

# **REGIONAL SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA: CONFIDENCE-BUILDING AND SURVIVAL AMIDST FAULTLINES AND VULNERABILITIES**

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Notwithstanding its common historical heritage, the tumult of South Asia's legacy renders it as the least integrated region in the world. The gambit of South Asian security discourse is extremely complex and perplexing owing primarily to the existential inter-state trust deficit. Regional security mechanisms have proved to be ineffective in the South Asian case as the "security-insecurity paradox" remains the focal point. Although the dialogues surrounding South Asian security take into account traditional (military) and non-traditional security issues, which dramatically alter the regional security environment, the fact remains that as the largest regional organisation, in terms of population and sphere of influence, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has failed to take off effectively. Heavily contentious political issues have eclipsed the forum entirely. Incongruous development, economies, demographic sizes, inadequate domestic energy resources (with a competition to secure energies supplies) are factors that constantly lay pressure on the stability and security of the region. Additionally, the politico and geo-strategic setting of the subcontinent, with security dependencies among regional nations, and the looming presence of external players, remain deeply intertwined.

The regional dynamics of South Asia do not make for a very promising or optimistic picture. In addition to the traditional challenges of nation-building, a pressing need for economic engagement has often been dwarfed by mammoth political compulsions which tend to block any such consideration. Being the second largest poorest region in the world, South Asia's human development indices are among the lowest in the world, with nearly 32 percent of the population here living on less than \$1 per day. The economic potential of the region has predominantly been demonstrated by the story of India's successful economic growth in recent years. Yet, it is ironical that in terms of the human development index, India is placed way below Sri Lanka and Maldives. However, the demographics, social, economic and political structures in South Asia, especially with regards to the economic potential of the region continue to be confronted by harsh realities of the region, characterized by mass poverty, unending conflict, and the resultant challenges of conflict resolution and access to energy. In so far as the domestic energy requirements are concerned, the fact that domestic resources are inadequate to meet the energy requirement in South Asia has fuelled a stiff competition for adequate, secure and affordable supplies of energy resources. The problem only tends to get compounded further by a rise in international pressure to cut greenhouse gas emissions, especially in the context of renewable energy given its inherent limitations. This leads to assessing and debating upon availability of natural gas as the cleanest fossil fuel, particularly for the power and industrial sectors in the region.

Besides, South Asia remains the most populous region in the world, with nearly 1.57 billion people, making for 23 percent of global populace. The region stands witness to decades of unending conflict including irregular, covert and proxy war in the name of jihad, spread of radical

fundamentalism/extremism and terrorism. The resultant challenges of human security and conflict resolution loom large across South Asian countries and the interminable presence of heavily militarized borders between prominent players in the region tend to manifest this reality. The population figures also illustrate that a predominant youth bulge in the region is challenging employment generation. Lack of enough opportunities, easy access to small arms, narcotics, and drugs has created a diabolical nexus between narcotics trafficking, arms trade and terrorism.

Themes such as identity, democracy and order are crucial in so far as understanding internal security dynamics of regional players in a case-by-case approach. Specifically, the state-centric approaches between India and Pakistan placed in the traditional realist framework of security are essentially based on the concept of power, thus depicting distinct interconnections between different levels of security. In fact, prominent traces of the sectoral approach to security can be found in areas including military security; political security; economic security (inclusive of access to resources); finance and markets necessary to sustain acceptable levels of welfare and state power; societal security encompassing the issue of cultural, religious and national identity; and environmental security. In case of the climate change debate in South Asia, the plethora of environmental problems include deforestation, soil erosion, floods, droughts, population explosion, growth, and alarmingly rising levels of pollution.

India's North-east, consists of an indigenous population of more than 220 major tribes and numerous sub-tribes, resultant of mass migrations over the past centuries, both from Southeast and East Asia. India lies at the centre of two major international weapon warehouses, namely, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/FATA region in the Af-Pak belt and the Southeast Asian arms market comprising Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Both these sub-regions are large-scale consumers as well as transit points for proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). The "gun culture" in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA areas is rooted in Darra Adam Khel with as many as 2,600 arms shops and five gun factories. Other South Asian nations including Bangladesh and Nepal were transit routes once upon a time, however, have become major end-users now. Sylhet and Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh were used to transfer arms procured by insurgent groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) from the Thai-Cambodian border and Myanmar. South Asia's security dynamics have become ever more precarious since India and Pakistan were propelled across a nuclear threshold with the consequent risk of war in a nuclear setting, and non-state actors challenging the very basic concept of nuclear security and terrorism, thereby threatening regional stability and security. More significantly, concerns over the physical security of nuclear weapons and sensitive WMD material/technology, including Radiological Dispersal Devices (commonly referred to as "Dirty Bombs") have only been rising in the past few years.

This can be attributed to growing radicalism both in society and in the armed forces of South Asian member-states, in addition to weak governance, socio-economic disparity — factors that remain the root of social turmoil and political unrest. While the prospect of cooperative peace and security in South Asia is highly desirable, the 21<sup>st</sup> century discourse on South Asian Security revolves critically on a strong and sincere political will, requisite to enhance regional integration and operationalise cooperative peace, and more decisively, define and protect the parameters of human security in the subcontinent.