to emerge from it? At the least, it will lead to a chain of events rendering the institutions of multilateralism, including the UN fractured, if not irrelevant, US’s breach with some of its partners in the Atlantic alliance, a spillage of endemic and unforeseen conflicts in the depressed part of the South and West Asia, fuelling of racial and religious prejudices, a breakdown of human security-net, and, above all, a post-Vietnam syndrome on its own turf.

While the unpredictability of the post-Cold War world continues, a new peaceful order based on good democratic governance, harmonious international relations and human dignity will remain a far cry if and when the Iraq crisis explodes and then is repeated in other theatres where terror in US’s eyes reside. Instead, a disorder on planet earth will reign through the new century of the new millennium.
The media in South Asia, having been around for a while, is fairly robust. The periodic need to extract its freedom from sometimes reluctant states has also given it considerable experience in ensuring a reasonably wide domestic coverage, to the extent that it often finds itself on the wrong side of national governments which are not always inclined towards democratic freedoms. In fact, the press has, over time, become so entrenched an institution and secured its relative autonomy to such a degree that, barring in Bhutan, there is no serious attempt any more to impose any kind of formal official restriction on media activity. It is, therefore, surprising that such a well-developed media with a strong bias in favour of international news has very little coverage on the region itself. The recent floods in both Europe and Asia tellingly demonstrate this disinterest in the immediate vicinity. The European flood was given greater coverage in the region's media than the floods in South Asia, despite the obvious fact that the damage caused by the former was negligible compared to the havoc and destruction caused by the latter. What is even more surprising, and perhaps a shade alarming, is that this should happen in a region whose largest countries at least have an unusual, even obsessive, interest in each
other. In this sense, the media of the region has failed its constituency. No nation of the region knows about the other in any meaningful way precisely because the media in each country excludes coverage of substantive issues concerning the other countries in the neighbourhood.

There are certain noticeable trends in media coverage that are too conspicuous to escape attention. The most perceptible fact is that mutual coverage is extremely limited. Paradoxically, despite being practically negligible, whatever little coverage does happen manages to convey extraordinarily negative images. If news of neighbours gleaned from all the national newspapers of South Asia were to be aggregated, the picture that emerges is of a region so abnormal as to be implausible. But precisely because such exercises in aggregation are never seriously undertaken, there is no real recognition of how little information on the different countries of the region that is of any consequence is actually furnished by the media.

When discussing media coverage in general, some caveats are in order. For one, there is a hierarchy of media both within and across countries. The mainstream Indian media is by far the most powerful regionally by virtue of its greater resources, experience and a long and generally uninterrupted climate of freedom. This has given the Indian media personnel with enormous experience and a capacity for diversified specialisations. India has the added advantage of possessing a large number of satellite channels, not a few of them in Hindi, which therefore possess a wide cross-border reach. The Indian media, for this reason, is regarded as a benchmark to gauge the extent of space that the South Asian media devotes to the region. Judged by this yardstick the extent of region-wide coverage is
minuscule. What is generally available is coverage of a bilateral kind that depends on the nature and magnitude of relations between countries and this tends to vary over time. Thus, for instance, the Indian media’s interest in the region is currently restricted largely to Pakistan, because of the continuing crisis in the relationship between the two countries. Following the same principle, in the mid- to late-1980s, Sri Lanka figured prominently in the news. As the relationship between the two countries deteriorated, so did the perspective of the coverage, so that at one stage Sri Lanka was reduced, in most Indian newspapers which bothered to cover the island, to an endless welter of government-JVP violence. To the casual reader of Indian newspapers, Sri Lanka had the appearance of a country that was perpetually engaged in domestic and international squabbles that it could not manage. Likewise, Bangladesh and Nepal surface in the news in any sustained manner only when some kind of a crisis involving India breaks out. Bangladesh briefly made headlines in India in the Middle of 2001 on account of a border incident that resulted in the deaths of Indian paramilitary soldiers. Nepal, thanks to a series of unfortunate events, has been regularly featured in the Indian media.

The Sri Lankan media too is relatively experienced by regional standards, but is more or less preoccupied either by island-issues or by the predominant themes of international news. India occasionally figures in matters of bilateral importance. The Pakistani media is not quite as developed, but is no less robust than the Indian media when it comes to tendentious bilateral reportage. The Pakistani press betrays a fairly obvious disinterest in region-wide coverage, restricting its abiding South Asian focus to issues arising from the
long-standing disputes between Pakistan and India, the other
countries figuring sporadically, as and when they manage to become
newsworthy independent of bilateral concerns. The coverage in
Bangladesh is among the lowest in the region, whereas Nepal, whose
free media is perhaps the youngest, does have a larger volume of
fairly neutral coverage of neighbours, though India tends to get more
space than the others. Maldives for all practical purposes does not
exist, if the reference to it is any indication.

Thus, the overall picture is one of extremely limited coverage,
and as a general rule the coverage has hostile inflections. Coverage
of Pakistan in the Indian media focuses invariably on traditional
areas of domestic conflict (Shia-Sunni conflict in Karachi), inter-
provincial disputes, particularly those involving Punjab, Sindh and
Baluchistan, the drug and arms trade, ISI involvement in sinister
activities, the refuge given to Muslim members of the Bombay
underworld by Pakistan and so on. In Pakistan too, likewise, news on
India, to the extent it finds place, is dominated by images of Hindu
fundamentalist violence against Muslims and other minorities, on
human rights violations in Kashmir, of the Research and Analysis
Wing’s attempts to destabilise neighbours. Coverage on Sri Lanka
across mainland South Asia is exclusively restricted to the civil war,
and now, because it has become one of the talking points of the
international media, there is some references to the just concluded
peace talks in Thailand. But typically, when the high profile event
itself was over, there was no further mention of it, despite the fact
that peace talks are an ongoing process whose many nuances need to
be followed up in a sustained way if its dynamics are to be grasped
in all its dimensions. This meagre and episodic coverage of the peace
process is in stark contrast to the serial coverage that the violence in Sri Lanka attracted. Curiously, the peace process initiated between the government of India and the Naga separatists to try and resolve a 50 year conflict, the oldest internal live dispute in the region, has found no mention in any of the region’s media. This may partly have to do with the fact that no western interlocutors were involved and hence the international media, whose somewhat tasteless obsession with Islamic terror has now begun to verge on the macabre, chose to ignore it.

Smaller countries find it difficult to gain any mention in the media of the larger neighbours, and when they do, it invariably is in connection with some bilateral dispute usually over security or riparian issues. And then there is the Maldives, which figures only occasionally, despite having the best social indices in the region that itself should have been sufficient to attract the attention of the South Asian press. Instead, such is the level of indifference that there are very few who are even aware of the country’s remarkable achievements on social indices. The Maldives in recent times has found mention only incidentally, and that too momentarily, when the SAARC summit took place in January and again a few weeks ago when visiting Indian prime minister A B Vajpayee had to cut short his visit to the country after the attack on the Akshardham temple in Gujarat.

For the rest, when the coverage is not offensive or hostile, it is invariably either bizarre or trivial. The Asian Age of India is a fairly indicative register of this trend. The Asian Age is an unusual newspaper, because, of all the publications to come out of the region, this is the only one that carries the most extensive coverage of the
neighbourhood. Unfortunately, all too often it goes out of its way to cover unusual news that is more sensational than substantial. For instance, in its 2 October edition from Delhi, the only news it carried on Bangladesh was the mauling to death of a keeper at the Dhaka Zoo by two belligerent bears. The untimely death of zookeeper is no doubt tragic, but it surely does not qualify as the only national news to be reported in the largest country of the region. It is only reasonable to suppose that on 1 October there must have been more important news of Bangladesh that was worth carrying in an Indian newspaper. What is generally passed off as neighbourhood news are snippets of acid attacks in Bangladesh, of a man in Karachi killing his daughters for going to school, and such other details which, without providing any deep insights, nevertheless colour the reader's perception of these countries as being in some way uniformly degenerate.

This increasing focus on demeaning depictions of each other has meant the media of South Asia is unable to function as a South Asian media. This extraordinary enthusiasm of the national press in each country for denigrating the region as a whole has also come in the way of conceptualising South Asia as a feasible and serious venture in co-operation and collaboration. It is, therefore, not surprising that not only have all attempts at regional co-operation failed to make any headway, but even bilateral partnerships on an equal basis have become increasingly difficult in recent times. The media in South Asia is seemingly united only by its affinity for reporting only the most unpleasant news about neighbouring countries. As a result, this specific “genre of news” has come to be institutionalised, and what comes under the rubric of mutual coverage has certain essential
attributes, namely a disproportionate emphasis on violence and domestic crisis, and a preoccupation with the mala fide intentions of neighbouring states in bilateral matters.

There are as many reasons for this kind of a focus as there are consequences of it that are self-perpetuation but eventually debilitating. The process is in a sense cyclical. In part, this merely reflects the regional media’s tendency to partake of an international trend in highlighting and in the process caricaturing crises of various kinds particularly those involving violence and death. This is visible in the international pages of regional newspapers where, apart from the token coverage of neighbours, the rest of the news is taken up by violence in other parts of the world which have captured the attention of the West such as Zimbabwe, Burundi, Columbia and the usual suspects. This is only partially explained by the standardisation of news formats across the world and the general professional consensus of what constitutes news. While this global trend no doubt plays a role, it is also the case that, barring one or two newspapers in India which station correspondents in Islamabad and Colombo, for the most part, the media relies on international agency for news on the region. International agency news reflects the diplomatic and geopolitical concerns and priorities of the big powers particularly the US which has in recent times in pursuit of its great power ambitions made something of a fetish of violence in areas presumed to be of strategic interest to it. This reliance on agency news in many ways dictates the genre of news that has come to preoccupy media in South Asia.

The reliance on agency news is to a large extent dictated by serious constraints of finance and local geo-politics. Most media
houses either do not have the necessary resources or the attitude and
the inclination to station personnel in even the capital cities of the
regional countries. Even if they did have the necessary means and
the conviction of such necessity, the visa regimes of the larger
countries in the neighbourhood is based on mutual hostility and an
extraordinary degree of suspicion, which ironically enough the media
has done a great deal to magnify through its ill-advised strategies of
news coverage. But while these logistical variables do come in the
way of local systems of newsgathering, there is no necessary reason
that newspapers will make the effort to gather news independently of
international agencies even if these hurdles were somehow to be
removed. Nepal is a case in point and suggests that there is also a
general attitude of disinterest in the region as a whole. Kathmandu is
perhaps the only neutral venue in the entire region and which citizens
of all the other South Asian countries can freely access. Yet, Nepal is
hardly covered in these countries. Predictably for reasons of culture,
history and a shared, and sometimes disputed, frontier, India has
more interest in Nepal than the other neighbours do. Even this
interest is stirred only occasionally, when there is some kind of
crisis, and is satisfied in somewhat unprofessional ways despite the
fact that there is no barrier whatsoever, be it financial or
governmental, that stands in the way of getting authentic and reliable
information from Nepal. This was evident in December 2001, when
Kathmandu allegedly went on a spree of anti-India violence and
again in June 2002 when the palace massacre took place and the
Indian media, particularly satellite channels, gathered in the Nepali
capital to cover it. The Indian interest in the affair lasted only as long
as the international channels covered it.
Within this genre of violent and sensational news that gets precedence, there is a striking pattern of the approach and the focus of the content of the news and even the strategies employed to give information the desired flavour. There are three broad areas that tend to get covered. The first are the bilateral relations concerning long-standing disputes. The second are the domestic crises in the neighbouring country. The third is a crisis in the home country, which is attributed to the neighbouring country. Thus, for instance, Indo-Bangladesh border problems and issues of illegal migration, which are of bilateral import, tend to attract most of the attention on the part of the media both in Indian and Bangladeshi. The attacks on the Hindu minority in Bangladesh gets a fair degree of prominence in the Indian press while the attacks on Muslims in India gets its due coverage in both Bangladeshi and Pakistani press. Likewise, the attack on the Indian parliament or the Hindu temple in Gujarat suddenly gives Pakistan a lot of coverage in the Indian press.

This has to do with the history of South Asia, particularly the subcontinent. Just as agency news on South Asia focuses on issues of concern to the Western governments, the content of news in the region reflects state concerns relating to security and strategy. In that sense, news is state-generated. Thus, for instance, the attack on the Akshardham temple is attributed to Pakistan because the Indian Home Minister, L K Advani chose, even before the availability of any conclusive evidence, to find a Pakistani hand in the incident. In this sense, the media is often seen to be just a passive recorder of events in which the state plays a prominent role in shaping the content of news. However, it is not quite as innocent as this because many newspapers chose to report Advani’s statement as a fact as
opposed to an attributed claim. Therefore, the media chooses to participate in the foreign policy goals of respective governments and reinforces the kinds of stereotypes about neighbouring countries. As an instance of this, a banner-size Asia Age headline on 27 September for a report of an opinion poll conducted in Jammu and Kashmir by the paper read: 'Pak defeated in Kashmir'. The front page was dominated by the screaming colour, type size and font to convey a picture that was at variance with the content of the report. In fact, far from just Pakistan being defeated in the state, close to 50 percent of the people in the survey sample believed that complete independence was the only solution. Since this outcome does not quite suit the official view, the news had to be recast through the headline. Clearly, there are large sections of the media, which share the government of India’s strategic and foreign policy objectives and do not hesitate to use the means at their disposal to assist these interests. Likewise, during the Gujarat temple attack, Pakistan newspaper’s using the same AFP report that was used by the Nepali press gave a sensational headline to what was fairly even-handed copy. In this instance, the fairly descriptive agency copy had to be supplemented by the time-honoured practice of creating misperceptions through misleading headlines.

While historical antagonisms in the neighbourhood have had a role to play in this tendency of the press to lapse into nationalist rhetoric masquerading as reportage, a more recent development, namely the competitive diplomacy of the larger states of South Asia for the attentions of the same global patron, has accentuated the process of state-led news management. Ever since September 11 and the global obsession with terrorism, both India and Pakistan have
been desperately offering themselves as client states of the US. This involves aggressive attempts by each to portray the other as the fountainhead of terror in the region. Even if the media is not a conscious participant in the process, it has certainly become an unwitting partner just by the act of “breaking news” reportage, which does not wait for verification of claims before publicising it. Competitive diplomacy takes advantage of the competitive environment of the media to break stories of dubious credibility. The damage done is so extensive that subsequent retraction of stories does little to repair the situation.

In the prevailing climate of regional inter-state suspicion and hostility, when the countries of South Asia have themselves come to believe that the primary security threat to each country comes from within the region and not outside, there is little scope for the media as an institution to rectify the current imbalances and distortions of mutual representation. If anything, the media is more likely to amplify them. So far, it has been left to individual journalists, working against the grain of nationalism to provide a more balanced view. But these are few and far between and they cannot possibly neutralise the effects of the kind of reportage that generally dominates the region. When the situation will change is a matter of conjecture and it does not look to be anywhere on the horizon.
NEED FOR MEDIA COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA:
INFORMATION FLOW FOR CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

1. INTRODUCTION - ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN MOULDING PUBLIC OPINION

The importance that my Institute lays on media's multiple and influential roles is borne out by the in-depth analysis of media sources of information that is central to any research undertaken at the Institute of Regional Studies. As for co-operation, it can be judged by the manner in which the Institute has been happy to serve as yet another platform of expression for our South Asian colleagues. A core study that we carried as recently as September 2001 is entitled Media's Role in South Asian Security: A Case Study. This interesting research was done by a Research Fellow of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies. It serves to establish the proactive role played by the Institute of Regional Studies, not only to learn and benefit from the insights of other research perspectives, but also as a vehicle of information flow, both to make these research studies by South Asian scholars available to its own public opinion at home, as well as for further dissemination to other countries.
Before looking at the core issue of the impact of the media on public opinion, particularly through its coverage of political and security issues, at the outset, I would like to draw the attention of this learned audience to crucial aspects of the theme of confidence-building, for them to bear in mind. Unless we understand the term "confidence-building" and what are its parameters and acceptable criteria, we will not get far in achieving it. No amount of information flow can lead to confidence-building in public opinion, unless it has that very in-built purpose behind it. I also want to challenge the assumption that information flow happens only through formal institutions, collectively termed media, as not the whole picture. In communities where the media in its formal shape does not exist, relevant information still gets communicated in a relevant way among the group members. A Chinese saying so aptly puts it: a spoken word is faster than seventy horses.

When we talk for media cooperation in South Asia, the question arises that what do we understand by the term confidence-building? To put it a little more bluntly, how can the vernacular media of Bangladesh, or Pakistan, help in confidence-building regarding Sri Lanka’s Tamil problem? India has a huge media kingdom. How has the detailed reportage in India, for instance, of the Gujarat violence — termed as ‘carnage’ by its own media — provided a better understanding to its own public opinion, or within the South Asian public opinion, and whether it has led to confidence-building internally and externally? Another blunt question is whether the detailed footage that television has projected in these days regarding the Israeli excesses against the defenceless Palestinians, has it resulted in arousing the South Asian public opinion into any action
regarding the peaceful resolution of its own intra-regional animosities, lest it go the same way? Does it generate confidence-building to resolve the Kashmir Dispute for instance in a more meaningful way? What does such information flow regarding violent developments in one region provide to the public of another? What purpose does it serve? The ultimate question we have all explored one way or another is the nature and characteristics of the media: is it just a commercial business, or a vehicle of public education, or the promoter of ethical behaviour in the pursuit of national interests?

In the post-9/11 world scenario, these questions remain. The whole philosophy of terrorism as rendered by media in the post 9/11 scenario has changed the old-age concept of security between and within nations. Intra-state conflicts are now being viewed in the spotlight of what the international media typifies as terrorism. The media debate of what constitutes terrorism has left the Palestinians, Kashmiris and many others in cauldron to decide about their doom in the community of nations.

Indeed the media coverage of the events of 9/11 itself in the USA, as well as that of the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, brought the region of South Asia to the forefront of the American and international public opinion. The reason was that the international media projected the possibility that the next flare-up could happen in South Asia itself. The reasons lay in the long standing animosities that bedevil the nation-states of the region; the unresolved disputes such as the Kashmir Dispute and new ones that have surfaced within other member-states; the grinding poverty in the world’s most populated region; plus the presence of two nuclear states of India and Pakistan; and so forth. Within the region the
developments that led to the Indian military deployments against Pakistan and the resultant ongoing military standoff between the two countries, interspersed with the violent developments in the Indian state of Gujarat, which have not settled down, continue to provide the information grist to the media mill.

The oft-created war hysteria by the media between India and Pakistan is the best example one can give to investigate the role that the modern day media of South Asia is playing in not letting the dream of peace building in the region to be materialized.

The most recent war hype projected both in the Indian print and electronic media was to suggest that the two chronic rivals with nukes at their disposal were at the verge of war. There was an impression in the world community of heightened border tensions between the two countries and restricted mass movements as being effectively propagated by the Indian media. The ground reality was not the same. It was only the war lingo used by Indian media that generated fears among the masses on both sides of the border.

Whether it is in the domain of security or political issues, the greatest casualty in all the media projection that has taken place, remains confidence-building itself. The modern day media is not only expected to bring peace among nations through self-responsible projection of the conflict situation but at the same time it’s role in moulding public opinion must remain impartial.

The Agra Summit is a case in point. The high-pitched expectations, raised by media among the masses for the peace summit itself led to the break up of talks. As a result, the public pressure in both the countries not to surrender on issue of national
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concern left the process of confidence building measurements in shambles.

The hard stands of summit leaders on Kashmir with no space for mutual compromises, developed as a result of media build-up rendered the process of peace ineffective in the region.

We need to reflect what has been the role of the media in these situations - whether media projections have led to levelheaded responses from the policy makers. And if not, whether it has aroused the public opinion to exert the required pressures on policy makers for conflict-resolution.

2. SECURITY AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN SOUTH ASIA

Since the events of 9/11, South Asia has come to the forefront of international limelight with all its ugly sores. There could be differing perspectives over which issue is the more serious one. But as we meet at this conference, the military standoff between India and Pakistan continues, and behind this dispute lays the core issue of the Kashmir Dispute. The media of South Asia continues to accord it prime attention. Despite grinding poverty within India and Pakistan, both the countries are now de facto nuclear powers. On the political front, all countries face major problems in their governance and political systems, whether it be the much-flaunted ‘secular democracy’ of India, the kingdom of Nepal, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and People’s Republic of Bangladesh, or the Buddhist Sri Lanka. In terms of conflict resolution internally and externally in relations with each other, or in the domain of development issues, or over the poverty scenario, what is evident because it is missing is the lack of political will. Despite the fact that there is widespread
awareness and public demand for peace, and there are numerous community organisations providing local initiatives, the lack of political will to resolve conflicts on the one hand and lead development on the other is missing. Political instabilities lead to uncertainties at community levels. It is just the culture in which the violence of extremist organisations and individuals flourish. Even the disputes that have erupted are rooted in history and history itself is misused and abused – through lack of knowledge. Is it not a stark contradiction that in the case of the well-documented Kashmir Dispute, the genesis of which lies in the inequitable partition conducted by Britain of the time, the Indian media echoes its political pundits to suggest the need for moving on from positions rooted in history as regards the resolution of the Kashmir Dispute. Yet the Babri Masjid was demolished because of the belief among the Hindu community that it was constructed in the 1500s over an allegedly disputed site. Which of the two is more current history? India with its huge press has the greater means of projecting both objectivity and biases. You can well imagine what the impact would be on the equally huge public opinion in India, were the Indian media persons to emphasise objectivity, based on historical fact.

The preoccupation with security-related and political issues is the natural corollary to the fact that currently it is these two aspects that are the driving forces within societies, since they are the keys to who wields power and how. It is from this perception of power balances that governance draws its own directions. I venture to suggest that when the media sees its role confined merely to projecting limited perceptions that is all it will be able to portray. But when the focus shifts to participatory development, or seeing
security as comprehensive human security, and not only as military weaponry, or consider politics in terms of the quality of life of the masses and not only through quantitative elections, it is only then that the media comes into its proper domain. It is government systems that are hostage to prevailing perceptions arising out of the political configurations that hold sway. The media’s strength lies precisely in the fact that it need not enchain itself to these prevailing perceptions and power configurations, provided that by using the “mind’s eye”, it is willing to look at the limitless possibilities within the endowments of a state for comprehensive security arising out of participatory political systems.

3. MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLITICAL AND SECURITY ISSUES IN MOULDING THE PUBLIC OPINION – AN ANALYSIS

With a deeper knowledge of public issues and the needs of civil society, the media can serve as the bridge of understanding. Without deeper knowledge with only speculations to fall back upon, the media becomes the great divide within a country, and within a region. So the media’s role can only be as focussed as the mission behind it, as effective as the training of skills behind it, and as meaningful as the sense of purpose of a future direction behind it.

A report that looks at ‘media interventions’ distinguishes between ‘traditional’ journalism, with its focus on the emergence of good governance and democratic development, particularly in post-conflict environments; and the ‘newer category of media-related interventions’ that go beyond this traditional disengaged journalistic role, designed to have an intended outcome. Or in its words, ‘rather
than merely informing, material is selected for its potential in transforming conflict, by shifting attitudes of parties involved in a conflict, by providing essential information.' It goes on to state that between these two categories; media intervention and media related intervention, 'lies a stage of media fusion' and also that: 'journalists ... have argued the ostensibly impartial role they play is incompatible with reporting which openly seeks conflict resolution or involves personal intervention.'

Indeed if high professional norms and fundamental moral obligations were in-born characteristics of every media person on this earth, it would be easy to predict the time-frame of conflict resolution of the most intractable conflicts here and now.

One can identify five kinds of media interventions for peace-building, and more importantly, the requisite skills to make them effective. I summarise them below, and as I do so I will also raise observations and questions for you to consider:

a) **Type One:** This type of media interventions focuses on media training to overcome the 'lack of professionalism, diversity, freedom and technology', through rudimentary journalism training designed to address 'unskilled, inaccurate, conflict-obsessed, or highly partisan media', often controlled 'by state or special interests' and reflecting 'narrow views or propaganda.' The foremost tool for peace-building in this sort of an intervention requires 'training media in the basic skills of journalism, such as impartiality, accuracy and balance' as well as 'awareness of democratic processes'. It also includes technology
training and 'a promotion of journalistic codes and a basic legal infrastructure that protects journalists from intimidation.'

i. As does inaccurate reporting. So often have we to read clarifications in our own media. What is the training imparted to South Asian journalists by their employers? Do these employers feel it is commercially worthwhile to invest in the training of their journalists? What is the feedback of this training? Furthermore, do journalists want to be trained?

ii. The fact that it speaks of the need for journalistic codes suggests they are missing in practice. How true is that of the South Asian media is for us to determine through our own investigations into the state of the media. The moot question is: can a profession working without codes expect the same of others, or even convincingly talk about missing codes in other areas of activity? Who is to set up these codes and how? Only from this development of a proper code of journalistic ethics will it be possible to establish a proper 'basic legal infrastructure that protects journalists from intimidation.'

iii. Regarding control by the 'state' and 'special interests' and the implication that it necessarily reflects narrow views or propaganda requires more clarification. My observations are that the State is so far viewed as a necessary evil, whereas if there was a proper interaction between what we understand as the State and Civil Society, the State could become an actual embodiment of "we, the people" as a collective endeavour, or consciousness, to preserve the interests of the
communities it represents. State policies also need to be articulated. In my humble observation, control has arisen in the vacuum of professional codes of ethics. Similarly, 'special interests' which are not elaborated includes partisan media. Establishing professional codes would nullify partisan media, which by its very nature is exclusive and not inclusive. If there is less of partisan media there would be less of narrow views and one-sided propaganda. It is imbalance, which separates negative propaganda from positive advocacy.

(b) **Type Two**: This refers to the development of responsible journalism revolving around investigative, explanatory and specialist reporting and well-informed analytical reporting. Amongst the requisites, the needs identified are impartial media regulators, media performance requirements, access to information, press councils, promulgation of standards to define libel and slander as elements of media accountability, media management training, with a view to creating a media 'that serves society as a conflict resolution process and upholds democratic governance'.

i. To be noted is the prevalent view that the media 'serves' society, and can be 'conflict resolution process' and upholds democratic governance. Contradictions of course arise where the elements of media accountability are missing. The media that is in itself not accountable cannot sincerely speak of the lack of accountability within the State. I would even go so far as to say that the media without accountability would not be able to distinguish between the genuine accountability
processes and the partisan ones. But again the question is who is to set up the accountability mechanism for the media? Should it result from a consensus between the State and the Media? Should it be made a suo moto process within the judiciary? Should the originator be press council and if so, what kind of a press council would be the acceptable mechanism legally speaking? What have the press councils of South Asian countries achieved within their countries and collectively? These are questions to deliberate over.

(c) Type Three: It sees an emerging genre of media interventions as ‘located between traditional journalism and more proactive uses of the media.’ This views the proactive role that can be played by ‘sensitised media professionals’, who in addition to their traditional roles as carriers of observed information ‘may seek to facilitate dialogues within the community … with conflict resolution as one of their recognised values.’

i. There is much more substance to this media role as a facilitator of dialogue and we need to explore the avenues it can open. Indeed, already the interactivity of the Internet, with its chat groups, FAQs and Weblogs has opened innovative ways in which people-to-people and people-to-organisations contacts are evolving in a most transparent way within the civil society. Both for the media and for the policymaking structure we understand as the State, these are cost-effective if not entirely cost-free avenues for understanding the needs of civil society by tapping in openly
to these sites and reading for themselves what the larger public thinks of the core issues of the moment.

ii. The facilitator role of the media needs to be focused on co-opting both the 'state' structures and the 'special interest' groups. Indeed it should be taken on as a challenge similar to finding the true sources of information. No professional journalist gives up the search till he/she arrives at that fountainhead of information for even the tiniest of details. I take this opportunity to salute all those eminent journalists who in pursuit of accurate information have laid down their lives in zones of conflict.

(d) **Type Four:** This identifies a proactive media intervention, designed for a specific audience and purpose, and brought about with the help of a powerful actor such as a peacekeeping force, or a non-governmental organisation, operating/working in a conflict zone, intended to counter hate-propaganda, as well as programmed to provide practical information for immediate use, pertaining to issues for which they are set up.

(e) **Type Five:** This type of media interventions usually conducted by nongovernmental organisations is not conventional journalism, but is 'specifically intent upon transforming attitudes, promoting reconciliation and reducing conflict. The content is determined by its appropriateness to fostering peace.' It provides for innovative delivery mechanisms such as the use of other
forms of media (pop culture, wall posters, television, street theatre and so forth).

I draw your attention to the very recent portrayal of violent events in our part of the world. The Gujarat violence unfortunately for the people of that state in India has not ended and the recent heinous crime of indiscriminate shooting by terrorists is but the latest such condemnable event. Earlier, the Gujarat communal killings took a huge toll of the Muslim community of Gujarat by persons termed not as 'terrorists' or as 'fundamentalists' but as 'activists' of a party. The recent act of violence has been attributed to 'Islamic terrorists' or 'Muslim fundamentalists', belonging to a totally unknown organisation called the 'movement for revenge', who, as if to make sure that Pakistan was implicated, were also carrying return addresses on their persons showing that they had come from Pakistan! Not only that, learned political observers from the western countries, when asked to assess the possible causes found linkages with the current elections in the Indian-occupied Kashmir, and not with the fact that just some weeks earlier, in weeks of continuous violence, thousands of Muslims were butchered in a pogrom that rivalled that of the 1947 partition according to the Indian media itself. This sort of an imbalanced reportage that cannot evaluate the causes and linkages in a proper contextual perspective only points to the prevailing partisanship that holds sway for the time being in the western media as well. It could stem from only two major reasons: one is motivated choice to take sides; the other, deep ignorance of the root causes behind issues and conflicts. The end result is the same: which is perpetuation of prejudice in public opinion and not of understanding.
4. PROBE INTO THE SECURITY DIMENSION OF SATELLITE CULTURE

Today, we are face to face with revolutionary developments in the field of telecommunications. I take this blanket term to denote media in its most comprehensive form of how information is transmitted and thus includes every delivery mechanism from telephones and telegraphs to the print and electronic media to the wide world of the Internet. Indeed as the globe is becoming smaller through globalisation, the Internet is developing its own universe of 'cyberspace.' When the Sputnik satellite first orbited the earth that would have thought what it would lead to.

I am not even in the nursery of the Internet revolution and know little of the dynamics unleashed through the satellite culture. Other experts have dwelt on the technical aspects. I am going to speak a little on the security dimension of the satellite culture, as the developments within the satellite technology that can now connect ordinary people with other parts of the world through the wristwatch they wear, it has all opened both a very hopeful world of opportunities, and equally most scary scenarios of what the misuse could lead to. I am alluding to the militarisation of space. But let me digress and recount a personal experience of how the satellites can save lives as well.

Here, I would like to recall a personal experience. A young Swedish mountaineer was on an expedition in our Northern Areas when he fell into a crevice, got hurt and separated from the rest of the expedition members. He could not get in touch with other members but through his satellite telephone managed to get in touch
with his mother in Sweden who quickly got in touch with Pakistan’s ambassador in Sweden. For reasons best known to him, he rang me up in Islamabad. Though office timings had finished I happened to be in my office working overtime. I, at my end, straight away rang up the commander in Northern Areas who agreed to send the Helicopter and utilise the two hours of daylight hours that were available to search for the young mountaineer. Luckily they found him and safely brought him to Gilgit and onward to Islamabad. Now the Swedish Government holds a function on that date and the Chief Guest is normally the Pakistani Ambassador.

This, you would agree, is the better use of our technical advancement.

Reading the current-day appraisals of the technological developments, it is easy to see that for the time being human endeavour has just reached the base camp of developments yet to come in this domain. One can also detect that this new domain can become yet another tool for global power hegemony. Therefore, now is the time for countries in our region to heed the wake-up call and decide to cooperate rather than confront. Indeed, this one area of interaction for the time-being is far less tainted with conflicts as compared to other forms of human interactions. The military aspect of the satellite culture needs monitoring. Countries of the developing world are at a natural disadvantage because currently they are the generators of the knowledge that has led to the development of this huge new science. At best, we remain learners and that is what we must do and begin immediately. SAARC is an appropriate level with which to approach the subject of the militarisation of space. We know that the governments of the USA and other western countries
are deeply engaged in developing their responses to 'cyber terrorism'. We need to take a serious note of this serious concern of the developed countries and learn what we can from it.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS – THE ROLE OF MEDIA COOPERATION IN FACING THE CHALLENGES OF SECURITY

It is a huge terrain to cover where the deepening issues, evolving perceptions and multi-dimensional ramifications makes it a difficult task. The stark fact is that with the path-breaking advances being made in information technology, more and more people are communicating directly with each other. Yet, at the same time, not only is there greater violence, but also this violence has the widest outreach. So the task before the participants of this Conference is to go away from this venue with the resolve to investigate the correlation between these two aspects, and how to catalyse the informational role of the media to roles of peace-building through confidence-building. It is going to be a protracted struggle but the one imperative that it does require is to keep talking, keep listening and keep up the efforts to understand.

In that spirit I shall attempt to leave some recommendations to consider:

1) The smaller countries of South Asia must not shy away from their own monitoring and reporting of the regional conflicts, other than those that directly affect them. They need to also show their impact in the longer term. Since what impacts on the region, affects every member-state of the region. This would require the media’s focus on current affairs to develop
its own historical perspectives. Only a deeper knowledge of an issue can help devise strategies for the future, as well as evaluate the issues as they are. Such perspectives would have to be higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the Indian Ocean.

2) South Asian media persons must pursue causes in addition to their routine reportage. One such cause is the greater role of regional organisations. SAARC is a great cause to pursue in a proactive manner. I would like to stress that owners/editors of newspapers would have to show the way by making such causes part of their internal media policy, so that the media persons in their employment can pursue this worthy cause. Confidence-building must begin within such enterprises themselves. Other such worthy causes include the huge poverty in the region; the trafficking in human beings; narcotics; issues of under-development; conflict resolution and peace-building, the role of international organisations like the UN, to name a few. Periodically, the media in tandem with think tanks, academia and policymakers must jointly review their respective approaches on such matters at the common platforms of conferences.

3) Think Tanks should proactively establish their internal media monitoring mechanisms. I am inspired by how journalists and media persons in the United States and in Europe have set up their own media ombudsmen that keep a tab on the accuracy and fairness of media reportage. There needs to be more interaction between the media and think tanks. There are resources that can be commonly shared. I
would like to draw your attention on the manner in which the Institute of Regional Studies has done this since its inception in 1982. We bring out a fortnightly publication - Selections from the Regional Press. I would like to add that for each core news article that you read in this issue, we maintain entire archives of press clippings, which are available to researchers in the country, in South Asia and the region, and of the world.

4) **Media persons need to curb negative propaganda and disininformation.** To me it appears that it is disininformation that leads to negative propaganda. Disinformation can be a deliberate act as well as a result of laziness. The abilities and capacities of media persons to research sources of information get reflected in their reportage and analysis. Since their "breaking news" are the first sources of information to the public opinion at large, they are the initial catalysts in forging public perceptions. Perceptions, as we all know, become the reality on which public opinion bases its own value judgements and courses of action. Therefore, "breaking news" should be approached as a sacrosanct mission to provide the facts of the case as comprehensively and as objectively as possible. Depending on the approach, the harm or the good that it can do is amazing.

5) **There should be no need for exaggerated and sensationalised reporting.** There is an entire world beyond "breaking news" of reportage of developments as a whole. The very fact that a development finds space in media reportage makes it stand out in the limelight of public attention. Training of
journalists and media persons can help in that direction. Again, I would say the lead has to come from the media owners and editors.

6) **Media ethics.** The bottom line in media ethics is balance. If the goal is the search for accuracy to arrive at what is the truth in a given situation, it is a search that is not done in abstract, but is people-oriented. As in other professions, that of the media also has its own unscrupulous practitioners, as well as exemplars who stand out for their professional values of truth, honesty, courage, fairness, compassion, balance, independence, credibility and objectivity in any situation.

7) **Ensuring Information flow.** The crucial link remains the flow of information. In times of tensions, this becomes the lifeline to making realistic judgements and taking the correct decisions. Yet, it is during the time of tensions, when the need for information flow is the greatest, that short-sighted governments resort to bans on exchange of newspapers, and deny visas to media persons, and even ban the satellite channels. Indeed, places of learning themselves become taboo and out of bounds. The governments of South Asian countries can begin with practical measures that on how to ensure information flow. These do not harm any country’s sovereign positions during a prevailing period of tension. For instance, facilitating the stationing of media persons in member states and of academic exchanges, which should not stop just because the governments are not talking. Exchanges of newspapers and journals should be allowed across the
shortest possible route, as should the exchanges of the academia and researchers from think tanks.

In the ultimate analysis, there is no legislation that can totally debar any one from seeking the knowledge behind the information delivered. The pursuit of that knowledge would be proportionate to the levels of one’s own curiosity and search for truth. Half-baked information after all comes from half-hearted searches.