

Paradoxes of South Asian Security

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South Asia as a security zone is full of puzzles. The enigmatic character of South Asia is comprised its evolving nature, the complex conceptualization of its dominant security challenges, and the difficulty of finding solutions to these challenges. Some common security challenges that South Asian countries face require global solutions. The nuclear conundrum of India and Pakistan can only be solved by global solutions because of the complexity posed by the nuclear weapon countries located outside South Asia. Similarly, cyber security is a borderless problem. South Asian countries may manage their security challenges like terrorism with a cooperative framework, yet the increasing global connection to these regional problems complicates the search for solutions.

Keywords nuclear weapons, terrorism, South Asia, regional security, cyber security, regional nuclear stability

Introduction

This article examines the dominant perception of the South Asian regional security identity and capability. South Asia as a regional construct has always been flexible and contested. The presence of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) gives the impression that the idea of South Asia is institutionalized. At present, SAARC has eight members: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. And these countries are generally recognized as South Asian countries and the region which houses these countries is the South Asian region. Even the existence of SAARC has not put an end to the debate regarding South Asia as an appropriate security region. The inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC and the demand for inclusion or involvement of other countries like China underscores that the definition of the region is in a state of flux. The boundaries of South Asia are seemingly blurred. This also buttresses the view that South Asia is not a natural region for understanding the security of the countries of the region and combating their security challenges.

This uncertainty regarding South Asia stunts the growth of South Asia as a security region. The issue has been addressed differently by different sections of the international community. In Western countries, South Asia is predominantly considered a natural region and the analysis of security of the region is accomplished within this framework. Even some Asian countries, using the dominant Western paradigm, reflect the same view. Some non-Western writings maintain that the South Asian security region does exist in terms of non-traditional security challenges (Barthwal-Datta and Basu 2017) even if military security is debatable. Even when the phrase “South Asia” is used, most writings discuss only India and Pakistan to analyze the security situation in South Asia. Occasionally, some writings or studies do choose three countries—India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—for any discussions or understanding of South Asia or its security. The relevance of other South Asian countries is generally ignored and downplayed. Nuclear weapons and non-proliferation further complicate the use of the South Asian nomenclature in the security paradigm.

Within South Asia, policymakers and analysts hold different views of South Asia as a security region. Pakistan does not allow a vision of South Asian security beyond the India-Pakistan security relationship. A strong section in India has always been sceptical of South Asia as a security region because of the security challenges India faces, India’s size vis-à-vis the countries outside South Asia, and, most significantly, China.

So, it is pertinent to explore the following question: can South Asia as a security community address security issues haunting or dominating the South Asian region? South Asian countries do face some common security challenges, yet the formation of a security community in the region has not become a reality. The complexity of the South Asian regional construct is stimulated partly by the nature of threats the countries of the region face and partly by the mutually contradictory policies adopted by these countries. As a result, the solution to the dominant South Asian security puzzle must be found through cooperation with the international community.

Demystifying the Nuclear Flashpoint

For more than two decades, South Asian security has been predominantly linked to the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan. In 1998, the two countries tested their nuclear weapons and declared themselves nuclear weapon states. This started a new phase of nuclear politics worldwide. Immediately after the tests, the world appeared apprehensive about peace and stability in the region. Some even feared the possibility of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan (Hilali 1999; Rahman 2010), although nothing dramatic has happened yet in the region due to the possession of nuclear weapons by the two countries (Ganguly and

Kapur 2010).

In fact, India and Pakistan fought the Kargil War in 1999 after going nuclear. Yet, India exercised restraint and did not retaliate with nuclear weapons to reclaim its occupied territory. This war laid to rest a few nuclear myths. First, a war between two nuclear weapons countries may not necessarily turn into a nuclear war. In 1999, the war was a conventional one, ending without a nuclear exchange. It indicated that nuclear weapon countries may not escalate a war to the nuclear level because both sides are aware of the devastating consequences.

The Kargil War busted the myth of strategic parity—the idea that two nuclear weapons countries become militarily equal after acquiring nuclear weapons. The realization that fighting with nuclear weapons will have disastrous consequences, may force nuclear weapon countries to fight only a conventional war.

As for nuclear blackmail, it may or may not work. In nuclear blackmail, a nuclear weapon country threatens to use nuclear weapons to coerce a target country into making an undesirable action. In the case of the Kargil War, Pakistan tried to utilize nuclear blackmail but did not succeed (Bhutia 2015). The Indian approach of threatening to inflict unthinkable damage on Pakistan if it introduces nuclear weapons in a conflict continues even after the Kargil War (*BBC* 2003).

In 2016, India and Pakistan confronted each other again. After the terror attack on the Indian army camp at Uri, the Indian army carried out surgical strikes and destroyed six Pakistani terror launch pads on September 26, 2016 (PIB 2016a). The operation was controlled and had a limited objective of preventing terror groups from striking again. It was a preemptive strike inside Pakistani territory. Pakistan refused to accept that any such strike had taken place on any terror launch pad in the territory under its occupation or control. The denial was deliberate, to avoid escalation. No Pakistani nuclear weapon was used to end India's conventional intervention.

Similarly, on February 26, 2019, India retaliated to avenge yet another attack on its security agencies. Pakistan was somewhat restrained in making statements on the use of nuclear weapons in any battlefield situation. Pakistani authorities kept reiterating that nuclear weapons are not weapons of war after and even before the strike. When a journalist asked Major General Asif Ghafour, the spokesperson of Pakistan Armed Forces on February 22, 2019, whether Pakistani authorities will authorize field level officers to make decisions in the nuclear chain of command under full spectrum deterrence, he answered, “It is insane to talk [of] the use of this weapon. This is [a] weapon of deterrence and this is a political weapon. Responsible countries, responsible nations...do not talk about this. ... This is insane to talk about it” (ISPR 2019). This statement indicates that what matters is confidence, not the war potential that this weapon delivers. Pakistani officials frequently admitted that their policymakers were aware of the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons; and, as a result, Pakistan would not be using nuclear weapons.

Did the nuclearization of India and Pakistan bring instability to the region or elsewhere? If the region becomes unstable or if it is perceived so, then factors other than nuclear weapons are greatly responsible. Indeed after the nuclearization of these two countries, a section of the international community expressed its concern for regional stability. The stability-instability paradox, curiously, is guided by subjective issues. As a result, the debate about stability or instability remains largely unsettled. Even when India and Pakistan did not declare their nuclear weapons, the non-proliferation community of the United States, Europe, and Asia had been concerned about South Asian regional instability.

Just after the nuclearization of the two countries, the opinion was divided (Kapur 2008; Ganguly 2008; Sagan 2001). A set of arguments were put forward underlining that the stranglehold of the Pakistani Army on the Pakistani decision-making process had tightened because of the advent of nuclear weapons and this would cause instability. Some of these writings highlighted the possibility of an emboldened Pakistan taking up more adventures through Jihadis and, thus, causing greater instability in the India-Pakistan relationship in particular and the region in general. In many writings, Kashmir remained the “nuclear flashpoint.” However, many of these authors later acknowledged that after the initial moves such the Kargil intrusion and the attack on the Indian Parliament, Pakistan understood the limitations of altering the status-quo through nuclear weapons.

Some scholars on South Asia (Krepon and Gagne 2001; Sagan 2001; Watterson 2017; Kapur 2008; Ganguly 2008) have used the theory of a stability/instability paradox, illustrated in the early Cold War writings of authors such as Glen Snyder, B.H. Liddel Hart, and Kenneth Waltz, to study the nuclearization of India and Pakistan. The proponents of the theory maintain that nuclear weapons have ensured the absence of major wars or a world war. However, smaller conflicts are not ruled out. Sagan (2001) is apprehensive of limited or accidental nuclear war between India and Pakistan because of their historical baggage and geographical proximity.

India and Pakistan fought the Kargil War without a nuclear exchange. In recent years, India undertook limited conventional strikes, yet Pakistan did not retaliate with nuclear weapons. In August 2019, India removed Kashmir’s special status, thereby signalling that Pakistan’s claim on Kashmir had been dismissed. Instead of resorting to the nuclear option, Pakistan used diplomacy against the Indian move on Kashmir. India has made it clear that it does not believe in limited nuclear war; so, if in a conflict nuclear weapons breaks out, India is not obliged to respond in kind. India’s position must have pushed Pakistan to understand the devastating consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. In fact, India and Pakistan have even signed a few agreements to mitigate nuclear risks (MEA 2012a).

Actually, it is Pakistan’s ploy to project nuclear instability in the region to

extract concessions from the international community or deny India's growing accommodation in the global nuclear order. More than two decades after the nuclearization of the two countries, the reality is that concerns for South Asia regional nuclear instability are fast losing relevance in the global strategic community as well as in the global nuclear discourse. Pakistan has also tried to attract international attention to the "fragile strategic stability environment in South Asia" if India develops energy resources for economic development through the reactors acquired after the 2008 India-specific exemption in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) guidelines. This argument was later extended to the Indian candidacy for not merely membership in the NSG (Embassy of Islamic Republic of Pakistan 2015) but also other multilateral export control regimes.

Did nuclearization in South Asia start a nuclear arms race in the region? There is no classically visualized arms race. The action-reaction phenomenon seems to have ended with Pakistan's tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998 after India's tests the same year. Subsequently, what is being witnessed is merely a caricature of the action-reaction phenomenon. Many writings falsely project an arms race in the region. This projection is devoid of both logic and facts.

First, both nuclear weapon countries abide by the philosophy of minimum deterrence. Both are aware of the problem that excessive nuclear weapons and fissile materials caused to the two superpowers of the Cold War. After producing nuclear weapons, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into arms control agreements for the mutual reduction of their nuclear arsenals of different categories. Moreover, these countries spent a huge amount of money disposing of their nuclear arsenal and managing fissile materials. Indeed, some of the arms control agreements were signed to discard redundant weapons and refurbish the stockpiles with new and advanced nuclear weapons.

Second, the very use of the phrase "South Asian nuclear arms race" is a misnomer and an inaccurate, casual, and loose phrase, and, thus, creates the wrong impression about the reality existing in South Asia. As is evident, only India and Pakistan have gone nuclear. Other countries are completely unaffected by these developments. Some of these countries did express concern about the nuclearization of India and Pakistan in 1998 (Rediff on the Net 1998). Like a section of the international community, these countries were also worried about nuclear weapons-stimulated uncertainty in the region. But these countries never felt threatened by nuclear India or nuclear Pakistan. India and Pakistan both have declared policies of not using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons countries. Other countries in South Asia are not considering developing nuclear weapons to safeguard their security. Disinclination to select the nuclear option by any of these countries is visible or has been reported.

Third, the nuclearization of India and Pakistan reflects a unique trend of nuclearization in Asia. Each country seems to be pursuing its nuclear weapons on the basis of its threat perception. Both countries are conducting a controlled

nuclear build-up independent of each other's nuclear arsenals. Scholars and analysts may argue whether the threat perception is right/wrong or real/imaginary, but no Asian country has developed nuclear weapons to match those of their perceived adversary or adversaries. There is no "weapon-for-weapon" arms race, or a action-reaction phenomenon as was the case between the two superpowers during the Cold War.

Fourth, as briefly discussed in the context of the Kargil War, Pakistan and some alarmists predicted a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan. In recent years, Pakistan carefully and deliberately projects its NASR or HATF-IX missile system as a battlefield nuclear weapon or tactical weapon for use. According to a Pakistani government release, "NASR, with a range of 60 km, carries nuclear warheads of appropriate yield with high accuracy and shoot-and-scoot attributes. This quick response system addresses the need to deter evolving threats" (ISPR 2011).

Some expect India to project its Prahar system as an answer to Pakistan's NASR (Gangadharan 2011). An Indian government release states, "Prahar, a novel, highly manoeuvrable precision-strike, surface-to-surface tactical missile capable of being fired in salvo mode, is all set to extend the reach of our artillery fire to over 150 km, filling the gap between PINAKA rockets and the Prithvi Missile" (PIB 2013). The Indian government has refused to fall into the trap of this action-reaction projection/phenomenon. Instead it sends the signal that the use of nuclear weapons—tactical or strategic—is a use of nuclear weapons; so, India may respond to it by retaliating in accordance with its stated doctrine even if it sticks to its position of credible minimum deterrence, which means not producing unnecessary and excessive weapons to deter its adversary.

So the question arises: will Pakistan use tactical nuclear weapons to counter India's conventional superiority? Actually, even before India and Pakistan turned nuclear in 1998, a section of the international community highlighted proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia as a major security issue. All fears and predictions about the security of the region stand falsified two decades after nuclearization of the two countries. In theory, it may still appear a possibility. But Pakistan will have to use nuclear weapons to deter India's conventional superiority. Since India has a declared a doctrine of large-scale retaliation (MEA 2003), it may in theory annihilate Pakistan entirely.

Fifth, suppose India, for some reason, does not retaliate or is unable to retaliate, the reaction of the world would be extremely significant. Since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the world has not witnessed the use of nuclear weapons on any battlefield. In recent years, a country like Syria was bombarded on the suspicion of using chemical weapons. The same forces may not ignore the use of nuclear weapons against the Indian population or Indian armed forces. In reality, Pakistan's decision-makers will be forced to take these factors into account before introducing nuclear weapons into a conventional conflict.

Sixth, suppose all such forces and global powers remain undisturbed and do not retaliate or react against the Pakistani use of nuclear weapons, it will result in legitimizing the use of nuclear weapons across the world. The existing taboo against the use of nuclear weapons will be broken. If such a situation emerges, we may witness another phase of nuclear proliferation as many new countries may be tempted and encouraged to add nuclear weapons to their force structure. It will certainly have serious global consequences. The international community may be forced to sit down and do something similar to what it did to eliminate the Taliban from Afghanistan in 2001.

After India and Pakistan conducted their nuclear weapons tests, for several years a section of the global strategic community argued that the non-proliferation regime in general and even the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) would be adversely affected (Perkovich 1998, 1999; Cirincione 2000; Pilat 2007). Even those who believed that a non-member country cannot violate the treaty maintained that the test had provided a setback to norms which form the foundation of the post-Cold War non-proliferation regime. The Indian test was attributed to the deep mistrust that India had for the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Some were afraid of some technologically advanced countries, including countries enjoying the benefit of extended deterrence, developing nuclear weapons for their security. A number of Asian countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Japan, and even a few Southeast Asian countries, were expected to develop nuclear weapons (Cirincione 2000).

What has happened over the years is just opposite to what was predicted or still being predicted by a few. Except for North Korea, further proliferation has not occurred. Neither Iran, Iraq, Japan, nor any Southeast Asian country has acquired nuclear weapons. The nuclear umbrella countries still look happy with the old arrangement. North Korea did not cite the nuclearization of India and Pakistan as a cause or as an example for its nuclearization. Quite significantly, the nuclearization of India and Pakistan has not affected the non-proliferation regime which is providing international stability and security. India and Pakistan both demonstrate their commitment to and pledged to strengthen the global non-proliferation regime. In fact, the norm of non-proliferation seems to have been strengthened. Importantly, even if the two countries are not members of the NPT, both support the non-proliferation norm in theory (Pakistan Mission to the United Nations 2004; MEA 2005). However, the complicity of the Pakistani establishment in the proliferation network is a matter of concern.

Interestingly, the NSG, which was formed in response to Indian nuclear tests in 1974, has already passed India-specific exemptions in its guidelines. Now India and Pakistan have applied to participate in the activities of the NSG. India has joined three of the four principal multilateral export control regimes. Overall, the non-proliferation compliance culture has been strengthened. Both countries have developed advanced export control systems in their countries. Clandestine

arms transactions would not be conducted through written agreements. Yet, legal, regulatory, and enforcement mechanisms will restrict those transactions which do not have the support of governments. India and Pakistan are actively participating in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1540 Committee and its activities all over the world.

Both countries have also joined international efforts to promote nuclear security so that nuclear and radiological materials do not fall into the wrong hands. Both countries have evolved legal and institutional frameworks to promote nuclear security. And both countries participated in the Nuclear Security Summits. India accepts that “nuclear security is fundamentally a national responsibility” (IAEA 2020a). It has also started implementing the use of low-enriched uranium (LEU) which was raised at earlier Nuclear Security Summits. The Dhruva research reactor which uses LEU has been commissioned. Several emergency response centers are in operation to strengthen the nuclear detection architecture in India. Realizing the threat emanating from radiological materials, India is paying special attention to radiation monitoring systems along with developing appropriate preventive mechanisms. India has joined all thirteen universal instruments demonstrating the country’s commitment to combat all forms of terrorism including the use of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons.

Like India, Pakistan too considers nuclear security a continuing process. Some appropriate practices to ensure and enforce nuclear security are necessary, yet the adoption of these practices should not lead to complacency. A country should continue to have “constant vigilance, perpetual preparedness and zero complacency” (IAEA 2020b). Pakistan has published details of various measures it has taken for its national nuclear security regime. India and Pakistan have now both adopted the international conventions to fight nuclear terrorism. Pakistan, too, has developed legal and regulatory frameworks to manage nuclear security in the country. It has also established institutional mechanisms like the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority for taking action related to nuclear security.

This leads to the question: what is the solution to nuclear weapon-induced insecurity in South Asia? What more can India and Pakistan do to win the trust of the international community? Quite interestingly, India and Pakistan have been showing understanding regarding management of the risks associated with nuclear weapons. The Memorandum of Understanding signed in Lahore in 1999 was the first major agreement between the two countries. Later, an agreement for comprehensive risk reduction measures for confidence building was signed in 2007, which was extended in 2012 (MEA 2012b) and then again in 2017. Both countries assured each other about their command and control systems, provided assurance about protection against nuclear accidents and information after such accidents, and established a hotline between the two foreign secretaries and senior military officials, etc. (PIB 2015). However, the most significant confidence-building measure was the pre-notification of flight tests of ballistic missiles by

the two countries (MEA 2012b). India and China have also now entered into a nuclear confidence-building dialogue.

Any proposal for regional nuclear disarmament is a non-starter. This has been established over the two decades since the nuclearization of India and Pakistan. India cannot disarm itself until China does so. India has serious security issues with China, and in fact, as is well known by now, India nuclearized primarily because of China. The report of the clandestine acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pakistan was an additional matter of concern for India. The proposal for a South Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone, generally mooted by Pakistan, is not serious and is basically contradictory to the position it often takes. It is merely done for scoring points over India. Pakistan, on the one hand, proposes a South Asia nuclear weapons-free zone, and on the other, argues for keeping nuclear weapons to deter India's conventional superiority.

China has never been a supporter of Asian nuclear disarmament. It did not support it before its economic rise, and now that China has emerged as a world power it is difficult to even imagine Asian nuclear disarmament. The only solution is global nuclear disarmament when all nuclear powers surrender their nuclear weapons together. It may happen through a time-bound step-by-step process. As implementation of nuclear disarmament may take longer than anticipated, the Conference on Disarmament may chalk out reasonable and practical steps. If a serious move is made by the P-5 countries, other countries, including India and Pakistan, will follow.

Dominance of Jihadi Terrorism

Nuclear terrorism is generally considered a low-probability, high-consequence threat in comparison to general terrorism, which has been inflicting casualties on almost a day-to-day basis around the world. Terrorism has been one of the main security issues of South Asian countries for a long time. The countries of the South Asian region are countering terrorism of different versions. This ranges from terror groups based on ethnicity to left-wing political ideology to religious extremists of various faiths. Some countries of the region grapple with more than one terror ideology.

In the region, networks of Islamic terror groups operate via different names. Some are not very well known while some others are. Some are present in more than one South Asian country. Al Qaeda has sleeper cells or outfits operating in many South Asian countries. In some countries such as Pakistan and India, its presence is quite dominant. In other countries, it is undertaking recruitment drives.

Many of the radical Islamic groups operating in South Asia may appear to be acting independently, but in reality they have close links with international terror

groups. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJi), and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan all are connected to the global Jihadi network. The Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, Lashkar-e-Islam, the United Jihad Council, Tehrik-e-Jihad, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Sunni Tehrik, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and so on are other terror groups based in Pakistan which grab news headlines for their terror activities. Similarly, in Bangladesh, among other international Jihadi groups, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami-Bangladesh are prominent terror groups operating.

In India, Islamic terror groups such as the Indian Mujahideen (IM), the Popular Front of India, and Al Ummah appear to be indigenous but they too have foreign links. One informed writing on the subject argues that “though the IM cadres mostly come from India, their linkages with a global jihad are worrisome. Links to the LeT and the HuJi also portend to the fact that cross-border movement of cadres and arms appears rather easy with the help of false names and passports mostly of Pakistani origin” (Goswami 2009).

Writings on terrorism predominantly hold that left-wing terrorism, also called the old version of terrorism, is in decline. While it is true that now Islamic terrorism is the most dominant form of terrorism in the world, left-wing extremism is still striking terror in some parts of the world. South Asia is one such zone. In many South Asian countries, communist parties are active and contesting elections in a democratic way. But some communist and Maoist organizations are still underground and violent. Nepal witnessed Maoist violence, but later Maoist parties joined the democratic electoral process. Some Maoist parties are banned. The Communist Party of India-Maoist is one such party. India considers left-wing extremism to be one of the most potent internal security threats (MHA 2018). The Indian government has frequently been underlining the international character of Maoist violence in India. One government release noted:

No specific inputs are available to indicate that the Maoists/Left Wing Extremists are getting backing from foreign agency/country in India. However, the CPI (Maoist) party have close links with foreign Maoist organizations in Philippines, Turkey etc. The outfit is also a member of the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). The Maoist parties of South Asian countries are members of this conglomerate. Besides, Left Wing Extremist (LWE) groups have participated in conferences/seminars conducted in Belgium and Germany. The so-called ‘People’s War’ being waged by the CPI(Maoist) against the Indian State has also drawn support from several Maoist fringe organisations located in Germany, France, Holland, Turkey, Italy etc. The recovery of arms and ammunitions of foreign origin from the Left Wing Extremists in different encounters/operations is an indication of the fact that they are procuring weapons from different sources. Inputs indicate that some senior cadres of the Communist Party of the Philippines imparted training to the cadres of CPI (Maoist) in 2005 and 2011 (PIB

2016b).

India also faces problems from several other armed groups. Northeast India has a large number of organizations which are designated as terrorist outfits or organizations with unlawful associations (MHA 2019). Some of the prominent banned and active terror outfits operating in the northeast are the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, United Liberation Front of Asom, Karbi People's Liberation Tigers, National Liberation Front of Tripura, All-Tripura Tiger Force, National Democratic Front of Bodoland, United Progressive Front, Kamtapur Liberation Organization, People's Liberation Army, and Garo National Liberation Army, Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup (MHA 2018).

Sri Lanka once had the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE was the most feared terrorist organization in the world. It had an infantry, navy, and even an air force (SATP 2017). Its area of operation was not only Sri Lanka but also India. It was responsible for the killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and enjoyed some support in India. However, the support base declined after the killing of Rajiv Gandhi. A very small section of the population in Tamil Nadu continues to sympathize with the organization, but, because of negative Indian sentiment, open support for the LTTE has virtually ceased. Subsequently, Sri Lankan military operation completely decimated the LTTE. News reports regarding the resurfacing of the LTTE continue, though new Tamil groups assuming the same degree of lethality and striking power are yet to be witnessed.

Sri Lanka has seen the growth of other terror groups based on religion. Buddhist groups are also being called terror groups. Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, or Buddhist Power Army) is generally considered a Buddhist radical or terror group (Morrison 2020; Gunasingham 2019). Apparently, the group exists to protect perceived or actual dangers to Buddhism within the country as well as outside. It wants to establish Buddhist predominance in Sri Lanka. The target of the attacks has been the Muslim population of the country. However, other religious and ethnic groups are not spared if their conduct is found to challenge Buddhist precepts. The Buddhist brand is a combination of Buddhist nationalism and ethnocentrism.

In some quarters, it is strongly believed that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has already entered Sri Lanka, and may soon start operations, though the Sri Lankan government denies it. In April 2019, an Islamist group attacked a church on Easter Sunday, killing scores of people. The terror group also attacked other places like the Shangri-La Hotel. This group, apparently, goes by the name National Thowheeth Jama'ath, and is considered part of the international jihad movement (Dean 2019). Several suicide bombers have acted in its name. The organization may be a fringe group but the general understanding is that ISIS was behind the attack.

Have efforts been made at the South Asian level to fight terrorism? The countries of South Asia have been making bilateral, multilateral, and regional efforts through diplomacy. Some dialogues are structured and are taking place in a routine way, but, in many cases, crises engendered by terror attacks or even terror activities trigger dialogue between/among the countries of the region. Bilateral diplomacy has created some permanent mechanisms to address terror, but these are not considered to be enough. These countries have been addressing the problem of terrorism through SAARC, and since all the countries of the region are victims of terrorism of one form or another, the issue of terrorism remains on SAARC's agenda.

SAARC, during its second summit in Benguluru in 1986, took a significant step towards fighting terrorism. The heads of the countries underscored the importance for cooperation among South Asian states to thwart terrorism and eventually eradicate it from the region. All countries unambiguously condemned "all acts, methods and practices of terrorism as criminal and deplored their impact on life and property, social, economic development, political stability, regional and international peace and co-operation" (SAARC Secretariat 1986). The next line of the Benguluru summit declaration is extremely meaningful. It pronounced that the member-countries had "recognized the importance of the principles laid down in United Nations (UN) Resolution 2625 which among others required that each State should refrain from organizing, instigating, assisting or participating in acts of civil strife or terrorist acts in another State or acquiescing in organized activities within its territory directed towards the commission of such acts."

The Benguluru declaration had a mixed impact on terror-related activities. The third summit, which was held in Nepal in 1987, witnessed the signing of the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. The SAARC Convention was an attempt to bolster international conventions such as the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft and the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation. It also talked about extraditing terrorists but the caveats of the Convention have made it almost impossible to extradite any terrorist.

During the 2004 summit in Islamabad, the Additional Protocol was signed and appended to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. Terrorism was designated as a criminal activity. This also targeted terror funds. Mutual legal assistance, extradition, denial of refugee status, technical cooperation, and consultations and so on were the other highlights of the Protocol. Later, at the 2008 Colombo Summit, a Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters was brought in, but it hardly improved the SAARC Convention or the situation in South Asia.

Additionally, in 1995, the SAARC countries set up a SAARC Terrorism Offences Monitoring Desk in Colombo to allow for the collation, analysis,

dissemination, and sharing of information on crimes related to terrorism; and facilitate the exchange expertise, experience, methodologies, and strategies to combat terrorism and other related organized crimes (SAARC Secretariat 2018c). The countries also designated “focal points.” Several meetings of the High-Level Group of Eminent Experts took place to streamline anti-terror instruments of the SAARC.

The legal and institutional frameworks developed over the years have not been dismantled. The frameworks have endured the frequent crises in SAARC. At least officially and formally, SAARC continues to support or reiterate its support for the fight against terrorism. The countries unambiguously take a stand against “terrorism and violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations” (SAARC Secretariat 2014) and cooperate to combat terrorism along with transnational crimes. SAARC meetings still support the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and its Additional Protocol. The meetings of SAARC Ministers of Interior/Home and the SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk continue the focus on the fight against terrorism (SAARC Secretariat 2018b). SAARC organizes workshop for judges, prosecutors, and police officers in South Asia on effectively countering terrorism (*ibid.*). SAARC contributed to the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, one objective of which was combating terrorism (SAARC Secretariat 2018a).

The region tries to give the impression through the regional body that it wants to fight terrorism, but the reality has not changed much. Some of the states of South Asia continue to instigate and assist terror activities. After the 9/11 terror attacks, South Asian countries recognized the need for forging an international approach to combat terrorism. The summit declaration made in 2002 at Kathmandu further pushed the region towards the international community and the UN for fighting terrorism. The countries keep repeating their calls for an early conclusion of a UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

The 2002 Kathmandu declaration after 9/11 supported UNSC Resolution 1373 of September 28, 2001 for fighting all kinds of terrorism. It also backed full execution of the relevant international conventions relating to terrorism so that terror funding is immediately targeted. The regional approach failed for several reasons including the nature of the terror threat and the prevailing lack of trust among SAARC members. SAARC was not able to hold summits because of terror incidents (MEA 2020). Most member countries thought that hosting meetings of SAARC in Pakistan may send the wrong message on terrorism (Zahra-Malik 2016). Considering SAARC’s fight against terrorism is “a story of missed opportunities,” India underscores that “the relevance of SAARC would be determined by these actions against terrorism and this will decide our collective journey of the future to become more productive” (MEA 2019a). Although SAARC has yet to be discarded, the countries are looking beyond South Asia.

How should South Asian countries effectively fight against terrorism? The

current nature of terrorism is not confined to South Asia alone. Even in the past, Al-Qaeda was groomed in Afghanistan but its reach was worldwide. West Asia sent the leaders and funds. Its cadres were also recruited from all over the world. Just after the 9/11 attacks, one of the reports of the Congressional Research Service noted:

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan has seen substantive success with the vital assistance of neighboring Pakistan. Yet the United States increasingly is concerned that members of Al Qaeda and its Taliban supporters have found haven and been able to at least partially regroup in Pakistani cities and in the rugged Pakistan-Afghanistan border region inhabited by ethnic Pashtuns who express solidarity with anti-U.S. forces. Al Qaeda also reportedly has made alliances with indigenous Pakistani terrorist groups that have been implicated in both anti-Western attacks in Pakistan and terrorism in Indian Kashmir (Weiss and Hassan 2015).

The countries of South Asia have to explore all multilateral and international forums for fighting terrorism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which India and Pakistan became members in 2017, has underlined the significance of combating terrorism (SCO 2020a). The SCO is an inter-governmental international organization which also includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Nepal and Sri Lanka are dialogue partners and Afghanistan is one of the observer states. To fight terrorism, the SCO has established the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure which is one of two permanent bodies of the SCO. Its director is selected for a three year term by the Council of the heads of the member-states. The Bishkek Declaration of 2019 details terror challenges which are to be fought by the SCO members (SCO 2020b). Importantly, the declaration maintains that only the UN can play a central role in fighting terrorism by encouraging international cooperation in the fight.

Even forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN), which are essentially trade and economic groupings, are being used to fight terrorism (MHA 2017). The idea is simple: it is difficult to promote trade under the shadow of terrorism. The countries of the region are already active in different UN bodies set up to fight terrorism. Asian countries—and even the world—are cooperating with South Asian countries because they know that terrorism is a common enemy (UNODC 2017).

Other Security Challenges

If nuclear weapons and terrorism are two dominant challenges in South Asia, there are a few other security challenges which the countries of South Asia are facing. Some of the other prominent challenges are maritime security, cyber security, and other non-traditional security issues. Are these security challenges Pan-South Asian in nature? There are some common challenges. Certainly none of the principal challenges the countries of South Asia are confronting are strictly Pan-South Asian in nature. Some countries may be facing challenges unique to that particular country and may seek a national solution or a custom-made solution through a group of countries from within or outside of Asia. However, most of the problems are not confined to the region, so extra-regional or global solutions need to be found.

Maritime Security

When maritime security in South Asia is mentioned, the Indian Ocean immediately captures the imagination. One-fifth of the world's total ocean area is covered by the Indian Ocean, which has a total of 2.4 million square kilometers of exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The Indian Ocean encapsulates coastlines of almost 70,000 km. It touches two-fifths of the world's population, transacts two-thirds of the world's shipments, one-third of the world's cargo, half of the world's container traffic, and three-fourths of its traffic goes to other regions of the world. The Indian Ocean region is still confronting unresolved sovereignty issues, territorial disputes, contradictory positions on international norms, maritime muscle flexing, and general militarization of the region

At present, the countries of South Asia may not be facing challenges to their "sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence" (UN 2018) from the sea but the South Asian region does share many of the traditional and non-traditional security challenges not only with the countries of the Indian Ocean region but also with the countries which use the sea routes for trade and commerce. Piracy and maritime terrorism, external intelligence-gathering in EEZs, raising funds for terrorism through the sea, transportation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and related items, conventional arms smuggling, pollution, climate change, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing are prominent security challenges the South Asian region shares with other countries. In fact, many of the South Asian traditional and non-traditional security challenges lie in safeguarding maritime safety and security.

Nowadays, the most popular forum for discussing the Indian Ocean is the Indian Ocean Rim Association. For a long period, the security community was critical of the Association for not including security in its charter (Cordner 2014). The basic argument was that an association for a vast expanse like the Indian Ocean cannot facilitate trade without combining it with security mechanisms.

In Bengaluru in November 2011, a balanced charter for the Indian Ocean Rim Association was adopted. The amendment of the Charter acknowledged “the growing global emphasis on the unique geo-strategic primacy of the Indian Ocean rim” (IORA 2014). Article 3.c of the Charter denotes the following objectives for the Association: (1) maritime safety and security; (2) trade and investment facilitation; (3) fisheries management; (4) disaster risk management; (5) academic, science, and technology cooperation; and (6) tourism and cultural exchanges (*ibid.*).

The way great power politics is taking shape in Indian Ocean, it is difficult to predict what may happen in a few years. During the Cold War, the great powers had aggressive naval presences in the Indian Ocean. The countries of South Asia clamoured for the Indian Ocean to be a zone of peace. There are indications that a revival of great power politics is coming. If the South China Sea is witnessing a struggle over territory, the Indian Ocean is seeing Chinese efforts to dominate it and India’s assertion to maintain its presence in the region. China is also taking deep interest in the Arabian Sea which is causing concern worldwide (McDevitt 2018). The international community is sceptical of the Chinese “logistics ‘outposts’ in the western Indian Ocean” (*ibid.*), pushed in the name of maintaining regional security and order.

Even those who casually try to see China playing “the pivot in a regional triangular game” immediately acknowledge that China lacks “scrupulous neutrality” (Dittmer 2001). More significantly, it is a well-known fact that China and Pakistan both were or have been partners in the proliferation network. India has approached the Indian Ocean under the framework of SAGAR, which in Hindi means “ocean.” The Indian Prime Minister explained that “SAGAR should stand for ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’” (MEA 2018a).

India, as a result, has been forced to find extra-regional partners, because, for India, the Indian Ocean is not India’s ocean but “the centre of the emerging ‘Age of Asia’” (*ibid.*). India has signed agreements with many non-Asian countries such as France and the United States (MEA 2018b). India’s understanding with non-Asian partners is quite comprehensive. Partnerships are not only for securing trade lanes but also for fighting together against terrorism, WMD proliferation, and piracy. For this purpose, the agreements are designed to provide “reciprocal logistics support” to the armed forces of the partner countries, joint military exercises, and exchange of information in the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean region, etc.

Cybersecurity

In South Asia, several instances of cyber war or attacks appeared in media (Threat Connect 2013). These attacks were witnessed in all countries, prominently in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Incidents of defacing governmental and non-governmental sites were reported. Media reports stated that the hackers based

in South Asian countries basically hacked the websites of their rival or enemy countries, though most of the reports are not authenticated.

The South Asian region is witnessing a surge in internet use. One study (IWS 2020) calculates that by May 2020, South Asian countries had 759,271,586 internet users. Due to the size of the population, the number of people using the internet in India may be larger than other countries of South Asia (ibid.). For example, through May 2020, 560,000,000 persons used internet in India (ibid.), which is the most in South Asia. Pakistan has the second-largest number of users (71,608,065). However, the percentage of penetration of the internet among the population reveals a completely different result. In South Asia, through May 2020, the Maldives had 81.9 percent of its population using the internet, which is the highest followed by Bangladesh and Nepal with 57.2 percent and 54.1 percent respectively.

The countries of the region are taking measures to counter cyber-attacks. Computer emergency response and computer incidence response teams and centers are being set up. Yet, writings on the subject argue that the region lacks rudimentary cyber security defense for the national critical information infrastructures of the countries of the region (APT 2012). The increasing use of smartphones has further increased cyber vulnerability (ITU 2019).

One famous digital security company reports apprehension of “a sustained cyber spying campaign, likely state-sponsored, against Indian and Pakistani entities involved in regional security issues” (Bhatia 2017). However, the most alarming information was “the theft of US\$ 81 million from Bangladesh’s central bank” (*Daily Star* 2016). A non-South Asian country apparently “sponsored this theft from Bangladesh’s central bank” (Finkle 2017). India faced cyber-attacks on its critical infrastructure (Findlay et al. 2019); its nuclear facility and even its Space Agency received cyber threat calls.

In the context of India, an official from Microsoft remarked, “cybersecurity challenges do not stop at national borders” (Microsoft News Center India 2018). While ministers of Interior/Home in SAARC meetings discuss cybercrimes and cybersecurity challenges, in fact, this problem cannot be adequately dealt with at the regional level. All countries of the region are working bilaterally, multilaterally, and internationally to counter cyber threats and are looking beyond the region (MEA 2019b). One document of the International Telecommunication Union states:

The global challenge Cybercrime has developed from an ‘emerging crime’ to a serious manifestation of crime with great practical relevance unique opportunities to connect with a global marketplace. In order to create both an enabling environment for enterprises and to protect users of Internet services in developing countries, it is necessary that countries have a clear legal framework and sufficient law enforcement and technological capacities in place to effectively fight cybercrime. Such frameworks

and capacities are critical both to the protection of internet users within the country, and to the provision of effective support to foreign law enforcement agencies requesting international cooperation in cross national cybercrime cases (UNODC and ITU 2018).

Human Security

The lack of development and growth complicates the security situation in South Asia. South Asian countries have a sizeable portion of their populations living below the poverty line. Several countries have experienced economic growth, some even rapid growth. However, this growth has not succeeded in alleviating poverty and affecting rapid human development. Food and health security are genuine problems in many of these countries. The problem of human security is not an isolated one. Human security leads to problems for traditional security and many studies have endorsed the linkage (Hewitt 2004; Rice 2006; Dong 2009). Studies highlight that many conflicts are either caused or bolstered by poverty.

In South Asia, left-wing extremism or Maoist terrorism may be magnified by the involvement of external forces, but are bred by poverty. Poor and marginalized people fall prey to armed groups which promise to solve problems through ideology and undemocratic means. It is true that modern terrorism recruits from prosperous Western-educated and employed people (Singh 2014), but a large number of terror recruits still come from the poor and marginalized sections of the population. One study revealed that Al Qaeda in Afghanistan had been well-supported through funds collected from the conflict-prone diamond zone of Africa (Rice 2005). This also underscores that while national efforts may be necessary, South Asian security issues arising out of human security also have an extra-regional solution. One scholar of South Asian security commented:

The concept of 'the international community', if it is to have practical meaning and encapsulate the notion of 'solidarity without borders' instead of being an empty slogan, must come to terms with the multitude and gravity of the challenges confronting the peoples and nations of South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). The scale of the problems faced in the region and the numbers of people involved are so huge that success or failure in South Asia pose defining challenges to the core mandates of the United Nations as the global arena for problem-solving (Thakur and Wiggen 2004).

Conclusion

Interestingly, Asia does not have a pan-Asian institution to manage security across the region. But like other sub-regions of Asia, South Asia has an institution and, more significantly, an institution that carries the mandate of safeguarding and ensuring security of the region. Due to internal dynamics and the nature of

some of the principal threats, the institution has become ineffective and, to an extent, non-functional. SAARC exists but the South Asian community is nearly non-existent. For issues other than nuclear weapons, SAARC as an institution has the potential to deliver solutions to security challenges, but, unfortunately, it is not doing so. Even for international cooperation, it could be useful for the entire South Asian region. At times, multilateral diplomacy may yield better results than bilateral cooperation.

The South Asian security scenario and issues are really paradoxical. The dominant security issues may appear regional and national in nature, but these have become international problems. Some of the issues, which are minor in nature, may be solved within national boundaries, and, in fact, the countries do solve them. Mutual trust is seriously lacking, more so on terrorism. This is the time the country, which has been internationally recognized as the mother of the global terror network, should build confidence in its neighbors and the international community. All major issues—nuclear, maritime, and terrorism—do not appear to have any regional solution.

The countries of South Asia have to work with the international community in fighting these security challenges. However, this does not mean that national or regional efforts should lag behind. With the increase in the capacities of South Asian countries, efforts to solve South Asian security problems may possibly start from within.

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