

Report

Security Architecture for South Asia

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A public talk on the subject of “Security architecture for South Asia” by Mr. Farooq Sobhan, Former Foreign Secretary, Peoples Republic of Bangladesh and the President of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, was organized at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) under its distinguished lecture series on November 1, 2012. While welcoming the guests, the Director General ISSI, Ambassador (Retd) Ashraf Jehangir Qazi highlighted the importance of the subject. He said that the region of South Asia was full of promises and challenges. There was a need to look for new approaches to handle these challenges and it could only be done on regional basis. He then invited Mr. Sobhan to present his views on this very interesting subject.

In his presentation, Mr. Sobhan said that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent transformation of the global distribution of power from a bipolar to a multi-polar structure had profound ramifications on the perception of security, which resulted in 'regionalism' receiving a renewed impetus as a means of sustaining peace and stability. Despite sharing a common history, cultural and religious similarities, South Asia remained one of the least integrated regions in the world, both in terms of security cooperation as well as economic integration.

In the past, neither the critical regional issues of human security nor the examples set by robust regionalism in South East Asia were enough to overcome decades of mistrust and launch this region towards a co-operative security architecture.

The concurrence of positive trends in regionalism and prevalence of nontraditional security threats should have culminate in the visualization of a comprehensive security apparatus in South Asia. Although recent initiatives by SAARC to tackle regional security issues were encouraging, the lack of security architecture akin to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARE) or African Union (AU) rendered many of its recommendations to fail in crossing over from deliberation to application.

He outlined the contours of security architecture in South Asia using the ASEAN Regional Forum as a model. He said that since incorporating the proposed architecture within SAARC would require amendments to the SAARC Charter, this was conceptualized as independent of SAARC. In the future, plausible pathways could be examined to incorporate the architecture within SAARC, following necessary amendments to the SAARC Charter and organizational structure.

Talking about the regional scenario in South Asia, Mr. Sobhan said that the South Asian region, comprising of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka had about 23% of the world's population and 15% of the world's arable land, but received less than 1% of global foreign investment and tourism revenues, only 2% of global GDP. Furthermore, South Asia was still home to about 410 million of the 720 million poor living in the Asia-Pacific region, despite the rapid economic growth in India and, to a lesser extent, other countries in the region. Compounding the formidable economic and social challenges facing South Asia were numerous traditional and non-traditional security threats. Yet while South Asian countries confronted both military and human

security dilemmas, national budgets tended to favour military spending. Excessive spending on defence continued to have an adverse impact on the capacity of the countries in the region to provide adequate resources to spend on human security programs. This was one of the principal reasons why the level of poverty continued to remain so high in South Asia.

Furthermore, far from mitigating security threats, the substantial diversion of resources had helped make South Asia one of the major flashpoints in the world, with domestic compulsions and threat perceptions further fueling the existing arms race between some South Asian countries. Threat perceptions in the region were also influenced by the fear of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists, or even an accidental use of nuclear weapons or a false alarm provoking a nuclear conflict between regional rivals.

Mr. Sobhan was of the view that for all its economic potential, South and Central Asia remained one of the least economically integrated areas of the world. As of 2011, South Asia's intraregional trade stalled at around 2 percent of its total trade volume since 1980, and represented only a third of the region's GDP. This was significantly less than what one would expect, given the region's set of geographic circumstances, GDP, population, and existing trade arrangements. By contrast, East Asia's intra regional trade constituted approximately 15 percent of its total trade volume and represented almost three quarters of its GDP.

He said that South Asia was plagued, perhaps more than ever before, by multiple security threats. In many cases, traditional security threats were aggravated by non traditional security threats, though in

recent years policymakers had begun thinking of the challenges facing their countries and the region as a whole as non traditional security issues. Further aggravating the security of the region were the adverse economic and political ramifications of transnational terrorism and transnational crime. Countries in South Asia were beginning to comprehend the inadequacy of national security apparatuses in countering traditional and non-traditional risks and there was a fundamental need for cooperative security architecture to mitigate these escalating threats.

Mr. Sobhan opined that the main impediment to regional security in South Asia was the lack of confidence among member states. Decades of mistrust and confrontation rendered South Asia to be a deeply divided and compartmentalized region susceptible to volatility and instability. The South Asian region was mired by mistrust, confrontation and conflict which were further aggravated by poor governance and misunderstandings. Negotiation on disputes did not produce the desired results but countries were slowly beginning to realize the futility of confrontational means of resolving conflicts.

Mr. Sobhan briefly touched upon a number of non-traditional risks in South Asia. On food and water security, he said that substantial increases in food prices were forcing governments and development agencies in South Asia to reassess the policies for agriculture, food security, and international trade that they pursued over the past three decades. In South Asia, food costs constituted the major portion of the average household's spending. If food prices

continued to rise without a matching increase in salaries and incomes of people at the bottom of the economic ladder, it was estimated that approximately 100 million people could be pushed back into poverty, generating a host of political, social, economic, and environmental challenges. A well-coordinated approach was clearly required to tackle the problem of food security at both the national and the regional level. Along with the issues related to food, access to safe water and sharing of water resources between the countries in South Asia had become matters of critical importance. Nearly 63% of the South Asia's population had no access to sanitation facilities, while 11% of the population did not have access to safe drinking water.

The aids epidemic posed a crucial security threat in South Asia, particularly to India. Since India shared a porous border with its neighbors, cross border movement of infected patients posed severe threats to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Adding to this threat was the re-emergence of new strains of older diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) and cholera that were increasingly resistant to medical treatment. The unprecedented scale of movement of people and goods, along with the misuse or over-use of antibiotics, rapid urbanization, poor sanitation and weak health care infrastructures, exacerbated the possibility of a global pandemic and threatened to overwhelm the health care capacities of many South Asian states.

South Asia was among the world's most vulnerable regions to both natural and man-made disasters. Over the last 25 years, disasters

had killed nearly half a million people in South Asia and inflicted colossal financial damages. India had by far the highest number of disaster events, but flooding in Bangladesh claimed the most lives. The importance of environmental security was not confined to manmade and natural disasters but was also reflected on issues of environmental degradation and sustainability. South Asia as a region was characterized by extremely high environmental stress resulting from floods, scarcity of water, high urban population density, energy shortages, deforestation, and air pollution. Climate change was expected to exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities in South Asia, leading to the further depletion of scarce food and water resources, augmenting migration and increasing the number of internally displaced people.

Regional migration had risen to the top of the security agenda in South Asia, due in part to concerns that irregular migration flows could result in extremist elements entering in to a country in a clandestine way and then engage in acts of terrorism or organized crime resulting in undermining the security of the country. Concerns relating to migration although in most cases were played up and exaggerated to serve the interest of some political parties, specially prior to elections, given the impact of migration patterns on national security interests and interstate political relations, this important development within South Asia, had become a highly emotive issue and will need to be addressed. Some may even argue that migration management had become a critical issue in South Asia.

Throughout South Asia two types of migration was taking place, across borders and within individual countries.

Access to efficient and clean energy had become a critical issue for the functioning of economies. Not only were South Asian economies growing rapidly, but the demand for energy was also growing at an unprecedented rate. The uneven distribution of energy supplies among South Asian countries had generated significant vulnerabilities for their economies. Threats to energy security in South Asia were predominantly caused by lack of political will among several energy-producing countries to share resources with neighboring countries, as well as by the lack of regional cooperation in distributing energy. Apart from regional issues, rising costs of fossil fuels (specifically, oil and gas) and environmental hazards caused by coal-generated power plants will be a source of energy insecurity in the foreseeable future.

The absence of regional security cooperation had led to the proliferation of terrorism and transnational criminal elements throughout South Asia, with severe consequences. The bulk of transnational criminal activities in South Asia comprised of smuggling and human trafficking. Despite the negative economic impact of smuggling of consumer goods, the most nefarious form of smuggling was in arms and drugs. The exploitation of poor local people as 'drug mules', the corruption of border security and the social costs of drug compound to create a significant human security concern.

Recent terror attacks had exemplified the ability of transnational terrorist organizations to instigate volatility and

insecurity in an entire region by igniting confrontation between two of the largest military powers. Evidence exists of collaboration between terrorist groups from regional countries, as well as extremists seeking safe haven or expanding their bases by residing in neighbouring states.

Mr. Sobhan said that SAARC was envisioned initially as an organization that would facilitate peace, economic integration and prosperity in the region. In the past, any initiative within the framework of SAARC to discuss cooperation on issues of traditional and non-traditional security threats was not possible since it was argued that discussion of such issues was outside the terms of reference of SAARC. However, in recent years, most notably at the last four SAARC summits, the subject of combating terrorism within South Asia had been given the highest priority. Both traditional and non-traditional security issues were now being addressed by several SAARC member states within the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARE) and also within SAARC itself.

The inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC had further highlighted the importance of the need for a platform to discuss security issues. India's emergence as a major global power, combined with the security challenges, particularly terrorism, faced by South Asia as a region and by each of its member states individually, had led to the realization, at the highest political level, that an effective regional security architecture had now become necessary to ensure the security and development of South Asia.

One of the fundamental steps in achieving cooperative security was the formation of a holistic security architecture which would espouse security cooperation between politically diverse nations through a wide network of institutions.

The proposed architecture was envisioned as independent of SAARC as incorporating it within SAARC would require modification of its charter. In the future, provided that structural and legislative amendments were undertaken to facilitate the incorporation of the architecture within SAARC, it could act as the overseeing body. The constituents of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARE), particularly its annual security dialogue could be implemented within this architecture. Since several member states of SAARC were discussing security issues under the ARF, it was only viable that a forum should exist for the discussion of South Asian security issues.

Any security architecture in South Asia must be based on developing multilateral cooperation and initiating public diplomacy to counter the wide range of security threats posing the region. Such an initiative must be part of strengthening the process of regional cooperation on energy, trade and infrastructure as economic integration can facilitate and compliment collaboration on security issues.

The administration and implementation of the architecture would be undertaken through three major mechanisms:

Inter-governmental - This would include periodic meetings of Foreign Ministers, Home and Trade Ministers of all South Asian countries.

Government / Non-Government — This would include regular meetings of government officials, think-tanks and civil society from the eight member states of SAARC.

Non-Government — This would include regular meetings of think-tanks, non-state actors and members of civil society.

The three above mechanism or bodies, would be supported by a small regional secretariat.

The main activities of the three above mentioned bodies would be as follows:

Dialogues: Dialogues on critical security issues as well as economic issues would be undertaken through seminars and workshops. Participation would include Government and Non-Governmental representatives.

Research: Extensive collaborative research would be undertaken on major security concerns, particularly climate change, health security and disaster management. Research would also explore the possibilities of greater collaboration on energy, trade and infrastructure development. Research would be undertaken by academics and think-tanks; the outcome of their research work and the findings would be disseminated to Governments and relevant NGOs.

Training: Training of Law enforcement officials would be undertaken at the Inter-Governmental level. At the initial stage, joint exercises between law enforcement officials of different South Asian nations will be undertaken.

In the future, capacity building measures could be undertaken through:

- Joint Peace Keeping Operations
- Joint Disaster Management missions
- Joint Institutional arrangements for dealing with NTS threats, including data collection on food, water and energy security
- Annual meetings of heads of intelligence agencies
- Joint ventures towards energy cooperation in the region, Joint Infrastructure projects, particularly in relations to sea ports and regional highways

Mr. Sobhan said that one route to peace and stability in South Asia, which gained prominence in recent times, was the socio-economic development route. This route could perhaps be the most important pathway to peace and thus the proposed Security Architecture stresses on the need for greater economic cooperation among the countries in trade, investment and energy cooperation, as ensuring equitable sharing of resources, sustainable growth and prosperity can go a long way to create a safe and stable environment in South Asia which will be conducive to robust security cooperation. Security collaboration was thus inherently linked to economic integration and addressing both issues under a single architecture which had both Track 1 and 2 elements, but was not constrained by the modalities of SAARC, the most practical approach to collectively address the diverse range of issues facing this region.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Sobhan said that while accounting for the severe constraints and impediments in overcoming deeply entrenched regional acrimonies, a regional security architecture was an important step towards regional cooperation on traditional and non traditional security issues and economic integration. Confidence building, preventative diplomacy, conflict prevention were all steps, which if undertaken through an institutional mechanism may eventually draw all the countries of South Asia to collectively fight common threats as well as benefit from each other's economies.

The presentation was followed by a question and answer session. A guest from the audience said that no security architecture will fulfil its purpose unless the conflicts that exist between India and Pakistan were resolved. Questions regarding the role Pakistan could play in shaping the security architecture in South Asia and the role of external powers were also raised. Mr. Sobhan said that indeed it were the inter-state conflicts that prevented SAARC from realising its full potential. Almost all the countries of South Asia have problems with India but they must continue their efforts to settle them bilaterally through negotiations. However, these bilateral problems should not come in the way of dealing with the problems that the South Asian region faced collectively. He said that Pakistan had a critical role to play. It has problems with both its eastern and western neighbours i.e. India and Afghanistan respectively. However, with problems, there were opportunities as well and it should focus more on opportunities and try to resolve the problems. India had a vital role to play in South Asia but China has recently emerged as a global power. China, India and US will have to

learn to live together.

A guest wondered who would take the initiative towards forming this cooperative security architecture in South Asia. Another guest from the audience asked Mr. Sobhan whether he thought SAARC could be evolved in an effective organisation to overcome these challenges or a new architecture should be formed. Another guest commented that India wanted to dominate this region. This thinking needed to be changed if South Asia had to grow as a region. Mr. Sobhan said that governments of South Asian countries were not the only options as other avenues were also available to kick start this process. There were think tanks like ISSI and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute where a lot of work had been done and some initiatives could be taken right away. He was of the view that South Asian region needed to look at new regional institutions. He said that India today was going through profound changes and most important of it was the rise of regional parties. These regional parties were playing very important role in the Indian national politics and these very regional parties could play an important role in bringing this region closer together. Today, India was more responsive to regional cooperation. Its trade with China has crossed \$75 billion and probably in next two years, it will be around \$100 billion. The relations between the two countries are increasingly dominated by economy and trade. India was also coming to terms of seeing greater role for China in the region.

Another guest pointed out that stronger countries tended to settle their disputes with weaker countries on bilateral level as in multilateral forums, other countries also get involved which created problems for the stronger countries. He asked whether this attitude has started to change in

South Asia. Mr. Sobhan replied that in his opinion things had started to change. He gave an example of a deep sea port being built in Chittagong by four international companies from India, China, US and possibly Denmark. Similarly, he said there was a very strong lobby in both India and China who wanted the two countries focus more on economic relations. If China and India could do it, then why not rest of South Asia?

With this, the event came to its end. The Director General (ISSI) said that this was the most important issue that the region was facing and should be treated as a priority by the countries of this region. He thanked Mr. Farooq Sobhan for sharing his views. He also thanked the participants for their active participation and making the event a success.

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