SOUTH ASIAN SECURITY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: ISSUES AND OUTLOOK

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Introduction
From the very onset of decolonisation, South Asia has been beset with numerous interrelated domestic and inter-state conflicts, owing their origin to a large number of sources. These were rooted in the colonial past as well as the dynamics of postcolonial socio-economic and politico-cultural development of the South Asian societies. Intra-and inter-state conflicts in the region have often been compounded in the process of interaction with the outside world. The bi-polar world order, characterized by a fierce rivalry between the two power blocs, has had accelerating impacts on most, if not all, of the major conflicts in South Asia. Viewing international developments in terms of a zero-sum-game, the super powers have involved themselves competitively in most of the inter-state conflicts in the region. Along with the super powers, another extra-regional power, China, has made persistent attempts to shape a favourable regional balance of power by involving itself in South Asian conflicts.

Extra-regional involvement was also invited by the feuding South Asian countries themselves either to face the otherwise unchallengeable regional adversary or to neutralize extra-regional involvement in favour of a regional antagonist. As a matter of fact, throughout the entire post-colonial period, feuding parties in South Asia have almost invariably invited extra-regional great powers in regional conflicts while the latter with competing interests have made persistent attempts, in one way or the other, to shape a regional balance deemed to serve their broader strategic perspectives. As a consequence, extra-regional involvement in South Asian con-
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Conflicts became a constant phenomenon. In certain cases, the momentum of the conflicts was sustained largely due to the competitive involvement of the extra-regional great powers.

Over the recent years, East-West relations as well as the post-war international order have undergone a process of radical transformation. Rejection of socialism by the Soviet Union and the other East European countries and their march towards capitalism and Western model of democracy have eroded the very rationale for confrontation between the two power blocs. The very dichotomy between the East and West has lost relevance to the present context of global politics. Cold War, now, belongs to the past. The removal of ideological barriers has led to the convergence of their broader interests Vis-a-Vis the Third World. These changes in contemporary international relations have rendered China virtually incapable of playing power politics to the extent it used to during the past couple of decades. In the changed circumstances, the great powers have shown a distinct willingness to withdraw their competitive involvement from the Third World regional conflicts. With regard to South Asia, Samuel Huntington put the issue rather bluntly when he said, “Without the Cold War it is hard to see how much interest the United States will have in who governs Afghanistan or whether India or Pakistan controls Kashmir. In the changed circumstances, the great powers are concentrating collective efforts with a view to resolving them amicably or even imposing solutions when they judged it to be expedient or necessary. While a good number of regional conflicts remain to be resolved, the great powers have with drawn their competitive involvement from virtually all of them.

The post-Cold War era is, thus, characterized by two distinct and interrelated phenomena. On the positive side, the world has made a decisive shift away from conflict to a course of cooperation. The delicate balance between defense and development has clearly tilted in favour of the latter. On the other hand, the convergence of ideologies and broader interests of the developed countries has brought a virtual end to a crucial balance that existed in international politics. Thus the post-Cold War era, while opening up some new opportunities to the Third World in terms of resolving some of
the outstanding conflicts, also posed a severe challenge of facing the developed countries, now united virtually in a single bloc.

The inter-state relations in south Asia appear highly paradoxical when viewed in the context of trends in today's global politics. The region appears to be prepared neither to take the advantages offered by the recent changes in international arena nor to face the challenges posed by them. The conflict scenario in South Asia remains almost unaffected. Contrary to expectations, both intra and inter-state conflicts have become more intractable. In the context of today's world when the cooperation among the regional countries is most crucial, South Asia has given regional cooperation within the framework of the SAARC at best a low-key position.

It is in this backdrop that an attempt would be made to study South Asian security in the post-Cold War era highlighting the major issues and the outlook on the subject. With this end in view, a host of related questions would be addressed. The region is already torn with numerous intra-regional feuds while intra-state conflicts along ethnic, linguistic, religious and other parochial lines pose a formidable challenge to the nation-building efforts in the region. Why has the region not been successful in resolving its numerous conflicts despite the withdrawal of extra-regional involvement? What are the real causes behind these conflicts? Finally, how to make a departure from conflict to a course of cooperation? The paper would begin with a brief review of the security scenario in South Asia in the post-Cold War era with particular emphasis on the approach of the extra-regional great powers towards the region. Part II is an attempt to analyze the nation-building process and the resultant intra-state conflicts. Part III would deal with the inter-state conflicts and their impact on the overall security situation in the region.

I

Security Scenario in South Asia:
The Role of Extra-Regional Powers

From the very inception, the security scenario in South Asia has been constantly influenced by the extra-regional great powers. Before initiating a discussion on the subject, it
is worth mentioning that the inter-state relations in South Asia and the overall security situation prevailing in the region created a fertile ground for the involvement of extra-regional great powers in South Asian conflicts. Due to a bitter Hindu-Muslim rivalry in the Sub-continent, the common anti-colonial front of the two communities fell apart. Failure to find out an amicable solution led to a series of traumatic developments involving large-scale loss of lives on both sides and a huge exodus. Finally, the country was partitioned on religious ground with bitter enmities to persist between India and Pakistan till now. None of the other countries in the region inherited such a bitter conflict from the colonial past. On certain occasions, however, colonial and pre-colonial antagonism survived and even revived in politically relevant forms. This coupled with the post-colonial dynamics of intra- and inter-state relations, generated numerous conflicts between and among the South Asian countries which gradually transformed the region into an area of permanent mistrust, endemic conflicts and recurrent wars.

Post-War world was torn by the two major conflicts among the great powers--the East-West Cold War and the Sino-Soviet rivalry which played the decisive role in shaping the global security environment. Due to the inherent weaknesses, as indicated earlier, South Asia could never insulate itself from either of the major conflicts. External influence on the region’s security was first initiated by the US and Pakistan in the early 1950s. During the hey-days of Cold War the US, being rebuffed by India, turned to Pakistan for alliance relationship. Given India’s non-participation in the Cold War, the strategic location of Pakistan at the doorstep of the Soviet Union and China was the main attraction to the US policy makers. Counterbalancing the perceived threats from India has been the guiding factor in Pakistan’s quest for alliance relationship with the US. To neutralize or, at least, to minimize the impact of Pak-US alliance relationship, India turned to the Soviet Union, though it refrained from joining the Cold War. Nonetheless, the Cold War was brought to the Sub-continent which constantly cast a dark shadow on its security scenario. Similarly, the Sino-Soviet rivalry and the Sino-Indian conflict have also influenced the security scenario
in the region. For about three decades, China's South Asia policy was single-mindedly directed against India. In this regard, China has encouraged and rendered moral and political support as well as economic and military assistance to a number of South Asian countries, particularly India's arch-rival Pakistan to enable them to face the Indian challenge.

During the entire Cold War period, the conflict scenario in South Asia was dominated by two antagonists - India and Pakistan. The extra-regional great powers were also divided along the same line - the US and China on Pakistan's side and the Soviet Union on India's side. Along with India and Pakistan, these three powers - the US, the Soviet Union and China - have been the determinant of regional politics in South Asia with regard to both conflict and cooperation. Conflicts in the region have often been complicated by their competitive involvement. In certain cases, however, crises have been defused and wars have been stopped thanks to great power efforts. The Tashkent Accord is a case in point. In the past the Cold War vitiated the atmosphere in the region and gave impetus to conflicts, while relaxation of tension among the great powers created favorable conditions by at least minimizing the external inputs to conflicts in the region. Therefore, it was only natural to expect that the radical changes that took place at the global level, particularly the withdrawal of the competitive involvement of super and great powers from Third World regional conflicts would create favorable conditions for the settlement of conflicts and enhancing the emerging process of cooperation in the region.

The conflict scenario in South Asia, however, remained virtually unaffected by the withdrawal of competitive involvement of extra-regional great powers from the region. The primary reason is the fact that it has only removed the external inputs from the conflicts which have only been partly responsible for their outbreak or sustenance and never played the decisive role. A complex web of reasons that continue to bedevil security situation in south Asia is rooted within. The countries of the region are in the early stage of nation building which is being conducted in a highly pluralistic setting. The process of nation building has never been
smooth, often highly difficult and not seldom painful with accompanying upheavals and traumas. The worst among them has been the intra-state violence along ethno-linguistic or religious lines. The region is a queer amalgam of people and faiths. Its ethno-racial and linguistic diversity is the most complex to be found anywhere outside Africa. There are six main religions, viz', Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and Jainism. Nation building in such a pluralistic setting creates fertile ground for conflicts along ethno-linguistic and religious lines. Another source of intra-state conflict has been the quest for appropriate model of socio-economic and political development. Cross-border affiliation of ethno-linguistic and religious groups often transformed intra-state conflicts into inter-state ones. In some cases, such problems have been connived or abetted from across the border with political motives. In others, failure to resolve ethno-religious conflicts gave rise to external bogey. Meanwhile, South Asia has been less than successful in resolving bilateral disputes inherited from the colonial past. In addition, undefined land and maritime boundary, conflict of economic interests, sharing of common natural resources and others generated a host of bilateral disputes. These, coupled with the asymmetry in the real power of regional states, historical antagonism and irredentism created an environment of mistrust that sustains the present momentum of South Asian conflicts. To sum up, the conflicts in the region are rooted in the dynamics of socio-economic, politico-cultural and historical development of the region itself a discussion on which would follow.

II
The Nation-Building Process and Resultant Intra-State Conflicts

The process of nation-building is highly complex and contradictory. It includes not only economic development, but goes far beyond to encompass the complex, inter-related and inter-dependent changes in the society as a whole. It implies economic, social, political as well as cultural development in a balanced and integrated way, embracing the diversity of social, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities, geographical regions in harmony with the prevailing values.
The task is a formidable one, particularly in the context of a Third World region like South Asia. Because, the countries of the region have inherited underdeveloped and asymmetrically developed social structure as well as socio-political and economic institutions. Moreover, the social forces which formulate and execute the development strategies, often act more in accordance with their group interests than the textbook type ideal suggestions. As a result, nation building efforts generate numerous distortions and deformities and create imbalances along both horizontal and vertical lines within the polity. From the very beginning of their independence, South Asian countries were facing numerous internal cleavages and conflicts involving a cross-section of classes, social strata, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical regions. Such conflicts could be sub-divided into two broad themes: i. the uneven development of sub-national groups; and ii. the quest for appropriate model of socio-economic development.

1. The Uneven Development of Sub-national Groups

As it has already been indicated, uneven development in South Asia, as elsewhere in the Third World, is rooted primarily in the colonial past. The countries of the region were first exposed to modern development during colonial rule, when modernization and development were conducted exclusively in the interest of the metropolis. Even development has never been on the agenda of the colonial planners. Moreover, in British India unevenness was deliberately created as part of divide and rule strategy. As a consequence, the colonial legacy left various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups and geographical regions unevenly developed.

Political and economic institutions in these countries were also under-developed. Nationalist movements, in most of the countries, suffered from serious crises. The same implies to the democratic institutions created under colonial rule. The reasons are manifold. The vast majority of the population were illiterate. Their level of socio-economic and political consciousness was low. Following the independence, they gradually turned out to be rather passive participants of political process. Class structure of the society was highly
under-developed. Pre-capitalist mode of production was predominant. Newly emerged entrepreneur class was weak and highly dependent on foreign capital. In the circumstances, a small segment of privileged people, representing those ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical regions who fared well during the colonial rule, could easily usurp the political, administrative and economic power in the newly emerged countries. It was under their leadership that development strategies were formulated and executed. They have sought to mould the society in a way that would preserve and strengthen their vested interests.

The next reason is the borrowed development strategies. The newly-emerged countries usually preferred development strategies most of which were successfully tested in the Western developed countries. However, the socio-political and economic conditions in these countries, their resource base and working culture, all are quite different from those in developed countries in the early stage of their industrialization. Moreover, the international environment is also quite different. This created severe problems of adaptation and adjustment in the peculiar conditions of the newly-emerged countries as well as the contemporary international economic relations. In addition, Western development models were compounded by Western aid and experts and, along with them, Western influence on development programs. All these preserved and even further strengthened economic interests of the developed countries.

In this backdrop, the process of nation-building in the South Asian countries was inevitably accompanied by scramble for scarce resources of the region among economically and politically dominating groups with participation of foreign business interests. That, among others, generated uneven economic, political and cultural development of different ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical regions within a single political entity. In other words, certain sub-national groups established their domination in the economic, politico-administrative and even cultural spheres depriving others of their legitimate share.

Such a situation was bound to give rise to a complex web of political problems. The National Liberation Movement of
the colonial peoples, particularly that in South Asia, represented a united front of extremely heterogeneous forces. Diverse, often contradictory to one another, ethnic, linguistic and other sub-national groups, religious communities and geographical regions united themselves against colonial subjugation for national independence considering it as a means to achieve economic, political and cultural emancipation. On the part of its participants, high degree of emotion was involved in the Movement, while from the very beginning it was suffering from inner-contradictions primarily due to its heterogeneity. The nationalist leaders themselves persistently projected a brighter future of their country that was to come once the colonial rule ended; often, so bright that it existed only in their imagination. All these, coupled with the exposure to modernization and communication, generated great expectations among mass population following the independence. It posed a formidable challenge of telescoping the progress done in the relatively advanced countries for centuries within decades. Even the sincere attempts on the part of the leadership could hardly fulfil all these expectations. Hopes in most of the countries turned to be despair. In the circumstances, deliberate economic exploitation and politico-cultural suppression of one or a combination of sub-national groups by the others have, over a period of time, induced an insecurity amongst the people with cultures or religious/ethnic identities different from those of the ruling elite and gave rise to the sense of internal colonialism. The subjugated group or groups came out to the political arena with demands for equal participation in the process of national development and nation building. Such was the beginning of a political problem generated by the uneven development. It has consistently been one of the few most difficult problems, which the South Asian states faced and are still facing in the process of their nation-building.

The Nationalist Movement represented passionate anti-colonialism which has been the starting point of its endeavors. With the end of colonialism, that passionate anti-colonialism began to wane. Even people who considered that they have a common heritage, with the emergence of internal
colonialism, could not envision a common destiny for the future. Thus, a good number of countries which were suffering from uneven development also began to suffer from crisis of national identity.

In the backdrop of uneven development over a period of time and the absence of a politically viable national alternative, the deprived section of the society responded by seeking the proximate sources for mobilizing militancy and political pressure: i.e. the assertion of ethnic, linguistic, religious or regional identities. In this regard, the deprived groups usually tend to de-emphasize those elements of identity which unite them with the dominating sub-national group or groups and put particular emphasis on those elements which separate them.

The quest for equal participation in the process of nation building by the deprived ethnic and/or linguistic groups, religious communities etc., their quest for national/sub-national identity different from that of the dominating group/groups and in desperate cases, bid for secession turned out to be the single-most dangerous threat to internal stability in contemporary South Asia.

As it was mentioned, it is the deprived groups who usually mobilized militancy against the ruling groups. In recent years, however, the growing polarization of society along sub-national lines so charged the political atmosphere that in a number of cases the relatively affluent sections also began to assert their ethnic or religious identity and accordingly, mobilize militancy. The Sikh militancy is the most illustrated example to this.

In certain cases, faced with the political consequences of uneven development, the elites of these countries failed to act within the perspective of strengthening the democratic institutions by decentralizing political and economic power. They also failed to create an environment of freedom to practice religion and culture among diverse communities. Instead, these elites responded by strengthening and using the coercive power of the state to preserve regime interests against resurgent sub-nationalism. At the political level, the ideologies of the ruling elites became increasingly narrowed. Sinhalese nationalism of the Sri Lankan elite, resurgent
Hindu nationalism of the Indian elite, and an obscurantist version of Islam of Pakistan's Punjabi-Muhajir dominated ruling elite are cases in point. In the face of the rising tide of national/sub-national assertion the use of the coercive power of the state hardly could bring any lasting settlement to the problems. Instead, such measures themselves pushed the aggrieved sub-national groups to the extreme path of the bid for secession and/or political violence. Admittedly, the aggrieved sections also, in certain cases, failed to realize the political wisdom in finding out peaceful solution to the problems through accommodation.

As the ethno-religious and linguistic conflicts in South Asia reveal, most of them follow a more or less common pattern:

i. The victims of uneven development come out to the political arena with demands for equal participation in the nation building process. In this regard, they consciously subdue their ethno-linguistic or religious identity which unite them with their counterparts to the one which separate them.

ii. Parochial approach on the part of the dominant group towards an amicable settlement of the problem transforms the sub-national consciousness into quest for separate national identity and the demand for equal participation within the polity into that for a separate state.

iii. Conflict generates a dynamism of its own that becomes difficult to reverse. Essentially a political problem that could be resolved peacefully threatens the security of the parties involved.

iv. Intransigence on the part of both the sides led to violence causing enormous damage to the material and human resources of the concerned parties.

From the very beginning of South Asia’s exposure to modern development, the uneven socio-economic and politico-cultural development of its different ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical regions was exposing itself with far reaching politico-security consequences. In recent years, the problem became much more complex and intractable. All the countries of South Asia are suffering from it, while the degree of unevenness and the nature and magnitude of its political and security conse-
sequences may vary. While the experience of 1971 has generated a degree of awareness in Pakistan with regard to the uneven development of its sub-national groups and resultant conflicts, most of the lessons of 1971 have been mislearned. The country is far from finding out a mechanism of the management and resolution of its intra-state conflicts. In Sri Lanka, a relatively deprived majority, while facing the task of bringing evenness in the level of the development of its two major ethnic communities, has unduly subdued the minority which shattered the polity and jeopardized the security of the country. The settlement of the ethnic conflict still remains the most urgent task of the country.

Bangladesh is still undergoing the period of trial and error and yet to integrate its small but geo-politically important ethnic minorities. Democratic institutions and a federal form of government let India create a more or less effective mechanism of conflict management and resolution. In dealing with her numerous ethno-religious and linguistic conflicts, India appears to have opted for a policy of finding out a solution where it is possible to live with the rest. In this regard, India, despite endemic crises, have demonstrated tremendous ability to live with the problems. In recent years, however, the cost of living with the problems has substantially increased.

Inherent weaknesses of South Asian states—underdevelopment and asymmetrical development of classes and social groups, political and economic institutions, narrow elite base, scarcity of resources, external dependence and the contradictory nature of the very process of development would ensure that uneven development would remain a constant feature of their socio-economic and politico-cultural life. So would be the resultant conflicts.

**Quest for Appropriate Model of Socio-Economic Development**

The National Liberation Movement in the South Asian countries attracted mass participation with diverse socio-political, ethno-religious as well as ideological background. This, coupled with the complexities and contradictions associated with the nation building process as discussed earlier, made the question of the appropriate model of socio-
economic development a subject of intense academic debate, political polemics and, not seldom, violent social conflicts.

While the mainstream leadership of the national Liberation Movement has been influenced by the liberal democratic ideas of the West, a significant part of the anti-colonial movement became radicalized. Radical ideas had also flown from the Soviet Union and China. Influential liberal democrats like Nehru and others were impressed by certain aspects of the socialist economic model and sought to adapt them the indigenous conditions. A combination of all these transformed the question whether to opt for socialist or capitalist model into one of the crucial issues of socio-political life in the South Asian countries. While the capitalist model has remained uninterruptedly operational, it has been challenged both from the above and the below, not seldom, violently. Over the recent years, the demise of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the disastrous consequences suffered by the socialist-oriented countries have severely decreased the appeal of the socialist model. At present, the threat of intra-state conflict over whether to opt for capitalist or socialist model is non-existent, as only one model is on the agenda--the capitalist one.

It however, may not be the final verdict of history. There are enough reasons to believe that social conflicts along vertical lines while remaining dormant, may erupt at any juncture of history. As elsewhere, economic disparities along vertical line in South Asian societies is on the increase. The issue of equitable distribution of national wealth, keeping in view the need of the under-privileged strat of the society, is no more on the agenda. There is hardly any initiative from the above or any compelling pressure from the below. Such a situation could very well prove to be temporary. It may be too early to write-off Marxism. As a matter of fact, Marx did not invent egalitarianism. It is as old as the human civilization. In South Asia, egalitarianism has been a fascinating idea throughout the millennia. It has got a respectable place in South Asian folklores, mythology, literature, social-spiritual traditions and religions. Capitalist model of development, as implemented in South Asia, is often viewed by a significant part of the politically conscious people as alien to the social,
cultural and spiritual values of the region. In the circumstances, abject poverty of vast majority of the people and the affluence of a few, without meaningful efforts aimed at bridging the gap, may generate social conflict along the vertical line. A more fundamental issue, the celebration of the end of history by the West could also prove to be a shallow idea. As Irving Kristol puts the reasons, “It is no accident ... that the 20th century has witnessed a series of rebellions against ... capitalist democracy. These rebellions have failed, but the sources that feed such rebellions remain”.  

Democracy has been a highly cherished goal of National Liberation Movement of South Asian people. Nonetheless, the countries of the region have experienced numerous zig-zags, by-paths and a number of setbacks in the way of building a democratic society. As a matter of fact, barring India and Sri Lanka, none of them could sustain an uninterrupted democratic system. Over the recent years, however, struggle for democracy is coming to the forefront of regional politics with democratic forces re-asserting themselves in a number of countries. A host of reasons could be held responsible for the situation. Those social and political forces who stood for Western democracy and free market economy were being opposed by two opposite camps. The communists used to brand them as the representatives of bourgeoisie, their worst class enemy. On the other hand, a significant part of the proponents of free market economy in South Asia, out of the fear of communism, supported anti-communist-dictators. The same implies to the West, particularly the US.

The situation has changed significantly, following the demise of communism in Europe. For understandable reasons, the communists and other leftist radicals are now shifting their focus of attention from the struggle for socialism to that for democratic freedom. Anti-communist supporters of dictatorship are also gradually, but decisively, identifying themselves with the movement for democracy. The Western countries, including the US, are gradually distancing from or creating pressures on friendly dictators. Recent changes rendered it virtually impossible for them to support coercive measures against democratic forces without risking strong repercussions at home. Another development in this regard is
that with the fear of communism subsided, the West no more needs to patronize or install friendly dictators in South Asia. In the circumstances, the struggle for democracy is gaining momentum in a number of countries in South Asia. Bangladesh and Nepal have scored impressive gains. Both of them have embarked upon a path of democratic development.

All this, however, does not mean too bright a future for democracy in the region. Both the newly-emerged democracies and the democratic movements, will have to undergo severe tests before some of them could establish themselves as viable democracies. Bangladesh's and Nepal's march towards democracy is certain to be highly difficult and may even be painful. An array of reasons could be attributed in favor of such a prognosis. Their economic and political institutions are highly under-developed. Only a small segment of population is politically conscious. The vast majority remains illiterate and the level of their political consciousness and participation is also very low. They live in poverty and are yet to be drawn to modern economic activities. Slow exposure to modernization, on the one hand, and the revolution in communication, on the other, generated great expectations among common mass with regard to freedom and prosperity which even sincere attempts on the part of the leadership could hardly fulfill.

In Sri Lanka, a highly violent conflict between the two main ethnic groups poses a severe threat to democracy. Elementary human rights are being grossly violated by both the parties involved in the conflict. Democratic rights are being increasingly crippled. As a result, democratic institutions are suffering from serious crises and declining legitimacy. In India, democracy is facing a severe challenge. It comes from a number of sources -- numerous ethno-religious conflicts involving large-scale violence, economic difficulties, declining effectiveness of democratic institutions and the political elite to name a few.

The way Benazir Bhutto was ousted from power and the environment in which subsequent elections were held have once again halted Pakistan's march towards democracy. The prevailing environment of intimidation and persecution in Pakistan is indicative of the fact that the forces of dicta-
torship in South Asia are determined to defend their positions and regain the lost ones. In this regard, they would not hesitate to use all the weapons they have got at their arsenal—palace intrigue, sabotage, economic and political subversion, bribery and the use of brute force to name a few. In the circumstances, the danger of violent changes looms large.

Operating on the difficulties and failures faced by the South Asian countries in their nation-building process, certain revivalist forces, both religious and nationalist, are coming to the forefront of political life. Among them, the forces championing religious revivalism and chauvinism are in the sharp rise. They seek a reversal of history, a retrat into the past that they have mythified for political purposes. Their aim is the eradication of the present in the hope that the future will more closely resemble the real or imaginary glorious past—an irrational as well as impossible task. To them the cult of violence is a remarkable virtue. In this regard, their militancy is directed less against the sins of mankind than the people belonging to rival religious community or political stream. They are among the most disruptive forces in contemporary South Asian politics.

III
Regional Security Scenario and Inter-state Conflicts

For the convenience of our analysis, the issues which dominate regional security scenario and inter-state conflicts in South Asia could be divided into the following two themes: i. divergent security perspectives; and ii. inter-state conflicts.

i. Divergent security perspectives

During the entire post-independent period two diametrically opposite perceptions dominated South Asia’s security thinking as well as practical policy of the regional states. As indicated earlier, smaller South Asian countries either directly or indirectly, welcomed external great power involvement in the region with a view to counterbalancing the otherwise unchallenged might of India. In this regard, China and the US have been readily available. On the other hand, India’s policy was designed to keep the great powers—friends and adversaries alike—out of intra-regional affairs, so that it
could exert its power and influence to bear upon the countries of the region. Even when developing closer cooperation with the Soviet Union with a view to counterbalancing the Pak-US-China axis in South Asia, India did not give up the idea of keeping all these extra-regional powers out of the region, though it could do little to change the situation.

During the post-1971 period, India, from a claimant to the regional power status in South Asia, transformed itself into a contender of it. Her strategic thinking on the region underwent a radical transformation. Taking into account her historical potentials as well as international standing, Indian strategists developed a series of well-connected foreign policy and security perceptions with regard to its role in determining the destiny of South Asia which are widely known as India Doctrine. To a significant extent it is the South Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine, wherein India views the entire region as a single strategic unit and herself as the sole custodian of security and stability in the region. 10

During the late-Indira period, and particularly under Rajiv Gandhi, this doctrinaire precept was put into action. As judged by the policy makers in New Delhi, over the four decades of its existence as an independent state, India has prepared herself to embark upon such a policy. Economically, politically and geo-strategically, it has emerged as the single-most dominant power in South Asia overwhelming all its neighbors taken together. In size, it is the largest country, even larger than all its neighbors taken together. It is one of the largest industrial powers of the world. Its army in size, is next only to the super powers and China. It has the world’s sixth largest Navy and eighth largest Air Force. Despite recurrent crises, its political system proved to be more stable than that of any South Asian country. In international arena, it emerged as a factor that should be reckoned with by all the great powers.

With the withdrawal of super and great power involvement from South Asia a vacuum has been created setting the stage for India to fulfil its objectives envisaged in the India Doctrine. While such a situation was envisioned by India’s founding fathers, Nehru in particular, in terms of the method of its implementation the new Indian policy was an
antithesis to Gandhian non-violence and Nehruvian peaceful coexistence. It was highly heavy handed and dependent on the use of or the threat to use force in dealing with the neighbors. Indian policy towards the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and the stationing of IPKF in that country under a controversial treaty, its intervention in the Maldives to suppress an attempted coup, and the deadlock in its relations with Nepal are only the most illustrated manifestations of this policy.

India's role of self-appointed custodian of peace and stability in the region has generated deep mistrust and suspicion in the region. Smaller South Asian neighbors of India are aware of and do recognize India's attempts to transform this natural pre-eminence into an imposed pre-dominance. More disconcerting became the fact that the extra-regional great powers, on whom the smaller countries banked so much, have shown a distinct unwillingness to challenge India within the region. In the circumstances, the smaller South Asian countries have developed a sense of being intimidated. They were deeply concerned that what happened with Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal could be repeated with any other country of the region. As a consequence, India's relations with its neighbors deteriorated severely. Its authority in the region reached the lowest ebb. The worst victim of such an unhealthy atmosphere in the region became the emerging process of cooperation within the framework of SAARC.

However, India's experience as a regional hegemon is not encouraging for itself. The reasons are primarily of domestic and regional nature. The enormous costs incurred by India in terms of material and human resources to sustain its Sri Lanka adventure, the unhappy experience of deadlock in its relations with Nepal have brought, even during Rajiv Gandhi's rule, a change in Indian mind. Influential circles in India came to realize that the prevailing situation of mistrust and suspicion cannot be congenial for the long-standing interests of the country in the region. They became aware that Indian diplomacy has failed to display the wisdom, sophistication and caution as displayed by the previous generation of its leaders. In concrete terms, they have clearly
realized that it is necessary to devise more sophisticated methods of exerting influence on the neighbors than employed against Sri Lanka or even Nepal. The crisis in Kashmir, while deteriorated Indo-Pak relations, also vividly demonstrated the need for shifting emphasis from foreign adventures to domestic politics. During V.P. Singh’s rule, Indian regional posture underwent a process of change. The withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka, a comparatively conciliatory approach towards Nepal and to a lesser extent towards Bangladesh were indicative of the new trend in Indian thinking. The crisis over the Babri Mosque issue and the subsequent developments, including the change of government, reinvigorated the shift in Indian policy away from foreign adventure to domestic problems. Sharp division of the society along ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious as well as ideological lines, coupled with the development of events prior to and following the tragic death of Rajiv Gandhi, painfully reiterated the fact that India is literally at war with itself. Any dramatic improvement in the domestic situation is unlikely and it would serve as a powerful restraint against foreign adventure.

Another important related development is the declining role of regional powers. The replacement of the bipolar world with a unipolar one resulted in the establishment of unprecedented control over the international system by the US and its allies. The great powers—virtually united in a single bloc—have embarked upon a policy of curbing the power and influence of the regional powers. In the Gulf, they have already demonstrated their firmness vis-a-vis hostile designs of a regional power. The Gulf War and the fate of Iraq would put severe restraint on the ambitions of regional hegemons, particularly when such ambitions are confronted with the collective designs of the great powers. As evident from Indian policy, it has clearly received the message and is adjusting its policy to the current realities of international politics.

In the circumstances, security threats to smaller South Asian neighbors of India—as posed by India’s regional security posture during the 1980s—have significantly reduced. Without any dramatic change in the domestic, regional as well as international situation—which is highly unlikely in
the foreseeable future – no realistic politician in power in New Delhi could or would revert to the foreign and security policies of the 1980s.

**ii. Inter-state conflicts**

Inter-state relations in South Asia are characterized by the existence of a number of bilateral disputes which proved to be too difficult to resolve. While some of them are rooted in the historical past, others are in the current dynamics of bilateral as well as intra-state relations. The list of such disputes would be too long. For the convenience of our analysis, it would be better to identify the main concrete issues over which South Asian states quarrel. These are:

i. territorial disputes inherited from the colonial past and the demarcation of land and maritime boundaries;

ii. the sharing of the water resources of common rivers, including that of the Ganges;

iii. intra-state conflict involving ethno-linguistic and religious groups with cross-border affiliation;

iv. conflicting economic interests;

v. smuggling, illegal cross-border activities and a number of other issues.

One of the main characteristic features of bilateral disputes in South Asia is the fact that virtually all of them are Indo-centric. Each of them involves India, on the one hand, and any other country, on the other. The only remarkable exception are the disputes between Bangladesh and Pakistan over the sharing of common assets, and the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis in the former. The only commonly acceptable explanation for this may be the fact that all South Asian countries share a common border with India but with no other regional countries.

Another significant feature is that intra-state conflict over ethnic, linguistic and religious issues in the region often assumes inter-state character with cross-border implications. The main reason behind this is the cross-border affiliation of such groups. It makes the intra-state conflict in one country to have its reverberations felt in neighboring one leading to transborder movement of refugees, political dissidents and arms. In contemporary South Asia, more than anything else, cross-border affiliation of ethnic, linguistic and religious
groups creates almost irresistible temptation for the involvement in the intra-state cleavages in the neighboring countries. On certain occasions, ethno-religious conflicts are being abated from across the border. On others, the ruling elites, being unable to find out solution to intra-state conflicts, are seeking external bogey with a view to justifying repression and mobilizing people to defend the sovereignty and integrity of the country. The transformation of intra-state conflicts into inter-state ones has always been and still remains the single-most dominant factor contributing to violent conflicts in South Asia.

Inter-state relations in South Asia have been shaped under the influence of a host of historical factors of highly contradictory nature. While some of them warranted close ties others dictated a distant approach. In addition, some factors, while creating high degree of interdependence between or among nations, also generated almost irreconcilable conflict of interests. The emergence of disputes and conflicts in inter-state relations, in the region, therefore, can be viewed as natural or even inevitable. Nonetheless, the persistence of all these disputes and conflicts creating such a crisis of confidence in regional politics for so many years and with no solution in sight looks certainly bizarre.

Despite the replacement of India's regional security posture of the 1980s by a much more moderate one and its realization of the consequences of protracted disputes with the neighbors, Indian leadership could hardly undertake any courageous initiative with a view to resolving bilateral disputes. The primary reason behind such a rather paradoxical situation is the fact that there is, at present, too weak a government in power in New Delhi. Its position is too vulnerable to domestic opposition. The resolution of the most of its disputes with neighbors would need substantial compromise on the part of India. If such compromises are made, it would be in all likelihood, characterized by the domestic opposition as weakness of the government. A government that is vulnerable at home cannot afford compromises abroad. Another important factor, the main opposition to the ruling Indian National Congress is the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) with militant Hindu
chauvinism at its heart. Current reality of Indian politics, particularly the correlation of forces between the Congress and the BJP would not let the former to take any bold step on foreign policy issues that would face resistance from the later. No less important is whether the Congress government itself is prepared to make any compromise with the neighbors on the issues of bilateral discords remains quite uncertain. The other countries of the region also stand nowhere much better. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the ruling circles have 'banked too much on anti-Indian rhetorics to gain popular legitimacy. It would constrain their quest for a compromise solution to the disputes with India. Moreover, in both the countries there are powerful anti-Indian lobbies. In Bangladesh also there are powerful lobbies which will resist even such compromises on Bangladesh-India disputes which could be justified in terms of national interests. In the circumstances, South Asian countries will have to travel a long way to find out the wisdom in making compromise solution to numerous bilateral disputes that would facilitate a departure from conflict to a course of cooperation in the region.

Concluding Observations

As evident from our preceding discussion, South Asia is miserably failing to respond to the radical changes in international arena and remains unprepared to face the challenges of the future. The region remains bogged down in numerous intra- and inter-state conflicts while the world has made a decisive shift away from conflict to a course of cooperation. On the other hand, it has given regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC at best a low-key profile when, in order to fulfilling the gigantic tasks of nation-building and facing the challenges posed by the contemporary international economic relations, closer cooperation among the regional countries became as indispensable as never.

The key-question now is how long can South Asia afford to live with such state of affairs in the region? Barring drought-suffering black Africa there is not a single geographical region in the world that is as impoverished as South Asia is. The region is dependent on external world for its mere survival. More than half of the world's total illiterate people live in South Asia. About half of the region's total
population live below the poverty line. Such a region cannot afford to insulate itself from the on-going process of radical change in international arena. The tremendous difficulties suffered by South Asia and the gigantic tasks ahead will create insurmountable pressure on it for evolving a mechanism for the proper management and resolution of its intra- and inter state conflicts and thus, embarking upon a path of meaningful cooperation for mutual benefit.
Notes and References


