

DYNAMICS OF INTRA-STATE CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA

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The article analyzes the nature and the dynamics of intra-state conflicts in Southern Asia, and the role of regional and external actors in the conflict processes. The most important of intra-regional factors influencing the dynamics of a conflict being the way Indian reacts on it. To the most important external factor U.S. and China belong. The author examines the problems in the context of peculiarities of integration of the regional countries with existing economic and social conflicts. Fundamental differences between them are emphasized both in economic development and in political system structure. At the same time, social deprivation and deep inequality problems are specific for the most Southern Asian countries which become the base of conflict potential. Key attention is paid to the specific conflicts in different countries connected with combination of ethnic, religious, political and other factors. In most cases the conflicts sprung have violent character and run as armed battles. The author criticizes the attempts of some researchers to explain the presence of such conflicts by influencing on them by a single factor, which does not allow for representing their multidimensional complexity. In the biggest conflicts, the manifestations of nationalism, religious fundamentalism and terroristic threats can be traced. Four basic variables are emphasized to determine intra-state conflict dynamics in the countries of Southern Asia like real or subjective marginalization of different social groups; identity and state border juxtapositions; state actions in response to a conflict uprising, interaction with external environment, both intra- and extra-regional.

Key words: conflict, Southern Asia, dynamics, China, India, identity, marginalization, terrorism.

The notion of South Asia as a geographical entity may be a contested domain, but there is a broad consensus among scholars that South Asia continues to be a major conflict prone area in the globe. What is unique about conflicts in South Asia is not their intensity or

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frequency but their regional dynamics. Thus, in South Asia, the intra-state conflicts and inter-state conflicts are not two exclusive categories. The dynamics of these two aspects of conflicts in South Asia underlines the fact that they are interrelated and criss-cross each other at various points. The intra-state conflict may assume the shape of inter-state conflict due to this dynamics, which has a potential threat to regional stability. The negative synergy in the intermeshing of intra-state conflicts in South Asia is far ahead in comparison to the available intra-state cooperative synergy to solve these conflicts. The historical experience of modern South Asia, its cross-cutting ethnic and religious composition and uneven economic and political progress in the region generates and sustains such dynamics in the long run.

Two other elements further complicate the nature of conflict dynamics in South Asia. **First** is the 'India Factor.' Beyond any Choice, India happens to be the largest, most developed and centrally located actor in South Asia. Ideally, India should be a stabilizing force in the region, but unfortunately, it is not so. Directly or indirectly, India has been viewed or willingly has been a major stake holder in all major intra-state conflicts in South Asia. If India opts for playing a proactive role in these conflicts, it has been projected as a regional bully and if India opts for non- involvement in these conflicts, its core national interests and/or its regional power status are undermined. Since independence, Indian foreign policy makers are faced with and continue to face this dilemma, which is inherent in the very nature of conflict dynamics in South Asia. The **second factor** is the involvement of external actors in the South Asian conflicts due to their vested interests arising out of strategic importance of this region in their design. The regional actors facilitated this involvement of external actors, more often, to balance the Indian influence in the region. Among others, China and the US have been and continue to be the lead external players in the region. This Paper is an attempt to delineate the salient features of dynamics of intra-state conflicts in South Asia, which have deep bearing on the regional peace and stability.

South Asia: Crises of Identity and Growth

A definite geographical identity of South Asia has always been a subject of controversy and has eluded consensus. Earlier this continent was known as India Subcontinent, but American and British strategic thinkers and policy makers deliberately preferred to use the term South Asia to deemphasize the preeminence position of India in this region. "south Asia as a successor term to Indian Subcontinent was brought in to usages by The United States and Britain, presumably to deemphasize India's natural Predominance in the sub-continent and to soothe their protégé Pakistan's sensitivity in not being viewed as part of anything termed Indian"¹. However, at present, the term South Asia has assumed larger acceptability. The UN scheme of sub-regions includes all eight members of SAARC along with Iran as part of what it terms as Southern Asia. Another international agency, the UN Population Information Network includes eight different countries in South Asia namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, India, Nepal, Iran, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, but it treats Maldives as part of Pacific sub-region. The UN Economic Commission for Asia and Pacific treats original seven members of SAARC as the part of South Asia. The leading area studies programmes in different universities also do not have consensus as to which countries should form part of South Asia. While Centre for South Asia Studies at the University of Cambridge has extended its activities to include many of the countries of South-East Asia like Indonesia and Malaysia, the Centers for South Asian Studies at both Michigan and Virginia Universities include seven present member of SAARC, (except Maldives) and Tibet in South Asia. The present paper restricts the geographical reach of South Asia to the present eight members of SAARC.

Like its geographical identity, its cultural identity suffers from myriad ethnic, religious, linguistic cleavages sustained and perpetuated during colonial and post- colonial periods. The countries of South Asia not only have uneven level of economic development, but their political systems are placed at the extreme and opposite ends of political spectrum. This is in spite of the fact that the all countries in the region have long and rich tradition of exchange and sharing of ideas and

culture. The problem lies between and within the major actors of the region as Neera Chandoke remarks, "*South Asia is a region troubled by numerous problems: Immense social deprivation and deep inequities on the one hand and fragile democratic traditions and a tendency towards authoritarianism on the other. The problem is compounded by tensions between neighboring states, and religious and linguistic tensions within states, all of which has resulted in polarized and somewhat polarized civil societies and repressive states.*"² This is also in spite of the fact that they have been trying for the last 25 years to strengthen regional economic cooperation through the mechanism of SAARC, but the progress is far below in comparison to other regions of the world. The regional actors instead of looking to each other, have been looking away from each other. The regional integration is weakest in South Asia. The regional cooperation for the purpose of regional peace and security is pipe dream, as Peter Jones Comments, "It would be stretching things to regard South Asia at present a region where people enjoy dependable expectations of peaceful change. Moreover, if one adopts the purist notion of Regional Security Community and includes questions of large scale intra or sub-state violence in the equation, we are a very long way away."³ According to a Report of the World Bank, South Asia: Growth and Regional Integration, the intra- regional trade is less than 2 percent of GDP, compared to more than 20 percent in South Asia. Only seven percent of international telephone calls are regional, which is much below to the 71 percent of such calls in East Asia. South Asia ranks last among all the regions of the world in terms of road density, rail lines, and per capita mobile phone density.⁴

Inclusion of Afghanistan in 2007 within the ambit of SAARC has serious implications for the conflict dynamics in South Asia as some commentators view it as the legitimization of US military intervention, without the approval of the UN, in Afghanistan in the name of launching global war on terror; as noted scholar Ninan Koshy remarks, "*It is clear that the incorporation of Afghanistan in SAARC is the result of the eagerness of the US to incorporate the war ravaged country under an institutional framework so that it (its present status) can assume legitimacy.*"⁵ Also, since the epicenter of global terrorism as well as the

fight against it lies in the Afghanistan and both Pakistan and India have been roped in by the US in its new AF-PAK strategy, it is bound to have serious implications for the changing nature of conflict in South Asia. While Indian establishments in Afghanistan have been targeted in Afghanistan by terrorists, Taliban have succeeded in strengthening their network in border areas of Pakistan adjacent to Afghan border. The Waziristan and adjoining area in Afghanistan- Pakistan border has emerged as major flashpoint of Conflict in South Asia in recent years. In last three years, while Taliban have succeeded in cultivating safe sanctuaries and popular support in the region, The NATO forces have carried out unmanned Drone attacks in the region without the formal approval of Pakistani government. Pakistan has also launched unsuccessful military operations against terrorist in this area. The resonance of this conflict is being felt in Indian Parts of Kashmir with fear and dismay.

Basic Demographic and Economic Indicators of South Asian Countries

Name of country	Area in (Sq kms)	Population (2009-2010)	Density in Sq Kms	GDP (Nominal) (2009-10)	Per capita Income (2009-2010)
Bangladesh	147,570	162,221,000	1,099	\$100,002 million	\$551
Bhutan	38,394	697,000	18	\$1,269 million	\$1,832
India	3,287,240	1,198,003,000	365	\$1,430,000 million	\$1,176
Maldives	298	396,334	1,330	\$1,357 million	\$4,388
Nepal	147,181	29,331,000 ^l	200	\$12,615 million	\$427
Pakistan	803,940	180,808,000	225	\$166,515 million	\$981
Sri Lanka	65,610	20,238,000	309	\$41,323 million	\$2,068
Afghanistan	647500	33609937	52	\$14044 million	\$486

The dynamics of conflicts in South Asia has wide ramifications for the regional and peace and development due to its strategic importance. Leaving aside Africa, the South Asia is the least developed region of the globe. Out of its eight countries, four countries- Afghanistan Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives- are least developed countries as per the parameters of the UN. However, Maldives has recently (December, 2010) graduated out of LDC category. South Asia has twenty percent of the Global population, but occupies only 2.4 percent of the global land area. Its 400 million people (25 percent of South Asia's total population) live below the poverty line of \$1 per day, which comes around 43 percent of the World's total poor population. In the direct or indirect manner, inter-state and intra-state conflicts impinge upon the regional economy.⁶ The document prepared by the SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry succinctly narrates the economic backwardness of South Asia amidst its vast growth potential. It says, Although South Asia is blessed with 45 percent of its young labor force, forms the largest market of the world, and has the potential for sustainable growth. However, it contributes just 1.5 percent of the global GDP and just 1.2 percent in global exports. The region of South Asia appears unfortunate when compared with a small Asian country like Singapore, which only with 4.9 million population exported products of worth \$ 268 billion in 2009, while South Asia with a population of 1.6 billion could collectively export only \$238 billion in the same period.⁷

Conflict in South Asia: Strategic Dimensions

Though, South Asia does not figure in the ongoing debate on the 'Rise of Asia' or 'Asian Century' thesis, as facilitator of this thesis, as advocated by Kishore Mahbubani⁸ and others, yet its strategic significance to constrain this thesis are enormous. The Strategic importance of the South Asia is no less significant as it promotes the direct or indirect involvement of extra-regional actors in the intra-state as well as inter-state conflicts. First, all the major east-west trade routes pass through the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Pacific Ocean, which surround South Asia from west, south and east respectively. The security of these sea lanes is contingent upon the regional stability in South Asia.

The rising incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Aden has led to the deployment of the US, Chinese and naval forces in that region to ensure the security of sea lanes. Second, the South Asia, since 2001, has emerged as the global flashpoint of war against terror, as the US and its NATO allies are deeply entangled in Afghanistan's volatile situation. As the condition is not likely to become stable in near future, the final outcome of this war on terror will have serious impact on the regional stability in South Asia. Even before that, in the cold war era, due to presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, this region was a major point of Super power rivalry. Third, as China is poised to emerge as a major global power and India is closely following suit, the ongoing strategic competition between the two to gain influence in South Asia is likely to take the shape of strategic rivalry. China's growing engagement with South Asian countries in recent years with anti-India designs in order to offset Indian influence is known as what a defense expert, Arun Sahgel terms as the *Strategy of Concirclement'*. Under this policy, China secures defense and security facilities and influence in the South Asian countries, surrounding India.⁹ China's military and nuclear assistance to Pakistan, its involvement in the construction of Gwadar sea port in Pakistan and expansion of Karakoram Highway to gain access to Indian Ocean through Pakistan, Raising controversy about the status of Kashmir, its arms sale and access to port facilities in Bangladesh (Chittagong port) and Sri Lanka (Humbantota Port) , China's tacit understanding with Nepalese Maoists and their strategic links with military junta of Myanmar are some of the elements of Encirclement Policy. This policy of encirclement of India by China with the Assistance of Other South Asia nations is not only a cause of concern for India but has grave implications for the peace and conflict in the entire region. A noted Scholar Bill Emmott Comments, *"That policy, being pursued largely for economic reasons, is ringing alarm bells among Indian strategists and could well become a new source of tensions between India and China. Indians have long been hypersensitive about Chinese support for their arch enemy Pakistan, which has included the supply of conventional arms and nuclear technical assistance. They see it as China's efforts pursued since 1962 to keep India tied*

down to regional Conflicts."¹⁰ The deep involvement of China and India in the conflict ridden South Asia is likely to produce two Consequences. First, it may transform intra-state conflict in to larger regional dimensions, whose resolution may slip in to the hands of extra-regional actors. Second, the increasing complexity of conflicts due to such involvement, may lead towards their perpetuation in long term or lead to inter-state conflicts in the region.

Dynamics of Intra-regional Conflicts in the South Asia

Dynamics, in Physics, refers to the analysis of causes of motion and changes in the motion of a moving object. Conflict is a social phenomenon, characterized by the contested incapability between the two or more parties or groups. The conflict may be violent or non-violent. However, here we are concerned with the armed intra- state conflicts. Suba Chandran defines intra-state armed conflict "*as an armed conflict between the two groups, of which one is the state, in which violence has been by either or both parties, resulting in human and material casualties.*"¹¹ However, this leaves out those violent conflicts, which does not involve state as one of the party, for example, communal violence in India or Nepali- Madhesi ethnic clashes in Nepal, which have regional dimensions and bearing on the peace in the region. Again, it treats conflicts as events, whereas conflict is a process, where two parties with contradictory interests or viewpoints are in continuous engagement to realize their objectives. Shiv Hari and others define "conflict as '*situation*' where parties are unable to resolve their differences within existing institutional mechanisms".¹² In fact conflict is a cyclical process moving from origin, development, climax, resolution or decline to post- conflict phases. Here the idea of dynamics of conflict becomes relevant to analyze the causes and changing dimensions of conflicts. The Conflict dynamics subsumes the entire cyclical process of conflict in its interaction with internal and external environment.

The region of South Asia is conflict prone area. With the exception of Maldives, almost all countries of the region have experienced in the post- colonial period. However, this paper would

consider only those major conflicts which have been cause of concern for regional stability in last one decade or so. Pakistan continues to be in the throes of three major conflicts. First is the secessionist agitation by Baloch Nationalists, who are waging armed struggle for greater Baluchistan including Baloch inhabited territories in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Second is the category of those conflicts which bear ethnic or religious character. The triangular fight between Sindhis, the Central government; and the Muhajirs (migrant Muslims from India) in Sind province of Pakistan and the sectarian Shia- Sunni conflict, spread throughout the country, fall under this category. The Shias, consisting of 15 percent of the total population, are minority in Pakistan. The neighboring Iran, only Shia majority regime in the world may intervene in Pakistan during such sectarian conflict. The recent flash points of the Shia- Sunni violent clashes are the Tribal Areas of Pakistan especially Khyber Agency and Kurram Agency.

The third type of conflict is the menace of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, which not only have regional and global dimensions but also has the potential to challenge the very survival of Pakistan as a viable state. While US and NATO forces are pursuing the Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan, latter have regrouped and consolidated their position in tribal belt and some districts of North West Frontier Province of Pakistan under the banner of Tahrik-e- Taliban Pakistan. The border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan are the major flashpoints and stronghold of terrorist elements, which have spread their global and regional networks in India and Bangladesh. While Afghanistan continues to be divided by ethnic and tribal rivalries and the signs of political stability are not visible, Pakistan is engulfed in the fire of fundamentalist and terrorist violence with unviable economic structure and weak public institutions. There are also signals of backlash of popular sentiments against NATO forces in Afghanistan. Elements of Taliban have regrouped again and have become assertive over the years since the entry of NATO forces. Parag Khanna considers both Afghanistan and Pakistan as tribal federations with weak public institutions, *"plagued by illicit flow of weapons, drugs, and Islamic*

militants. In both countries, suicide bombings have reached the height of futility: Nobody even seems to ask anymore what the message is."¹³.

India, the largest country of the region, and the rising power in the global affairs is plagued by three sets of major conflicts- separatism and terrorism in Kashmir and elsewhere, insurgency in North-East and Naxalite violence in Central and East India. Each of these Conflicts have regional networks and interstate dimensions. While violence in Kashmir and terrorism in India is largely supported and promoted by Pakistan, and the North-Eastern insurgents have had safe sanctuaries in Myanmar and Bangladesh for long times, the Naxals or Maoists of India have developed close connections with Nepalese Maoists, which have the blessings of Chinese government and Communist party. Though none of these conflicts have potential to challenge the survival of India as a state, they suck India's energy needed for faster growth and greater role in global affairs. Sri Lanka, a relatively advanced country in terms of HDI, has suffered a major and devastating Tamil ethnic conflict since 1983 till 2009, when LTTE, the Tamil militant Organization was eliminated by Sri Lankan security forces. Even after this military victory, political solution of Tamil autonomy is not visible. Because of ethnic Affiliation of Indian Tamils, India has been deeply involved in this conflict, till Indian leader Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by LTTE suicide squad.

In the last one decade Islamic militancy and leftwing extremism have been in rise in Bangladesh. The prominent Islamic militant groups such as Harkatul Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) and Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh have not only developed close links with Al Qaeda, but have gained foothold in India also. The poor economic condition and discrimination in Bangladesh has forced large influx of Chakma and other refugees in the East and North-East parts of India leading to civil strife in Assam and other Indian areas. Chakmas (Buddhists), concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh are demanding greater autonomy, which is resisted by the government. Similarly, due to democratic and development deficit, Nepal has witnessed more than a decade (1986-2006) of Maoist insurgency and violent struggle. Though, Maoists have joined political mainstream in 2006, their militant cadres are yet to be rehabilitated and Nepal is suffering from the ills of

fractured polity. With China's growing influence among Nepalese Maoists, Indian security interests are at stake in Nepal's development. Bhutan, a small country, also suffers from the ethnic conflict between Drukmas and Nepalese, though it has remained within manageable proportions.

Yet the fundamental point remains as to how to analyze this veritable mass of complex conflicts persisting in South Asia. Laxami Iyer and Ejaz Ghani argue that the economic backwardness or lack of development is the root cause of internal conflict in South Asia. On the basis of conflict data from various sources, they concluded that laggard regions are more prone to conflicts.¹⁴ Another scholar, Suba Chandran, argues that intra-state armed conflicts in South Asia are primarily based on sub-nationalistic identity,¹⁵ while Subhash Kapila discovers that the external intervention by China and US through Pakistan as spoiler state, lack of honest deal brokers, historical and civilization background of South Asia are the major impediments in the conflict resolution in South Asia.¹⁶ Another writer Douglas Allen argues, "*contemporary political struggles in South Asia have increasingly assumed religious forms, at the same time, various, often dominant positions have increasingly politicized.*"¹⁷ However, such mono-causal analysis of conflicts in South Asia is fraught with difficulty and narrowness as it fails to capture the multi-causal and multi-dimensional complexity of ongoing conflicts. In this respect, terrorism presents a distinct case as its roots may be in laggard regions but its operational locus lies in rich urban areas. the complexity of terrorism arise from the fact that its loci of Support and Operations are fragmented widespread and diverse and hence not co-terminus. Similar is the problem with classification if conflicts in to ethnic, religious, political or economic categories, because such categories are not exclusive. The alternative may be to concentrate on the process rather than the visible content of the conflict, which is incorporated in the dynamics of conflicts which results from the interplay of multiple variables. Accordingly, the dynamics of intra-state conflicts in South Asia is shaped from the four set of variables:

1. ***Real or perceived marginalization*** of a group, which may be political, economic or Socio-cultural. This set of variable plays crucial

role in the origin of conflict: Naxalism in India (economic Marginalization), Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, Communal conflict and insurgency in North-East India (all types of real and perceived marginalization).

2. Perceiving marginalization in terms of a given identity, which may be ethnic, religious, caste or linguistic identity, as consolidated through historical experience as well as prevailing circumstances. In case of South Asia, the intensity of such identities and their cross-border spread (Islamic and Tamil identities) are crucial factors in shaping the nature of conflicts. J.N. Dixit remarks, that while Political boundaries of South Asian states are well defined, the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities of the people overlap and transcend national boundaries.¹⁸ According to Shibashis Chatterjee, ethnic conflicts are essentially identity conflicts in which the construction of threats, enemies and friends plays a pivotal role.¹⁹

3. Response of State to conflict, which may be military, political or economic. An eclectic response is more likely to succeed in management of conflicts.(insurgency in India's North-East).

4. External linkages, which may be regional or extra-regional. As explained earlier, majority of the conflicts in South Asia have inter-state linkages due to cross national nature of identities and historical experience of the region. The involvement of China and US in South Asia has become crucial to the conflicts related to terrorism, Kashmir Dispute and Naxalism. The external linkages may be favorable or unfavorable to the sustainability of conflict. For example after the launching of global fight against terror in 2001, the Tamil struggle received unfavorable regional and international response, which is a major cause of its demise.

In view of the above analysis, the salient features of intra-state conflict in South Asia may be inferred. These are: **Multi-causal and multi-dimensional nature of conflicts,, their cross national linkages, in which India always holds one end of this link, Primacy of marginalization and identity in the origin of conflicts, terrorism emerging as the major flashpoint in South Asia since 2001, and China and US providing external linkages to conflicts.**

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