

# Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution

*Mahendra P. Lama\**

## **Abstract**

[Traditional constructions of security, based on pure geo-political conception of threat, have dominated the South Asia region. The nature of conflicts and threats, however, is transforming and voices for peace and cooperation have emerged, primarily from non-state organizations. It is time to develop new, and strengthen already present, stake-holdings such as business and trade, preventive diplomacy and interactions among civil societies for long-term and sustainable peace in the region. – Eds.]

Conflict resolution has been an integral part of the work towards building peace, promoting development and consolidating regional cooperation and integration process. Conflicts have varied typologies sometimes with strikingly different facets, varieties and stages. Besides the material and human costs that are directly incurred by the conflictual situations and in the management of conflict, the long term costs transmitted through foregone opportunities and generational losses are both irreparable and insurmountable. The true cost of conflict dwarfs any gains by particular conflict parties. The resolutions of these conflicts also demand a multifaceted approaches depending upon the nature, state and content of the conflicts.

In South Asia, the inter-state conflicts have been the most critical of all the conflicts which have had far reaching implications for any regional development and cooperation initiative in the past. The regional cooperation process has not made any tangible progress as all the efforts towards this are thwarted by the mistrust, suspicion, and inhibitions of at least some of the member countries.

Interestingly, many of the regional groupings and organizations have developed widely varying mandates to deal with various domestic, national and regional issues of concerns among the member countries. These organizations have the advantage of proximity to the source of conflict and familiarity with the main actors, cultural values and local conditions .

One of the most glaring aspects of contemporary South Asia has been the non-existence of peace and cooperation constituency in the region as a whole. This has been in a way reflected by the slow progress made by the South Asian Association for regional Cooperation (SAARC) established in 1985. Though the SAARC was initiated with the

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\*Prof. Mahendra P. Lama is founding Vice Chancellor, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim, India

objectives of “promoting the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life”; “to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region” and “to contribute to mutual trust , understanding and appreciation of one another’s problems” this regional grouping’s functioning and development has been invariably halted and constrained mainly by the prolonged and vexed bilateral conflictual dynamics that prevail between India and Pakistan.

Somehow, the traditional constructions of security based on pure geo-political conception of threat have most eloquently dominated the peace and security discourse in the region. This dominant paradigm continues to rule the roost despite the end of cold war and the context transformation it brought about. The conflicts in South Asia have undergone large-scale transformation over the years. They are no longer military wars. These conflicts have a huge variety. They are manifested in both latent and blatant ways. They vary from migration to ethnicity, environment to imbalanced development, narcotics and small arms to terrorism, governance to globalization. These conflicts have become fiercer and more recurrent and have killed many times more South Asians than the conflicts created by the geo-political rivalry. Yet we hesitate to recognize these conflicts in our schematic and attempts to build peace and cooperation.

All these have both challenged and rendered the traditionally pre-dominant state-centric conflict management practices redundant to a large extent in South Asia. Therefore, the critical roles of non-state actors are increasingly realized. The stakeholders outside the government-state conglomeration are emerging to be vital and decisive. In this context, the confidence building measures (CBMs) we have addressed to in the past in South Asia themselves have to be reevaluated, redesigned and rebuilt.

So far we have extensively depended on military and political CBMs in South Asia. In the last 50 years no political and military CBMs have sustained. Alternatively, even if they have sustained they have remained totally emasculated and ineffective. The fate of many of these crucial CBMs were dependent upon and determined many a times by inept and highly unstable political regimes, pathologically insecure military generals and inward looking bureaucrats. Academics and other vocal members of the civil society have generally remained in the periphery to observe and analyze the plays of the central actors.

Secondly, these CBMs were addressed to only those who had serious stake holding in perpetuating the conflicts and keeping them alive. This meant that the stakeholders thrived on the adverse situations. Though these stake holders have always been in microscopic minority, they have somehow been able to closely align with the power echelons and marginalize the overwhelming majority. If one draws a normal curve to show how these CBMs have worked and

performed, one will find most of these CBMs have hit the trough without reaching the peak. More interestingly, once these CBMs hit the trough, they have never been found to be worth repeating.

This makes us to ponder over the vital question of designing new CBMs particularly in case of India-Pakistan conflicts. This therefore, takes us to the domain of economic CBMs where we consider the business and other economic cooperation (Track III diplomacy) as a measure of CBM and peace building in South Asia. As there are stake holders in keeping the conflict alive, there are stake holders for building the peace. We have never addressed ourselves to the latter.

There could be six roles of business and economic cooperation alone in peace building viz., business diplomacy; technology in the service of peace; business, development and the environment; trade and investment as preventive diplomacy; business as a funding source for peace building and business skills and practices for peace building.

In South Asia also, the CBMs built by the economic stakeholders have sustained. In this regard, India's relations with the smaller neighbors including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have several examples to offer. There have been serious political crises these countries have faced vis-à-vis India but they have been remarkably momentary and have shown urgent recovery mainly because of the large scale economic stake holding on both sides of the border.

Contrastingly striking has been the fact that in India-Pakistan relations there has been no such stake holding in the business sector. Whatever stake holding they have, they are unfortunately all on the side of keeping the conflict alive. For example, the arms purchase lobby, smuggling syndicates and the Dubai based traders. In other words, higher the possibility of conflict between India and Pakistan, the better and the wider are the opportunities and avenues for these, what I call 'negative stake holders', to maximize their gains. One can cite several examples to conclusively show as to how some of these agencies have been playing the Kashmir card only to perpetuate narrow economic interest of these miniscule stakeholders.

However the long awaited South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)<sup>1</sup> is now being operationalized. Pakistan has also decided to extend the much-needed Most Favored Nation (MFN) Treatment to India. The four avowed objectives of SAFTA are:

- a) eliminating barriers to trade in, and facilitating the cross-border movement of goods between the territories of the Contracting States;

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<sup>1</sup>The SAFTA agreement was signed on 6 January 2004 during the Twelfth SAARC Summit in Islamabad. The Agreement entered into force on 1 January 2006.

### *Policy Perspectives*

- b) promoting conditions of fair competition in the free trade area, and ensuring equitable benefits to all Contracting States, taking into account their respective levels and pattern of economic development;
- c) creating effective mechanism for the implementation and application of this Agreement, for its joint administration and for the resolution of disputes; and
- d) establishing a framework for further regional cooperation to expand and enhance the mutual benefits of this Agreement.

An avowed implementation of the SAFTA agreement could go a long way in resolving many of the conflictual dynamics between India and Pakistan.

That's why a chain of economic CBMs have to be designed and operationalized.

There will be conscious and constant efforts to thwart and abort any move towards creating positive stake-holdings as we could see in the case of trade policies of Pakistan, sugar deals and proposed cross border power trade. However, the globalization process led economic reforms is likely to be the most critical factor that could inject such positive stakeholders in India-Pakistan relations. Even if the mindset of instrumentalism persists in the improvement of relationship, the actors behind have become more diverse and dynamic in character.

There are several examples where these economic stake-holdings have significantly helped in transforming sometimes even the context of the protracted and violent conflicts into more amenable situations thereby helping the process of ripening for a negotiated settlement. Around the globe, certain joint ventures have been initiated between various conflicting parties that proved to be good examples that people from both sides can and do, work together.

The positive players and stake holdings are therefore, yet to emerge which if consciously generated will go a long way in building sustainable CBMs in the region. In creating, designing, building and promoting all these economic stake holdings, India's role comes out to be of pivotal nature both in terms of driving force and consolidating agency.

Besides the traditional state policy planners a far more extensive set of actors are emerging across South Asia which have started questioning the State's monopoly in determining various matrices of security issues. These include transnational religious organizations, environmental groups, human rights organizations, regional economic cooperatives, local communities, MNCs, diasporas and migrants/refugees.

These actors have entered into various forms of cooperation and collaboration. They vary from informal coalitions to global conferences and from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-official national and international institutions and regional organizations working in diverse areas. These forms of cooperation are dynamic and have flexible regional character. This has further led to the revitalization of civil societies at national, regional and global. In fact, in some of the conflictual situations the NGOs have very vital role both in its management and resolution. In other cases, they have acted as major agents in preventive diplomacy.

Many of these non-state actors advocate and advance regionalism for varied reasons. They exert a lot of pressure on official institutions at different levels. Organizations of civil society exert moral influence on many issues.

Despite a slow pace progress, one of the remarkable contributions of SAARC has been the fact that it has been able to trigger off a whole range of activities outside the official SAARC forum. These activities in private sector, in non-governmental organizations and community level activities across the region, have in fact, withstood all kinds of political ups and downs. It was estimated that in 1998-99 alone there were over 38 Track II channels working in South Asia. The process towards regional consolidation has been going on regardless of SAARC's officialdom. In fact, the parallel process of activities has far overtaken the official process with the latter pulling back the former. These are the activities which will hold SARRC in good stead in the long run and sustain the process. These are fast emerging as domestic and regional peace constituencies.