Peace and harmony
for development in South Asia

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South Asia, which consists of eight states of different sizes and capabilities, is characterized by high levels of insecurity in its inter-state, intra-state and human dimensions.[1] Although most emerged as independent nations in the 1940s, they have not yet been able to settle their conflicts—both internal and external. Some have even become the epicentres of conflicts. A large set of factors are responsible for the presence of multi-faceted conflicts

including irreconcilable national, sub-national and religious identities; lack of political development (i.e. absence of proper democratic institutions and procedures); weak economies; a bulging unemployed youth; unsettled territorial disputes; and lack of regional institutions.

Harmony of contrasts

The South Asian scene, which was once described as a 'harmony of contrasts', used to give a different picture. These very contrasts with strong political and psychological undercurrents became violent and caused recurrent divisions.

Afghanistan, situated in the western periphery of the region, is an extreme case of long-standing external penetration and internal violence, largely bred by the absence or the non-establishment of a strong state.[2]

Conflict has been a feature of life in Afghanistan since King Zahir Shah was deposed in 1973.

Bangladesh exhibits several internal conflicts, with the army and political parties waging frequent battles for the control of state power. Political instability, weak governance and extreme poverty are a major source of socio-political tensions. Incidents of terrorism have been on the rise since 2002, mostly in the forms of bomb blasts orchestrated by Islamic fundamentalist groups, recent hackings of secularists, as well as an ongoing separatist movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Bhutan, the so-called land of the thunder dragon and the last Shangri-La, is now facing an immense challenge due to its deteriorating environment and its rising youth unemployment, which is around 7.3 per cent, amid an external debt that has soared to nearly 90 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

India, the largest democracy in the world, has three main sources of internal conflicts. First, there are long-running separatist movements in several north-eastern states (Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura). The second source of internal violence in India

comes from incidents perpetrated by left wing extremist groups ("Naxalite" movements) in many states of India. The third source of increasing violence in India stems from incidents of terrorism in India's cities, such as the Mumbai attack of 26 November 2008.

Maldives has suffered acute political instability for several years, and a new cycle of chaos and unrest appears to be intensifying. Continued political instability in the Maldives could damage its vital tourist trade, a key employer and earner of foreign exchange. The Maldivian economy has faltered in recent years and the country suffers from overcrowding, high unemployment rates and substance abuse. Political instability, organized corruption, youth unemployment, gang related violence and a rising sea level due to climate change are threatening the very existence of this tiny archipelago.

Nepal recently had a violent internal conflict, which has made a crucial turn for a resolution. But prolonged chaos and political instability breed many challenges that need to be overcome for a peaceful settlement of this conflict. The unstable political environment, poverty and growing ethnic tensions and religious fragmentation are some elements, which could renew violence if not handled carefully.

Pakistan has been facing several internal conflicts on religious and ethnic lines. The difficulty of maintaining a functional democracy, lack of a proper federal structure and economic integration of provinces are some of Pakistan's woes. Pakistan's education system is such that 70 per cent of its primary education is offered through religious seminaries or *madrasahs*. This absence of a liberal education system has been blamed for generating condi-

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tions for many Pakistani youth joining radical religious movements that now have emerged as a major challenge.[3]

In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had been conducting an armed campaign for a separate Tamil homeland since the early 1980s, which came to an end in 2009 after government forces quashed the armed revolt. Still, the island nation may not achieve long-term peace without properly resolving the aspirations of the Tamil population.

Besides internal problems within each South Asian state, they are also engaged in inter-state conflicts. South Asia is one of the 'critical regions with complex security' primarily due to the fact that most South Asian states are engulfed in varying degrees of conflicts and disputes. Probably, the highest number of inter-state conflicts plague the region compared to any other regional blocs. Bilateral relations are defined by antagonism and mistrust. For example, many problems between India and Nepal originate from the open border between the two countries. There are disputes between India and Bangladesh over illegal migration from the CHT and also in sharing the waters of Ganges and Teesta.[4]

Similarly, the cultural diversity based on language, religion and ethnicity is another factor that prevents the region from uniting. Rather, it frequently exerts a negative pressure on inter-sate relations in most of South Asia, especially due to differences originating from the days the colonial masters left the subcontinent. The area is characterized by countries which have had widely differing political systems—democracies, military dictatorships and monarchies.

Though most South Asian states emerged from a shared colonial past—similar political experiences and common social values—divergences, however, are still significant. India and Sri Lanka are said to have performed better in the political sphere than other functioning democracies that have varying degrees of success. The beginning of the 1990s witnessed a

sweeping democratic transition in the region. But in a long-term perspective, Pakistan and Bangladesh have yet to institutionalize democracy and confirm that their political systems have the capability to keep the military out of politics. Nepal's messy transition to multi-party democracy is at the crossroads following the demise of its monarchy after a decade old Maoist insurgency. Bhutan retains the authority of its monarch as the dominant institution, while the Maldives' rocky experience with multi-party politics has not been deemed a failure so far. Culturally, South Asian countries cannot be simply lumped together. The integration of the region becomes less likely under the present circumstances marked by, among others, divided politics, diverse allegiances, differing perspectives and cultural policies.[5]

Regionalism in South Asia

South Asia has had a long history of engaging in the region-building experiment that is epitomized by the founding of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). South Asian heads of state and government formally adopted the Charter of the SAARC on 8 December 1985, with Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as its members. At the 13th SAARC summit meeting, held on 12–13 November 2005 in Dhaka, SAARC's membership was expanded to include Afghanistan. SAARC was created for cooperation in the socio-economic fields, based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence and non-interference in the internal affairs of members.

Cooperation within SAARC was designed to complement both bilateral and multilateral relations of SAARC states. All decisions within SAARC are taken on the basis of unanimity. Bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from the group's deliberations (Article X of the Charter).[6] Yet numerous conflicts and challenges impede full cooperation for their economic development. For regionalism to be effective, South Asia requires confidence building at multiple levels of relations.

Bilateralism has traditionally been South Asia's mainstay in weaving regional relationships. While a certain degree of multilateralism has existed in the region, it has long been marginalized. Despite the creation of SAARC, the regional institution is proving to be dysfunctional in setting up effective and viable multilateral cooperation mechanisms.

To come out of the bilateral suspicions and multilateral incompetence, the region is adopting new ways of cooperation. Several of them have seen sub-regional or multilateral dialogues and cooperation, which bypass the regional mechanism, as a way out. Even in bilateral discussions, countries are devoting more time to these novel methods. For example, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-regional initiative was envisioned to improve economic cooperation and connectivity among the four South Asian countries. For India, this initiative allows it to bypass some of the more complex political issues of SAARC and engage in direct discussions on connectivity with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. This initiative is expected to help landlocked Bhutan and Nepal integrate more effectively with the global economy. This is testimony to the region's recognition of regional and sub-regional multilateralism as an effective tool to build confidence and to ease bilateral tensions.

The momentum towards regional cooperation in South Asia was generated against a backdrop of globalization and the sway of transnational issues creeping into their domestic agenda. There is no denying that South Asia must work on a multilateral platform to deal with growing traditional as well as non-traditional security threats such as terrorism,

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pandemics, piracy and energy. These issues are transnational in nature and have induced the countries to cooperate for pragmatic considerations, i.e., to promote functional cooperation. Similarly, broader non-military problems such as "economic security," "food security," "energy and resource security," and "environmental security" can only be addressed through regional cooperation.[7]

Nowhere in the world are problems and challenges of security and development more prominent than in South Asia. More than 200 million people live in slums, and about 500 million go without electricity. Still, 42 per cent of the world's poor live in South Asia—more than in any other region of the world. In addition, many countries in the region suffer from extreme forms of social exclusion and huge infrastructure gaps. The larger countries are experiencing increases in inequality. The region, home to half a billion poor, remains key in the fight against global poverty and for prosperity goals.

The multiplicity of intra-state and inter-state armed conflicts and multitudes of security threats—from both traditional and non-traditional sources—have foisted the concept of inter-linking the nexus of peace (security), harmony (cooperation) and development. A focus on economic and security integration in South Asia can provide an innovative perspective and context for understanding the connections within this nexus. The inextricable link between economic regionalism and security integration highlights the fact that it is impossible to achieve the economic growth and development objectives of integration in an environment of distrust, armed conflicts and perpetual political instability in the region. The driving force for any regional economic integration initiative in contemporary world politics has always been economic growth and development for maintaining regional peace and security.

Traditionally, "security" and "development" have been separate policy fields without much exchange taking

place between the two. Different worldviews, organizational cultures, and concerns have shaped the specific approaches of scholars and practitioners in both areas. This divergence has contributed in the creation of, what some have labelled, a security-development gap.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially in the post-9/11 era, the complex relationship between security and development has increasingly been understood to be interlinked. And, the lack of security for large parts of the world's population remains a main obstacle for the post-2015 development agenda: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The emerging post-Cold War debate is on the securitization of development, i.e. treating development as a security issue because wars and armed conflicts exacerbate the problems of underdevelopment and insecurity. The problems of underdevelopment- such as poverty, social exclusion and gross violations of human rights- in some cases instigate violent conflicts.[9] The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 on "Conflict, Security and Development" stated: "One-and-a-half billion people live in areas affected by fragility, conflict, or large-scale, organized criminal violence, and no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has

Box
Non-traditional security threats

Present-day diplomats are confronting new issues that challenge the very concept of what constitutes a security issue. Non-traditional security (NTS) issues—such as transnational crime, terrorism, disaster relief, information security, climate change, and public health epidemics—are now considered core national security issues.

The rise of NTS issues presents new challenges for developing a regional security architecture—What traditional and non-traditional issues can be considered true security issues? Does the state remain the exclusive actor of international politics? Does individual security derive from national security? How can the military adapt to non-traditional security issues?

Such questions present serious obstacles to establishing a formal security architecture for the NTS portfolio. Still, there remains a genuine regional interest in deepening multilateral and bilateral security cooperation.

It is necessary to define what constitutes a security issue today. Scholars have found that classical frameworks are not easily adapted to the contemporary security landscape. They instead turn to novel approaches to security studies, including 'securitisation theory'. This concept provides an analytical framework which adapts well to both traditional and NTS issues as well as state and non-state actors. By focusing on whether a given issue represents an existential threat—typically to a state or non-state actor—securitisation theory enables analysts to both expand and limit the field of security issues.

Traditionally, adherents of securitisation theory recognize specific categories of security issues. According to Barry Buzan, these include five general categories: military, environmental, economic, societal and political issues. It is from broad categories such as these that security analysts can distil individual risks and threats.

Source: Adapted from Walsh (2011)[8]

yet to achieve a single United Nations Millennium Development Goal (UN MDG)."[10]

Thus, there is a broad consensus that development and security are inextricably linked. Development is impossible in a security vacuum and a country which is underdeveloped risks being mired into a protracted conflict. Goal 16 of the SDG is dedicated to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels.

South Asian countries have seen within the last decade that the region confronted a series of major security challenges threatening their economic development. They have thus seen the security and development nexus at play. From terrorism and natural disasters afflicting parts of the region with a greater frequency to the looming threat of pandemics, it has become clear that non-military threats to the security of states and societies must be addressed urgently and comprehensively. A number of security scholars in South Asia have begun to highlight and designate any security concern that is non-military in nature as non-traditional security, or NTS. In South Asia, environmental degradation, natural disasters, outbreaks of epidemiological diseases, transnational crimes, illegal migration, increased terrorism and other concerns have been classified as major non-traditional security threats that plague the region.

Aside from being non-military in nature, they are transnational in scope—neither purely domestic nor purely inter-state. They emerge with a very short notice and are transmitted rapidly as a result of globalization and the communication revolution. They cannot be prevented entirely, but can be mitigated through coping mechanisms. National solutions are often inadequate and, thus, regional and multilateral cooperation is essential. Finally, the object of security is no longer just state sovereignty or territorial integrity but also the people—

their survival, well-being and dignity, at both the individual and societal levels.[11]

South Asian states do not have a clear common conception regarding NTS. What kinds of concerns/threats fall under NTS? Despite the emerging trend toward security framing, there is yet to be a consensus on what NTS really means. The issues that fall under NTS are often contextually defined. What may be an NTS issue in one country—such as economic security, food security and energy security—could already be part of the traditional concept of security in another. For example, energy security, which is considered as one of the component of the NTS framework, has long been one of India's traditional security issues. With the increase in NTS threats, the impetus for effective regionalism has become more urgent and securitization of development on a regional platform is the need of these challenging times.[12]

Harmonious world

Peace and harmony for development among the nation states should be the core vision for regional integration in South Asia. In other words, the economic goals of regional integration need to be complemented by a broader vision that incorporates regional security goals. It should abide by the principle of a "harmonious region" derived from a "harmonious world" concept, which was formally introduced by the then Chinese president, Hu Jintao, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) in 2005. His proposal for a "harmonious world" included: (1) security cooperation for peace, (2) economic cooperation for prosperity, (3) inter-civilizational dialogue for mutual respect, and (4) reforms of the UN for strengthening its global governance role.[13]

This proposal is very relevant in the South Asian context, which is striving to be a "harmonious region" with the aim of: (1) regional security cooperation for peace and development, (2) regional economic cooper-

ation for prosperity, (3) inter-civilizational dialogue for mutual respect, and (4) strengthening of SAARC and institution building to achieve all the other goals to becoming a harmonious region. ∎

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Notes

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3. *ibid.*

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5. *ibid.*

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