



Strategic Shift in South Asia's Security Calculus: Implications for India



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Over the years the boundaries between geo-political, geo-strategic, and geo-economics have become increasingly blurred. The security and development in today's age are totally inter-dependent on each other.¹ For that matter, when we look at the alliance or groupings between nations, security and economic affluence has always been at its core. Security situations have deteriorated in regions/nations due to developmental differentials. The Daesh is actually found expanding in areas where there is weak governance, or is completely non-existent. Therefore, a secure environment is mandatory to ensure good, all inclusive, and well-balanced development.

South Asia, with its eight constituent nations, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives, with an exception of India, the Region in terms of

development has fared very poorly. It continues to remain unstable on account of its regional security situation. Although, there seems to be a fair degree of scope to questioning divisions like West/East Asia, South Asia, and South-East Asia. In some ways for India, it may make better sense to include Myanmar too, in this grouping. While as a geographical entity it appears to have been well-defined, politically, the Region has been continuously vulnerable to the great game of regional power play.

India-centric Approach for South Asian Security

South Asia necessarily has an India-centric approach towards its security and development structures. The Indian interventions in Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh on the request of their respective governments need to be recalled.^{2,3} India after

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Independence attempted to project itself as a natural leader in this Region, initially with Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1958 and later with the formation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since 1985. But that has remained more in theory than in practice. And if that was not enough, the entire Region has been over shadowed by four Indo-Pak conflicts, starting with 1947-48, 1965, 1971, the limited war in 1999 in Kargil, and the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. These conflicts, in great measure, have inflicted a credibility crisis for India, despite its status as the largest democracy in the world.

South Asia as the Soft Underbelly of China and Russia

Speaking in geo-strategic terms, this Region in many ways represents the soft underbelly of Russia and China. Therefore, South Asia has always remained under the shadows of power play and interference from external factors, be it the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979⁴ and later the United States in 2001.⁴ These two interventions by the two erstwhile superpower blocs have been the turning points as far as the security dynamics of South Asia are concerned. In the very first instance, it upgraded the strategic importance and alarmed the Region with the magnitude of the conflict at their door steps. However, for one nation called Pakistan, it was a blessing in disguise—so as to regain its diminished geo-strategic importance. Thereafter, Pakistan became an anchor in providing a launch vehicle in the form of the Mujahideens and Haqqani network for the United States to help evict the Soviets in 1989 following sustained efforts of nearly a decade.

Subsequently, in the second innings of direct United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, consequent to Al Qaeda's 9/11 attack on the United States. Pakistan once again was placed in a key role for the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in providing logistic

base support and access to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). It is yet to be seen as to when will the situation stabilize itself in and around Afghanistan following a complete pull out of the ISAF from the Region. While Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) offers a southern corridor for the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to the Arabian Sea for trade and commerce, the littoral states play a strategic role in the domination of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

It is due to these considerations that China has conceived the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the game changer for this Region and has even co-opted Russia into this project, even if belatedly. China also remains highly concerned about the Tibetan uprising that may be triggered through the land borders of India, Bhutan, and Nepal into China. Finally, Beijing is only too well-aware of the role of the IOR littoral states as far as domination of the Region is concerned.

All this while, Pakistan being at the centre-stage of power play, also sought to redefine and put into practice, a new model of hybrid warfare in widening the options to resolve the Jammu and Kashmir dispute with India. It can be argued that Pakistan felt encouraged at the outcome of this low-cost option in evicting the Soviets from Afghanistan and later playing the Taliban card even to blunt efforts of the ISAF fighting inside Afghanistan, while keeping India effectively engaged in Jammu and Kashmir simultaneously.

Besides, long-term instabilities in West Asia have provided Pakistan an opportunity to assert a larger than life role in this Region and what is now visibly foreseen on the horizon is the pan-Islamic character of the face of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Tragically, General Raheel Sharif, the former Chief of Pakistan Army has taken over as the Commander of the Saudi Arabia-led 39-nation Islamic Military coalition formed to combat terrorism in West Asia. It

is such a shocking contradiction that the perpetrators of international terrorism have been entrusted with the task of uprooting it.

India is still in the process of simply initiating debates and discussion on the problems of terrorism without even achieving a common consensus to evolve definitions of its basics, including on global platforms such as the United Nations. To a global phenomenon, the search is seemingly at regional solutions. The unchecked inter-regional migrations and displacement of people with disproportionate dimensions being caused by unstable security situation needs to be addressed seriously and could well be a human disaster in the making waiting to go over the tipping scale.

In essence, the United States' Rebalancing Strategy since 2010 has landed up providing an excellent opportunity to revisionist powers like Russia and China to secure their own regional interests in a more aggressive manner as is visible by their actions. Russian involvement in Syria and China's actions in the South China Sea as also its mega projects like the Belt and Road Initiative especially with Pakistan playing a devious role on expected lines. China in particular, has surprised the world by the total reconciliatory approach that has been adopted by the Philippines, the very country that had dragged China to the International Court in the arbitration case on the issue of the South China Sea. Encouraged by these developments, China appears to have set its eyes on the IOR for which the early signs began to appear in 2008 with the presence of Chinese submarines and naval vessels in this Region as part of its task force for anti-piracy role in the Gulf of Aden. Just to highlight that the first inaugural ship from the port of Gawadar has sailed to Bangladesh, besides, the heavy Chinese investments in Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Not only that the terms and conditions for these investments are vague, the exclusive real estate and

usage of the infrastructures that is being demanded in return, is making recipients uncomfortable indeed. In fact, there has been public outcry too in some of these countries.

India's Strategic Concerns and South Asian Security

The security aspect of South Asia needs to be viewed from two distinct perspectives. These are: (1) land-based conflicts like conventional wars/terrorism, and (2) the maritime domain of IOR. India's strategic interests range from protecting its sovereignty and autonomy to provide a peaceful environment to accomplish developmental goals, particularly alleviation of poverty and preservation of unity in diversity. A peaceful environment also calls for India's immediate land and maritime neighbourhood in IOR to be stable and secure.

Despite unsettled borders that India has with China and the issue of Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan, it is felt that any large-scale wars beyond border skirmishes may not take place, given the sensitivity of the nuclear escalatory ladder owing to the nuclear arsenal present in the Southern Asian region among three neighbours. Pakistan has made four unsuccessful attempts in the past to take Kashmir by force, before opting to wage proxy war through terrorism, as a long-term, low-cost strategy for the last 28 years now. Two recent developments seem to have given it a boost. First, the US\$ 54 billion, CPEC passing through Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir 200-kilometre stretch and need to provide depth to this strategic project. Second is China's use of its veto power in favour of Jaish-e-Mohammed Chief Maulana Masood Azhar. Against all this, India's ultimate response can only be a conventional. When, how, and where would that lead us to with both, China and Pakistan being nuclear powers, is anybody's guess. Pakistan's sponsored proxy war against India is still on since 1989, having

its origin in Jammu and Kashmir, which remains an unfinished agenda for Pakistan since Independence. It does not seem likely that this will end in near future. In fact, with increasing Chinese stakes inside Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, vis-à-vis, the CPEC and strategic assets of ‘Terrorists Under Chinese Blessings’, it is likely to go on even longer. Although one can forecast with some degree of certainty that given the Chinese sensitivity to Xinjiang province of the restive Uighurs, China is likely to realize sooner than later that its support to Pakistan’s strategic assets of terrorists is not likely to be of any great advantage even at the cost of India being engaged in a low-cost option of sub-conventional war by Pakistan. When a neighbour’s house is on fire, surely some heat will be felt on the periphery as well. Given the Pan-Islamic nature of the vision of the Islamic fundamentalists, radicals and terrorists, there could be a dangerous fallout of the rather simplistic arguments based on what now appears to be an advantage in the short-term.

On the eastern flank of India’s border, in Bangladesh, there has been enough evidence to indicate the shape of things to come with the year 2016 being any indication. The Year was dominated by activities of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and its breakaway faction Neo-JMB with allegiance to the Islamic State. The café attack in Dhaka in July 2016 was among the most prominent and revealing action.

One should well appreciate India’s security concerns on terrorism considering the fact that India has the third-largest Muslim population in the world, Bangladesh the fourth largest, and Pakistan the second largest. The problem with terrorism-supported strategy and terrorists outfits is that there are no rules of engagement, nor can their trajectory be forecasted for sure, be it Daesh, Al Qaeda, Taliban, TPP, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), JeM, JMB or Neo-JMB. There also cannot be any distinction between good or

bad terrorists. Neither can there be any categorization of pro- or anti-national sentiments amongst them as the example of Pakistan’s Tehrik-i-Taliban has proved.

In the domain of maritime threats, militarization of the IOR is now a distinct possibility despite India’s best efforts for decades to declare it as a ‘Zone of Peace’. This dimension has got greater impetus after China’s very recent actions in the South China Sea. Therefore, India must be better prepared to guard not only its own interests but also that of the IOR littoral states as well. This will call for India to have much greater investments in coastal security combined with the power projection capabilities of the Indian Navy.

There are much greater sensitivities attached to any/all arrangements of military cooperation either between SAARC nations themselves, or, with any outside power in the IOR because this is likely to be construed as against the core interests of China and Russia. So one great possibility that exists here is to resolve all border disputes between SAARC nations at the earliest to reduce burden on military expenditure and re-prioritize resource allocations for much needed developmental projects aiming towards greater economic cooperation.

Another possibility for cooperation is in the field of information and intelligence-sharing mechanisms with fast and reliable integrated voice-cum-data links between SAARC nations. The interoperability of security forces in complete synergy with one another could then be the next possibility. But with Pakistan as part of the SAARC platform, one cannot be very positive on this; however, if it’s isolated in the long-term as it happened recently during the SAARC Summit, then there is a ray of hope. May be India needs to leave Pakistan from the SAARC grouping and focus more on bilateral/trilateral cooperation mechanisms like Nepal-Bhutan, Myanmar-Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka-Maldives.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding all this, it can be stated with firm conviction that regional cooperation alone can lead to regional integration, which in turn can only be achieved by means of astute and sustained diplomacy, for failure of diplomacy may result into armed conflicts, limited, or otherwise. In conclusion, it can be stated that the future holds non-traditional threats to security in plenty wherein climate and space-based threats too could hold substantial share of causing instability and chaos. The need of the hour is to manage a balanced and all-inclusive developmental model regionally rather than contest for individual identities. It is only then that regional and individual national progress will be achieved in a peaceful and holistic manner. India, truly, is a living testament of

being a pluralistic developing society that aspires for a greater say and role in regional and world politics, and is working in a focused fashion towards achieving the same.

Notes

1. World Development Report, *Conflict, Security and Development*, 2011.
2. David Brewster, 'Operation Cactus: India's 1988 Intervention in Maldives', *Pragati*, 18 April 2014.
3. R Hariharan, 'A Tale of Two Interventions', *The Hindu*, 28 July 2012.
4. Uday Rai Mehra, 'Why Did the Soviet Union Invade Afghanistan in 1979', LSE Paper, London, 9 October 2014, available at <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/10/09/why-did-the-soviet-union-invade-afghanistan-in-1979/>, accessed on

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