

Comprehensive Security in South Asia: Problems and Prospects

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The right of a country to preserve its national security which has become increasingly vulnerable to the menace of international terrorism cannot be questioned. Security, however, in a comprehensive sense, transcends the ability of a country to protect its territory from external aggression, extra-regional threats, global wars and violence as V. R. Raghavan rightly observes: 'The existing state-centred approach to national security, confined to the defense of a country against territorial aggression, has been widened to the idea of security inclusive of a larger set of threats to the people of the state'¹. A similar view is maintained by P. R. Chari: 'An understanding of South Asian national security requires the military and non-military threats in the region to be considered'². Such non-military threats, as Baral points out, include ethnic crisis, national and transnational terrorism, religious fundamentalism, atmospheric pollution, population, poverty, trans-border migration and redefinition of state sovereignty in accordance with the burgeoning trend of supra-nationalism.³

Our approach to South Asian security has been lopsided as it has hitherto focussed mainly on the military component, including the nuclear potential, of some South Asian Countries, namely, India and Pakistan.⁴ With the end of the Cold War, the ambit of security studies has expanded to include human, environmental, social and economic security, as Abdur Rob Khan opines: 'Military security is still perhaps the dominant

¹ V.R. Raghavan: 'Introduction', in V. R. Raghavan (ed.) Comprehensive Security in South Asia : Seminar Proceedings, Delhi Policy Group, January 2001, p. 1

² P. R. Chari : 'Security and Governance in South Asia: Their Linkages', in P. R. Chari (ed.). Security and Governance in South Asia, RCSS, Colombo 2001, p. 12

³ Lok Raj Baral: 'Non-military Threats and Governance' in Muchkund Dubey and Nancy Jetly (eds.) South Asia and Its Eastern Neighbours, New Delhi 1999, see pp 243-267 for detail.

⁴ M. P. Lohani: 'South Asia Comprehensive Security Perspectives: Nepal' in . V. R. Raghavan (ed.) Comprehensive Security in South Asia: Seminar Proceedings, Delhi Policy Group, January 2001, see pp 23-35 for detail.

paradigm, but it is being increasingly realized that military security cannot respond to some of mankind's fundamental needs like freedom from poverty, threats to individuals and groups from multiple sources.⁵

The purpose of this paper is to bring home the point that security in South Asia is threatened today as much by massive poverty, the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, including economic disparity within states⁶, population growth disproportionate to economic growth, social tensions caused by ethnic strife and communal clashes, large-scale migrations within and between states in search for a better life, urbanization at an accelerated pace and deterioration in the environment as by the arms race between two major countries of the region, acts of violence and terror perpetrated by terrorists to coerce individuals, groups, communities or governments into conceding to their political demands and religious fundamentalists threatening to radicalize the society of the region.

South Asia comprising seven nations accounts for over one-fifth of the world's population. With a civilization regarded as one of the most ancient the region derives its identity and uniqueness from a common geography, a common eco-system and shared bonds of culture, history and the economics of neighbourhood.⁷ It is recognized that poverty alleviation is the greatest challenge facing the peoples of South Asia.⁸ Endemic poverty is responsible for creating political and social tensions in South Asia. Despite more than four decades of development effort, the overall rate of growth in the region has remained too low to have a substantial impact on living standards and quality of nearly 40 percent of the people. Growth has failed to 'trickle down' in any significant manner, and the magnitude of poverty remains staggering.⁹ The Report of the Independent South

⁵ Abdur Rob Khan: 'Introduction' in Abdur Rob Khan (ed.) Globalization and Non-traditional Security in South Asia, RCSS, Colombo 2001, P. 12

⁶ Indian Finance Minister P. Chidambaram made a statement, as reported in *The Kathmandu Post*, August 7, 2004, that India's wealthier states are getting richer while poorer states are lagging behind, creating an economic gulf that has dangerous implications for the country's stability.

⁷ Meeting the Challenge: Report of the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation, SAARC Secretariat, November 1992, xii

⁸ "Twelfth SAARC Declaration" Published in Report on Nepal's Foreign Affairs (2002 – 2003), IFA, Kathmandu, March 2004, P. 170

⁹ Meeting the Challenge, Op. cit. p. 15

Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA), 1992 draws our attention to how large-scale unemployment of educated youth all over the region has given rise to much disenchantment and alienation with the development process and, for that matter, with the democratic process itself. We further learn from the study that conflicts and militancy, in many cases, are partly the result of the inability of the economies of the region to grow fast enough to satisfy the awakened aspirations of the people'.¹⁰ ISACPA, now reconstituted, has already submitted its Report 'our Future our Responsibility', and the twelfth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad in January this year declared poverty alleviation as 'the overarching goal of all SAARC activities'.¹¹

Nepal's Tenth Five-Year Plan has accorded priority to poverty alleviation. Despite the implementation of pro-poor programmes, the percentage of people living below the poverty line is somewhere between 35 to 40 percent. The Human Development Report 2004 ranks Nepal 69th among 95 developing countries in the Human Poverty Index (HPI).¹² Nepal has a long way to go before the target of reducing the poverty of people to 15 percent below poverty line is achieved within the next twelve years. Poverty reduction is still a mirage, as Jan Sharma writes: 'Most poverty-fighting programmes designed to benefit the poorest of the poor and other disadvantaged groups have left out these very groups for one reason or the other'.¹³

With a gradual erosion of the credibility of the State and anomie of other political institutions,¹⁴ it is hardly surprising that social groups mired in abject poverty and alienated from the mainstream have, in some countries of the region, already resorted to violent means or methods to express their resentment and frustration. South Asia seems to have embraced a culture of violence in recent years, as insurgency and counter

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 14

¹¹ 'Twelfth SAARC Declaration', Op. cit. P. 170

¹² As reported in the Himalayan Times, Kathmandu, July 20, 2004

¹³ Jan Sharma: 'Tackling Exclusion', The Kathmandu Post, July 19, 2004

¹⁴ 'South Asia', states Jayadeva Uyangoda, 'is fast reaching a phase of political anomie. One of its key features is the weakening, from within as well as without, of the old forms of the state along with the erosion of their structures of legitimation', in 'Security's Insecurity: South Asia's States, Societies and Citizens in the Age of Globalization', Rajesh M. Basrur (ed.) *Security in the New Millennium*, RCSS, India Research Press, New Delhi, 2001, p. 116

insurgency operations and movements have become the order of the day in most South Asian countries.¹⁵ While ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, where secessionist Tamil Tigers (LTTE) have waged armed struggle for more than two decades, remains unresolved despite peace talks between the government and rebels through international mediation, Maoist insurgents in Nepal, where ‘violence exploded in 1996 as ‘People’s War’ for the seizure of state power and has continued as a protracted conflict’,¹⁶ have, in recent years, unleashed the reign of terror in different parts of the country, in particular far western districts which are woefully backward, neglected and deprived of the minimum infrastructure for development. A large number of people that include security personnel, Maoists and other innocent civilians have lost their lives in the cross-fire between insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. The insurgents twice walked out of the negotiations, despite several rounds of peace talks and have intensified their indiscriminate acts of violence, terror and insurgency through intimidation, extortion, abduction and senseless killings. Recently, the rebels have also intensified the campaign of forcible recruitment of youths in their militia.¹⁷

Maoist insurgents have been dubbed terrorists by the State. The close connection between Nepali Maoists and their counterparts in India is no longer an open secret. They have received arms supplies from across the border, albeit clandestinely. The outgoing Indian Ambassador Shyam Saran, in a recent interaction with the media, described the Maoist insurgency as a common threat to Nepal and India. While admitting that arms smuggling has happened, he stressed the need for vigilance and extended India’s cooperation to resolve the problem politically. He categorically stated: ‘The problem of Maoist insurgency Nepal is facing does not respect our national boundaries’.¹⁸ In this context, it is encouraging to note that India has recently taken steps to deploy the Special Security Bureau (SSB) on the border to control cross-border arms and explosive smuggling. Likewise, some Maoist leaders have been apprehended and handed over by India to

¹⁵ M. P. Lohani, Op. cit. p. 30

¹⁶ Dhruva Kumar: ‘Proximate causes of conflict in Nepal’, an unpublished paper presented at an International Workshop on ‘Causes of Internal Conflict and Means to Resolve Them: Case Study of Nepal’ Kathmandu, February 22-24, 2004, p. 1

¹⁷ The Kathmandu Post, July 19, 2004

¹⁸ As reported in the Himalayan Times, Kathmandu, July 10, 2004

Nepal, while some are in Indian custody. Nepal has appreciated Indian gesture of cooperation.

A unique feature of the Nepal-India relationship is the open border which has been misused for large scale migration¹⁹ as well as for undesirable activities such as terrorism, subversion, drug-smuggling and trafficking in women.²⁰ Such activities are bound to give rise to occasional irritants, tensions and misunderstanding in bilateral relations. The cross-border movement of terrorist and criminal elements who sneak into each other's territory to carry out their sinister designs is a matter of serious concern to both Nepal and India. The need for regulating the open border through joint endeavours, vigilance, patrolling and strict record keeping of the movement of goods and people has been realized and highlighted by experts and policy makers on both sides. Nepali fears that the continued presence of terrorist and criminal elements across the border might jeopardize its security and make the country vulnerable to external intervention are not completely unjustified.

A glaring instance of the misuse of the open border was the influx into Nepal of over one hundred thousand refugees from Bhutan in the 90s. Victims of ethnic cleansing these refugees have been languishing in seven UNHCR –sponsored camps in eastern Nepal for more than a decade. The plight of these refugees, mostly uneducated, unemployed and demoralized, and who have been waiting impatiently for repatriation to their own country with dignity and honour is bound to further embitter the otherwise friendly relations between Nepal and Bhutan which have worked together in international forums for the cause of land-locked and least developed countries (LDCs). The lingering refugee crisis, it is feared, might turn the refugee camps into a breeding ground for terrorists and other anti-social elements posing a threat to the security of both Nepal and India. There is already a rising incidence of crime, and forests in the surrounding areas are being felled

¹⁹ John Woodall, a senior International Labour Organization (ILO) officer, made a statement, as reported in *The Kathmandu Post*, August 7, 2004 that Nepal and India sharing porous open border has also fuelled to cross-border migration and that the increasing trend of migration from Nepal could be linked to flaring insurgency.

²⁰ M. P. Lohani 'Nepal's Security at the Turn of the Century', in Kousar J. Azam (ed.). Discourse in Trust: US- South Asia Relations, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi 1999, see pp 275-286 for detail.

causing damage to the ecosystem of the region. Experience has shown that a landslide in Nepal would wreak havoc in the Ganges and sweep away an entire village in Bangladesh. The longer the process of repatriation is delayed, the more difficult it will be for governments of the region to devise concrete programmes of cooperation in order to curb further deterioration in the environment.

Despite 15 rounds of talks between Nepal and Bhutan, the refugee imbroglio remains unresolved. There is a strong feeling that the problem cannot be solved without the cooperation of India which, as stated earlier, was the first entry point of asylum for refugees from Bhutan. India is reluctant to mediate, insisting that it is a bilateral problem. A noted human rights activist and a senior Bhutanese leader Tek Nath Rizal who spent 10 years in Bhutan's prison does not accept the argument that the refugee problem is a bilateral one where two countries Nepal and Bhutan sit and find a lasting solution.²¹ While Nepal has not abandoned efforts to arrive at a solution through the bilateral process, the issue has already become internationalized.²² There is mounting pressure on Bhutan from the international community, including the European Union and donor agencies, to expedite the repatriation of already verified refugees in the Khudunabari camp and launch the process of verification in other camps without further delay. The crux of the problem is the lack of political will in Thimpu which is buying time to postpone indefinitely the return of refugees to their country with dignity and honour.

The dominant presence of India in the region is a reality which cannot be left out of discussion on comprehensive security in South Asia. India is largest of all countries in the region in terms of size, population and resource endowment and shares common borders with all its neighbours, except for the island states of Maldives and Sri Lanka. Ever since the partition of India in 1947 which brought Pakistan into existence as an independent country, India and Pakistan with nuclear capabilities have already fought two wars over Kashmir and avoided, luckily, another military confrontation on the verge of war in the Kargil sector of Jammu and Kashmir five years ago. The deep distrust and hostility

²¹ 'Interview with Tek Nath Rizal', The Kathmandu Post, July 19, 2004

²² 'Bhutan', Report on Nepal's Foreign Affairs (2002-2003), IFA, Kathmandu, March 2004, P. 17

between the two countries has been compounded by the lingering dispute over Kashmir.²³ Kashmir remains, without doubt, a festering sore in Indo-Pak relations. The international community, including countries in the region, welcomed the peace overtures recently made by the Congress (I) –led coalition government of India. Both countries have reaffirmed their commitment to the peace process and the resumption of composite dialogue. At the SAARC Ministerial Meeting in Islamabad last July, the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan discussed bilateral matters, including the issue of Kashmir, in a cordial atmosphere for improving relations through peaceful dialogue. There was, however, no reference to the recent increase in India’s defense expenditure by 17 percent and the same increase in Pakistan’s military budget by 6 percent. Observers, reacting to the increase in military expenditures in the region, have expressed apprehension that the arms race between the two nuclear rivals might cause a setback for regional peace and stability.²⁴

While Indo-Pak relations have remained strained due to cross-border terrorism, a major irritant in India-Bangladesh relations is the allegedly illegal presence of immigrants from Bangladesh, particularly in the north-eastern states of India. The militant separatist rebels from Assam called ULFA have crossed into Bhutan and used it as a base for hostile operations against their own country of origin. A majority of the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka continues to believe that the Tamil rebels known as LTTE were trained, aided and abetted in the Tamil Nadu State of India in the early 1980s. The death toll in the civil war in Sri Lanka has already risen to over 60,000 during the last two decades. As stated earlier, the Nepal-India open border continues to be misused by criminal, anti-social elements and terrorists, including Maoist insurgents. These few instances confirm the state of insecurity in the region which has not only contributed to the internal displacement of people and intra-state conflicts but also cross-border migration and inter-state conflicts.²⁵

²³ Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Talat Masood, ‘Security in South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective’ Security in South Asia (Policy Studies Series 2), IFA, Kathmandu 2001, p. 96

²⁴ The International Herald Tribune, July 13, 2004

²⁵ Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘Security in South Asia: A Bangladesh Perspective’ Security in South Asia (Policy Studies Series 2), IFA, Kathmandu 2001, see pp 1-29 for detail.

Democracy, good governance, economic growth and social justice are interrelated and call for an integrated and holistic approach in the context of comprehensive security in South Asia. Commenting on the process of governance in South Asia dominated by special interest groups, P.R. Chari observes that good political governance requires decentralization of powers to the people; accountability and transparency in public affairs; access to prompt and affordable justice; elimination of discrimination against women and minorities; and, finally, maintenance of peace and social cohesion within states.²⁶ Since South Asian society is multiracial, multiethnic, multi-religious and multilingual, the legitimacy of the democratic process and the rationale of democratic institutions are bound to be questioned if the policy makers and administrators in the region fail to accommodate the interests of the various ethnic groups and minorities that are seeking to assert themselves in the pursuit of their separate identities. In the Nepalese context, Harka Gurung refers to the change triggered by the ‘awareness among the nationalities to establish their cultural identities’.²⁷

Owing to the fragility of democratic regimes in South Asia, politicians in the region, with a few exceptions, have little or no time to think in the larger interest. They are so infatuated with power that they have failed to rise above petty self-interest and short-term political gains. There is an erosion of value system in South Asian politics, and the credibility of political institutions is at stake. Dipankar Banarjee is more forthright in his observation: ‘Rule of law, pluralism, tolerance, openness, transparency and respect for each other’s beliefs, values and religions appear to be fast eroding’.²⁸ No less incisive is Devendra Raj Pandey’s observation: ‘The fundamental issue today is that the constitutional systems and political institutions that we thought were near perfect no longer appear to be so. People are losing faith in them, not only in South Asia but almost all over the world. The reason is not any structural problem as such, but the behaviour of those who manage the system and the others including citizens, who are expected to

²⁶ P. R. Chari, op. cit. p. 14

²⁷ As reported in The Himalayan Times (‘Hindus’ growth rate falls in Nepal’, p. 1), Kathmandu August 3, 2004.

²⁸ Dipankar Banarjee, ‘Foreword’ in Rajesh M. Basrur (ed.) *Security in the New Millennium*, RCSS, India Research Press, New Delhi, 2001, viii

oversee the process'.²⁹ Pandey also deplores the exclusion of the majority poor from political participation which is dominated by traditional elites or neo-elites through corruption.³⁰

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in Nepal in 1990 was a positive development. It raised the people's expectations for a better life and a prosperous future. Euphoria was, however, a short-lived affair as it soon gave place to disillusionment. Although Nepal has had three general elections and two elections to local bodies since 1990, factional infighting in the ruling party (Nepali Congress), which had a comfortable majority in parliament, led to the premature dissolution of parliament, twice in 1994 and 2002. King Gyanendra dismissed the Deuba government in October 2002 as it failed to conduct elections in time, and he invoked Article 127 of the constitution to appoint three prime ministers in less than 2 years. The newly appointed prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, who heads a coalition of 4 political parties and 2 independent persons close to the palace, has a Royal mandate to restore peace by resolving the Maoist problem through fruitful and result-oriented dialogue and conduct general elections peacefully not later than April next year. During the last 13 years, Nepal has witnessed 13 governments with constitutional legitimacy, while raising fears of instability, chaos, confusion and a state of near anarchy.

While the common people continue to grumble against rising prices, income disparities, mass unemployment and overall economic stagnation, political corruption at the top and bureaucratic lethargy and inefficiency have combined to whip up public discontent resulting in rebellion followed by acts of violence and terror. Experts opine that there is a nexus between parties, leaders, ministers, bureaucrats, police and army personnel working in tandem with commission agents and underground gangs.³¹ Baral's analysis ends on a note of caution: 'If the political institutions continue to rot and if the political

²⁹ Devendra Raj Pandey, 'Governance and Political Corruption: A Perspective on Prospects of Regional Cooperation in South Asia' in K. K. Bhargava and Shridhar K. Khatri (eds.) South Asia 2010: Challenges and Opportunities, FES, Delhi 2001, p. 275

³⁰ Devendra Raj Pandey: Nepal's Failed Development, Nepal South Asia Centre, Kathmandu, April, 1999, p. 280-281

³¹ L. R. Baral: 'Governance and Security in Plural Societies', in P. R. Chari (ed.) Security and Governance in South Asia, RCSS, Colombo 2001, p. 100

leaders fail to identify with the common people, the legitimacy issue would surface again placing the country and the polity in serious jeopardy'.³²

In the changing regional security environment, the state is at once the power and non-power to deal with challenges confronting human society. The best strategy of comprehensive security in South Asia lies in the capacity of each country to face challenges and overcome social, economic, political and environmental constraints with renewed vigour, vitality and commitment. Imtiaz Ahmed pleads for the notion of national security to be replaced by a more sober and practical notion of societal security. He concludes by saying that only a combination of creative thinking and bold action could make a lasting difference to the issue of security in South Asia.³³

While recognizing the important role of non-state actors in promoting comprehensive security in South Asia, no state in the region can shirk its responsibility to provide opportunities for remote and backward regions in terms of basic education, primary health care and gainful employment. Each state must keep its own house in order by improving social, economic, political and environmental conditions within its territory. Governments of the region must incorporate the regional agenda in their national development strategy. While sharing experience at the regional level is useful, poverty alleviation is primarily a national responsibility.

The SAARC process needs to be reactivated as it has suffered setbacks in the past owing to bilateral tensions. The promotion of mutual trust and understanding is a prerequisite to achieve the aims of promoting peace, stability and amity in the region. SAARC's future and, for that matter, the prospects of comprehensive security in the region hinge on the willingness of India and Pakistan to accommodate each other on a 'give and take' basis.³⁴ The emphasis of all SAARC Summits has been on fostering good neighbourly relations, relieving tensions and building confidence. Notwithstanding existing contentious issues of a bilateral and regional nature, countries of South Asia should make an effort to

³² Ibid, pp 104-105

³³ Imtiaz Ahmed, *op. cit.* p. 24

³⁴ Y. N. Khanal, unpublished address to the young officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Kathmandu, August 2, 1998

channel their energies towards socio-economic issues, since non-military issues ranging from politics to economics and environment do not act in isolation but have a spillover effect on the other countries.³⁵

³⁵ V. R. Raghavan, *op. cit.* p. 3.