

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Sheikh Md Monirul Islam (ed.), *National Security Bangladesh 2008*, University Press Ltd, Dhaka, 2009.**

The book titled **National Security Bangladesh 2008**, produced by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) is an annual report on national security of Bangladesh, the second in the series, covering developments in the sector during the year 2008. It focuses on five key areas of security concern in Bangladesh – systemic aspects, especially external dimension; traditional sources of insecurity from internal perspective; thirdly, the linkage between issues of foreign policy with national security; fourthly, non-traditional security, the issue of food security in particular; and finally the role of civil society organizations in addressing security concerns with particular focus on human trafficking. The list by itself is impressive and the book has succeeded in dealing with the relevant issues in details and depth.

The book is replete with evidences of a high standard of research and hard work put in by the authors and the editor. It meets the felt-need for a compilation of the knowledge produced by the institute throughout the year on various aspects of national security in Bangladesh. The book adds a significant stock of value to the existing literature. Consistent with the standard of the books's publisher, the University Press Limited, it is also decently produced.

Having said that, while reading the book one gets an impression that on occasions, it loads the reader with value judgment and subjective statements. It says for instance: "... our present operational concept is (also) based on purely defensive posture. The concept puts emphasis on causing maximum attrition to the enemy from prepared defensive positions, taking advantage of the obstacle systems and gradually bringing enemy offensive to culmination point, so as to set a stage for a counter-offensive..." One can question who is this addressed to and does a book like this need such polemics, which could be more dispassionate.

The issues covered by the book are pertinent to the discourse on security in Bangladesh, and indeed quite extensive, which will impress the reader. What one finds missing, however, is the rationale for the selection of the specific areas and sub-themes, which is expected of a research product of this standard. In the absence of an analytical statement on the logic behind the choice of contents, one gets an impression that the topics were selected on the basis of the available

expertise and their interest rather than what the title of the book demands. This being a series, hopefully the next year's volume will fill this gap.

There is much to be desired, for instance, in the book's treatment of internal threats. The authors have picked up only two elements to deal with – terrorism and proliferation of small arms, which is quite reasonable. But a reader of the book would obviously look for updates on the situation with respect to such aspects as Chittagong Hill Tracts. The year 2008 like 2007 was a period when the armed forces were deployed under emergency to “assist” the civil administration. What role was played by them in this period and what implications it had on security – both traditional and non-traditional?

Even on the two selected elements, militancy and small arms proliferation the book falls short of addressing the root causes. What are the forces that have created, and continue to create, the space for the growth of terrorism and more specifically religious militancy, which is now increasingly becoming one of the most important sources of conventional insecurity? What are non-traditional factors leading to such conventional insecurities? Is it simply because Bangladesh is on a transit route of movement of inputs to militancy and terrorism, like weapons and ideas? How is the scope and incentive for religious militancy being created in a country born on a secular platform and rejection of the use of religion in politics and statecraft? To what extent is the space attributable to failures of the law enforcement and intelligence agencies; is it the confrontational politics and a politics of zero-sum game that also account for the space? The book would be much richer by treating such questions.

In terms of the non-traditional security (NTS) issues, it is quite logical that the book concentrates on food insecurity as the key thrust. But there are a number of other issues that could have received better treatment in the book. The chapter on NTS mentions human security indicators and very rightly points to six categories – political, economic, societal, health, environmental and cross-border security issues, but hardly dwell with any of these with much depth. The authors could pick up issues of such human security concerns in the period like the state of citizens' access to justice and law enforcement; how about the state of violation of human rights, custodial tortures, deaths and extra-judicial killings; how about the state of rights and securities of the many disadvantaged sections of the society – women, children and the disabled, as well as communities in disadvantaged situations for ethnic, religious and other identities; what prevented people from getting the basic entitlements and services provided by the state like education, health, safety nets and humanitarian assistance, and what would be the scenario if such data could be disaggregated by income levels?

The sixth chapter of the book dealing with the role of civil society is very interesting. It also picks up one particular area as thrust – human trafficking, which is quite important. Again, the logic behind selecting this instead of many other areas that the civil society and NGOs are active on is not sufficiently

explained. The authors do provide a snapshot of the issue-areas that civil society organisations are engaged in with implications for NTS. The attempt made in the section to show the “Frequency of CSOs Role in Insecurity Events” (table 5.1), is commendable. But it is not clear why only one and a quarter newspapers were relied upon to monitor the vast range of CSO activities. More so, a paper picked for the survey that accounts for a far lower proportion of readership than many others. This is not to question the credibility of the paper though, but to suggest that, in future, the information base for such assessment should be more representative.

A more pertinent approach could be to assess specific contributions the CSOs have made not only in service deliveries with human security implications, but also in terms of the whole range of legal, institutional and policy reforms that had to do with civil society activism in Bangladesh.

Finally, the book is on national security, and quite a lot of it is about non-traditional and human security. It is about a paradigm shift in favour of putting the people first. It is very useful and appropriate that BIISS produces such rich literature. But the question is, whether it is reaching the people in a useful manner? To what proportion of people does this publication in English make sense? I may also be blamed for the same folly not only because this review is in English, but also because during my own association with BIISS from early 1980s to mid-90s, all its publications also used to be in English. But we need to learn from past mistakes. If not the whole book, a substantive summary of the publication preferably in a manner that can be understood by readers outside the confines of academe and research for circulation not only in the capital but also local levels as deeply and widely as possible.

Security discourse remains an exclusive domain of a very limited number of researchers and professionals, mainly because of our failure to inform and engage the people in whose interest this discourse is supposed to be. It is about issues of their security, their life, living and well-being, in which they must have a voice to raise, demand to create, and a critical role to play. This extremely useful production of knowledge on security will be more meaningful if the people are informed and engaged.

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