

INDIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBOURS

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

India's relationship with its neighbours in South Asia has been always influenced by domestic politics. Moreover, there has been a continuous fear psychosis amongst the smaller states of the area, which consider India a regional hegemon. India however needs to adopt the stance of an "elder brother" rather than a hegemon. This paper traces the commonalities of South Asian countries, details the diverse security issues of the region and how they affect interstate relationships between India and its neighbours and in conclusion argues that there is a need to move towards a cooperative security framework in South Asia. This would not only rejuvenate SAARC but also build trust and mutual confidence between India and its neighbouring countries.

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The emerging world order poses new challenges and issues and this is also true for South Asia, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, but not China. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and various theses emanating from the Western world such as the "End of Ideology" (Daniel Bell) and the "End of History" (Francis Fukuyama) call for a fresh thinking and understanding of South Asia. Post-Cold War geopolitical

realities necessitate a cooperative security framework in the region to fight the neoliberal economic world order. While some common civilisational and cultural bonds and heritage mark the region as a whole, it also has some deep-rooted strategic problems and political instabilities. Despite all the countries being poor and underdeveloped and part of common organisational fronts/groups like the third world and the Non Aligned Movement, there are some inherent sources of conflict between South Asian states as well.

The deeply entrenched conflictual situation in South Asia is due to a number of factors. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are all multiethnic societies that have been experiencing regional autonomy or separatist movements for a long time. There are the Assamese, Kashmiris, Nagas, Sikhs, *et al* in India, the Baluchis, Pathans and Sindhis in Pakistan and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Ethnic conflicts in South Asia also have a regional dimension. Communal and separatist violence receive encouragement and material support from across national boundaries—as in the case of India's Kashmir, Punjab, tribal districts and northeast region, the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, the provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh in Pakistan, parts of Bangladesh, etc. When such support is sustained over a long period, as in the case of Pakistan's

support for Kashmiri separatists, it usually assumes the form of a proxy war and even a little spark can lead to a full-scale war (Raju GC Thomas, *Democracy, Security and Development in India*, London: Macmillan Press, 1996). Thus, ethnic disturbances in a country are exploited by neighbouring states, as in the case of Pakistan giving arms and training to Kashmiri militants and the Punjabi Sikh separatists or the Burmese aiding the Nagas and Mizos in northeast India. At times ethnic conflicts spillover into neighbouring states, such as the Tamil problem of Sri Lanka and the Chakmas (originally of Arunachal Pradesh) of Bangladesh into India. India however is determined not to concede to any separatist group, as the independence of one state could generate a chain reaction.

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crisis of governance in most South Asian states, as reflected by the collapse of democratic institutions, widespread corruption and fractured mandates resulting in coalition governments in India. In Pakistan, it can be seen in the frequent transfer of democracy to the military through coups. The combination of factors such as the crisis of governance, failure of the democratic system, decentralisation of power, imbalanced intra and interstate developments and increased ethnic conflicts jeopardise the South Asian system.

Most regional organisations, like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are guided by the basic assumptions of the functionalist theory, which states that cooperation in “low politics” areas (economic, social and technical) leads to cooperation in “high politics” areas (political cooperation). However, the bitter relationship between the two most powerful countries in South Asia—India and Pakistan—has ruled out any fruitful cooperation and SAARC’s record has been dismal in terms of institutional development and programme implementation. The following section details the diverse security issues between India and other South Asian states. It reflects how SAARC’s functioning has been affected by bilateral disputes between India on the one hand and Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on the other. It also evaluates how bilateral relations and domestic politics of South Asian states impinge on the functioning of SAARC.

Most South Asian states look at India as a regional hegemon. Undoubtedly, it is the dominant country of the area surrounded by a number of smaller countries. In many of these states democracy exists only in name, economic development is slow and political instability prevails. Applying the hypothesis of dependency theorist Immanuel Wallerstein, India constitutes the “centre” and its neighbours the “periphery”. Most South Asian states are economically underdeveloped. Abject poverty, female foeticide, gradual decline in primary and secondary education, hunger, illiteracy, lack of access to safe drinking water, malnutrition, rising levels of inflation, starvation deaths and unemployment afflict most regional states.

In South Asia, the balance of power is decisively in India’s favour, as its economic and military power and geographical size by far surpass that of its smaller neighbours. Although it was Bangladesh that primarily mooted the idea of SAARC, smaller South Asian states have since expressed their apprehensions of India’s dominance. As Rajen Harshe (“South Asian Regional Cooperation: Problems and Prospects”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol34, no19, 8 May 1999, p1100) elucidates, “India’s military interventions in Bangladesh (1971), Sri Lanka (1987–90) and the Maldives (1988) have only added to the insecurity as well

as fear of Indian hegemony amongst its neighbours". There thus remains a fear psychosis amongst the smaller South Asian nations that multilateral cooperation through SAARC would undermine their political autonomy and sovereignty. They are also apprehensive of being unable to settle bilateral disputes with neighbours in their own national interests. Thus, foreign policy objectives and national security considerations have impeded SAARC from becoming a regional success story.

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan share the same colonial and territorial past. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into two separate states (India and Pakistan) based on the two-nation theory laid down the seeds of animosity and the strained relationship today acts as a major impediment to the smooth functioning of SAARC. This paper next evaluates the respective power positions of India and Pakistan to understand the complexities of regional cooperation in South Asia. Pakistan perceives India as a dominant regional hegemonic player

in the South Asian system, while India sees Pakistan as its main challenger. New Delhi tends to play the role of a regional security manager and not a hegemon, wishing for bilateral negotiations and close cultural and economic relations with Islamabad. It also feels the necessity to keep the regional power balance to its advantage. On the other hand, Pakistan tends to internationalise disputes with India, seeking to strengthen itself by obtaining strategic support from outside the system, through extra-regional forces

like the United States of America (US) and China, while avoiding close cultural and economic relations with India (Rajesh Basrur, "South Asia's Persistent Cold War", *ACDIS Occasional Paper*, Research Programme on Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, November 1996, p2).

In addition, the deep-rooted legacy of mistrust and suspicion resulting from communal conflicts and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, has strained the efforts for cooperation. The concept of the two-nation theory—with religion being the basis of Pakistan and India a secular democracy with a federal structure catering to diverse ethnic, linguistic and regionalist aspirations with equal rights

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for all—places the two countries in different ideological compartments. Thus the two ideologies intrinsically create dissonance and pose serious threats to each other. Another major structural factor of mistrust has been the absence of interdependence between the two states. Pakistani fears Indian hegemony and the consequent loss of its own cultural identity. It is because of these structural factors that both India and Pakistan have been involved in a zero-sum game in their bilateral relations and consequently there has been little cooperation between the two (Sujit Lahiry, “SAARC: Old Dilemmas and Emerging Prospects”, *Journal of Peace Studies*, vol14, no2, April–June 2007, p24).

India and Pakistan have fought four wars—1947–48, 1965, 1971 and the limited war of 1999. Kashmir remains the most bitter issue of discord between the two countries and the state was divided into Indian Kashmir and Pakistan occupied Kashmir after the 1947–48 war. The 1965 war ended with a ceasefire brokered by the Soviet Union, which led to the formulation of the *Tashkent Agreement* on 4 January 1966. The *status quo* over the division of Kashmir was maintained in this agreement. While, Pakistan initiated the Indo–Pak conflicts of 1947–48 and 1965, India’s strategic initiative in East Pakistan led to the third war of 1971 (the war for Bangladesh’s independence). The partition of the Indian subcontinent included the division of the state of Bengal into two. While India retained West Bengal, East Bengal went to Pakistan primarily because of the dominant Muslim majority (about 86 per cent of the population) and was renamed East Pakistan. The Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman won an absolute parliamentary majority in the first democratic election held in the country in October 1970. The Awami League’s demand for autonomy however was rejected by the military regime led by General Yahya Khan, who launched a massive military campaign against East Pakistan. In protest a civil war started in March–April 1971. The Pakistani army resorted to widespread atrocities resulting in the massive influx of refugees (about four million by May 1971) into the Indian state of West Bengal (Kishore C Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2008, pp62–3).

On 5 December 1971, India declared war against Pakistan. Its decision was based on the facts that “The liberation of East Pakistan would undermine Pakistan’s two-nation theory, weaken Pakistan’s claims to Kashmir and reduce Pakistan’s size so that it would not be able to challenge India’s predominance in the region” (*ibid*, p63). Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, with the backing of the Soviet Union, gave logistical support by providing food, medicine and shelter to the

refugees from East Pakistan. To fight against the Pakistani army, Gandhi sent troops from India across its eastern border to join the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army). The two groups together won the 1971 war and the dismemberment of East Pakistan led to the formation of the independent country of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. India and Pakistan signed the *Simla Agreement* in 1972, by which both countries agreed to respect the line of control as determined by the ceasefire agreement on 17 December 1971 and resolve their disputes peacefully through bilateral negotiations or any other mutually acceptable means (*ibid*).

India and Pakistan reached the brink of war in 1984, 1987 and 1990 while the Kargil War in spring 1999 deepened the animosity between the two. Additionally, the possibility of a nuclear conflict loomed large in South Asia following nuclear tests by both countries in May 1998. The Kargil War was followed by the failed Agra Summit of 2001, in which according to some, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, mistakenly recognised President Pervez Musharraf as the legitimate leader of Pakistan. Musharraf had come to power through a military coup on 10 October 1999 by overthrowing the democratic civilian rule of Nawaz Sharif. This development reflects the dominance of the military and the shifting civil–military relations in

Pakistan. Subsequently, a thaw prevailed in Indo–Pak relations, followed by confidence building measures (CBMs), which focussed on cooperation in trade, economics and cultural ties. The two sides also envisaged the establishment of peaceful cooperative relations with the help of greater people-to-people contact. CBMs included the Delhi–Lahore bus service, as well as diplomatic, economic and military ties (Sujit Lahiry, “India’s Foreign Policy in South Asia: Retrospect and Prospect” in Emmanuel Nahar (Ed), *The Foreign Policy of India in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Prospects*, New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2011, p196). India and Pakistan also started a Composite Dialogue Process, which identified seven core areas (Famida Ashraf, “India–Pakistan Dialogue under the Congress Government”, *Strategic Studies*, vol24, no3, Autumn 2004, pp23–4):

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1. Peace and security including CBMs and Kashmir
2. Siachen
3. Wullar Barrage project
4. Sir Creek
5. Terrorism and drug trafficking
6. Economic and commercial cooperation
7. Promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields

The present United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in India has also reiterated the need for CBMs and dialogue with Pakistan. However, these have been hampered by the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and the frequent incidences of crossborder terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Successive governments in Pakistan, both civilian and military, have kept the line of control in Kashmir militarily hot and active for their own survival. Pakistani activities in Kashmir and the mountainous regions on Indian soil and along the line of control are dual in nature—sabotage from inside through infiltration and military skirmishes followed by full-scale attack from outside. Activities in other parts of its border with India, especially in the plains are intended to open numerous fronts to minimise India's attacking and defensive potentiality in the north (Sujit Lahiry, "A Blueprint of India's Defence Strategy", *Mainstream*, vol40, no11, 2 March 2002, pp27–8).

The prospects for regional cooperation in South Asia hinge on the geographically vast and economically and politically powerful "big brother" India resolving some of its conflicts with its neighbours. On its part in 1996, India signed the *Ganga Water Treaty* with Bangladesh for 30 years, which came into effect on 1 January 1997 and a river water sharing treaty with Nepal (the *Mahakali Accord*). Both these have boosted agrarian production and increased trade facilities between India and its neighbours (Lahiry, 2007, *ibid*, p26). In addition, during a visit to Dhaka in September 2011, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina mooted the need for an agreement on the sharing of the Teesta waters. However, the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee opposed the proposed ratio of 50:50 water sharing as laid down in the draft agreement of the treaty and it therefore did not materialise. Another contentious issue between India and Bangladesh is the construction of the Tipaimukh Dam, a hydel power project on the river Barak in Manipur. Bangladesh feels that the dam would have serious environmental impacts on its eastern Sylhet district.

Earlier during a January 2010 visit Manmohan Singh had signed a land

boundary agreement with his Bangladeshi counterpart. However, the non-implementation of the agreement has resulted in bitterness on both sides. Another cause of concern is the issue of border crimes, especially cattle smuggling, human trafficking and the killing of Bangladeshi nationals. Moreover, the bus service between Kolkata and Dhaka and the *hilsa* diplomacy have not made any substantial progress. Additionally, extra-regional powers (China, Saudi Arabia and the US) exert substantial influence on Bangladesh's economy, polity and foreign policy. Furthermore, Indo–Bangladesh relations have also been hampered by the Chittagong Hills Tract conflict. As Dash (*ibid*) argues, “Another thorny issue that has generated increased tension in Indo–Bangladeshi relations is the flow of refugees across the border to India as a result of the tribal insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Bangladesh blames India for supporting the *Chakma Shanti Bahini* who are fighting the government for greater autonomy for the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. India, in turn, blames Bangladesh for supporting Mizo National Front rebels against the Indian Union”.

Indo–Sri Lankan relations have been always affected by the problems faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka. During the last 30 years, successive Sri Lankan governments confronted a powerful challenge from the separatist terrorist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Indian policymakers essentially followed a two pronged strategy—finding a political solution to the ethnic conflict and ensuring the LTTE did not create a separate Tamil Eelam (Neil Devotta, “When Individuals, States and Systems Collide: India's Foreign Policy towards Sri Lanka” in Sumit Ganguly (Ed), *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p33). With the decimation of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan government in mid-May 2009, it was assumed that the Sri Lanka issue would end. However, the Sri Lankan government inflicted heavy casualties and allegedly committed gross human rights violations in its efforts to defeat the LTTE. This fact has become a major factor influencing India's response to the Sri Lankan Tamil issue. The regional *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* party led by M Karunanidhi

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left the UPA government at the centre on the issue of India's lack of commitment to a resolution against the Sri Lankan government. The resolution was moved by the US to confront Sri Lanka on the human rights issue and found support amongst the regional parties in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. India however has adopted a policy of caution and restraint, as it does not want to meddle in its neighbour's internal affairs. This principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country was enunciated by Jawaharlal Nehru in his *panchsheel* (five principles of peaceful coexistence). One may argue that India too would not tolerate any interference in its internal affairs by another country.

In Nepal, the monarchy was uprooted in 2008 and the country declared a secular one, ending its image of a Hindu state. However, the Constituent Assembly has not only failed to articulate and frame a new constitution, but has been unable to emancipate ethnic groups and oppressed castes as well. Land reforms were supposed to remove the remnants of feudalism, and help Nepal move from a state of dependency to steady economic growth. However, this will only be possible if all groups abide by the various peace agreements and work within a democratic framework (Aditya Adhikari, "Nepal: The Discontent after the Revolution", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol48, no7, 16 February 2013, p27).

Bhutan too is undergoing a transition from an absolute monarchy to a multiparty democracy. Since the 1950s, Bhutanese monarchs have gradually introduced democratic reforms. The process began with legal reforms such as the abolition of slavery and ended with the enactment of a Constitution. The first National Council elections were held in 2007–08, the first National Assembly elections in 2008 and the first local government elections in 2011. The post 2007–08 parliamentary elections period in Bhutan has witnessed a process of institutionalisation and the consolidation of the democratic process. India and Bhutan are guided by the *Treaty of Peace and Friendship* of 1949. This stipulates that India will not interfere in Bhutan's internal affairs, but that Thimphu would be guided by New Delhi in its foreign policy. The treaty provides for perpetual peace and friendship, free trade and commerce and equal justice to each other's citizens.

All major South Asian states are producers and exporters of raw materials and importers of finished products from economically developed countries. This adversely affects intra and interregional trade and industrial development. Intraregional trade as a share of total exports is a mere five per cent. On the other hand, the US, European Union and Japan are the largest trading partners of SAARC countries, accounting for more than 50 per cent of trade. Another

substantial proportion (40 per cent) of trade is with the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation region including China. The countries of South Asia could strengthen ties through greater intra and interregional trade, possibly through the South Asian Free Trade Area.

Additionally, the countries of South Asia need to evolve the concept of “cooperative security” to explain the underlying logic of regional cooperation. According to C Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) “Cooperative security could be understood as policies of governments, which see themselves as former adversaries or potential adversaries to shift from or avoid confrontationist policies. Cooperative security essentially reflects a policy of dealing peacefully with conflicts, not merely by abstention from violence or threats, but by active engagement in negotiation, a search for practical solutions and with a commitment to preventive measures. Cooperative assumes the existence of a condition in which the two sides possess the military capabilities to harm each other. ... Establishing cooperative security runs into a complex process of building confidence and trust and there could be repeated failures”. Thus in conclusion, cooperative security, intra and interregional trade and more confidence building measures could help rejuvenate not only SAARC, but also build trust and mutual confidence between India and its neighbours in South Asia. 

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