Reconstruction of regional cooperation
in South Asia in the post 9/11 era.

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The global order has undergone profound changes since 1990 and more recently since the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. This transformation has also affected the cooperation in the SAARC region and its members have vowed to fight terrorism along with an unequivocal commitment to the convention on the suppression of terrorism. In the light of these developments, SAARC agenda now covers all aspects relating to cooperative security, economic interdependence and peace in the region. In this context, this paper lays down that 'reconstruction of regional cooperation' in South Asia would be a pre-requisite for the spirit of cooperation and friendship to flourish among the member states. Towards this end, member states should agree to adopt necessary measures to strengthen co-operation among them.

There has been a systemic change in the architecture of international relations in past few years. The state centric Westphalian model has undergone a transformation and we witness the emergence of a post-modern system that no longer considers territorial boundaries as a serious limitation in international affairs. The evolution and establishment of the European Union is its first concrete manifestation. Hence, nation-states are no longer the central focus of research while their role has been further crippled by the emergence of non-state actors, privatization of wars and the rise of multilateralism in international negotiations.

The Uruguay round of negotiations culminating in the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) transformed multilateralism into a global reality. The old transcontinental multilateral organizations advocating the collective vested interests of developing countries, the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), the Group of 77 and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), all faded in importance. Those organizations were replaced by new regional groupings such as ASEAN, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), SAARC, etc.

Geo-political issues have undergone a momentous transformation in the last fifteen years. Both the ideological East-West confrontation and the Cold War came to an end. The US emerged as the dominant military and technological power on the world scene. Along with this development, came right behind the rise of regional powers such as India, China, Brazil and South

Africa, while the process of economic liberalization and reforms initiated in the early 1980s in China and early 1990s in India have brought huge new markets of the world scene.

While the global order has seen profound changes in the 1990s, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon brought new challenges to all quarters and in particular to the Asian region. Needless to say that the attitude of the extra-regional powers in the region was dramatically altered.

The member states of SAARC responded to the new situation with a commitment to fight terrorism. The UN resolution 1373 passed in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the US further paved the way for tighter regional cooperation in the sphere of security, peace and development.

Thus, SAARC agenda has been broadened to include all aspects of cooperative security and economic interdependence. This paper lies down that 'reconstruction of regional cooperation' in South Asia is a pre-requisite for the spirit of cooperation and friendship to flourish among the SAARC member states. This paper will first look at the concept of terrorism; possible reasons for its dispersal; and the purposes behind the specific terrorist attack. Then we will analyze why reconstruction of regional cooperation in the region is urgent.

What is terrorism?

Terrorism is a nebulous ever-changing concept, which expands in scope overtime as an increasingly wider range of violent activities is brought within its fold (1). One fundamental problem in any study of contemporary international terrorism is the lack of functional definition of the activity. Despite decades of academic literature on the subject no commonly accepted definition has been found (2). Terrorism by the early twentieth century came to mean violent action against the state, especially heads of state, ministers and other senior representatives. This meaning was derived from the League of Nations convention of 1937. Yet, in the aftermath of WWI many terrorists became statesmen. That is why terrorism is hard to define as just "unrestrained violence" or as "illegal activities against a state".

The proliferation of terrorist activities in recent times that have no territorial boundaries is certainly a global threat to peace, freedom, human dignity and civilization everywhere. It might be seen as a coward act aimed at innocent people and feeding itself on hatred and cynicism. "Every time

terrorists strike anywhere, all of us who believe in democracy and the rule of law must stand together and affirm our commitment to fight this scourge resolutely and united" said Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh (3).

As forms of power once exercised exclusively by the state have flown in a liberal global order to non-state entities, business, media and NGO, the decentering of the nation state system led to the proliferation of non-state armed groups. While the absolute monopoly of the state over the application of armed violence was broken, armed groups at either supra-national or infra-national level emerged. They are today at the root of all armed violence currently being waged. Many of those groups wish to disrupt, overthrow or capture state power. In the books written before 1970 the word 'terrorist' was commonly associated with words such as bandit, communist, brigand, insurrectionist or criminal. But since then, the word came into wider use. Post 9/11, it became known as a universal phenomenon.

The terrorist threat is also changing in ways that make it more dangerous and difficult to counter. Groups like the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization sought specific political concessions. Most terrorist organizations active in the 1970s and 1980s had clear political objectives. They tried to calibrate their attacks to produce just enough bloodshed to get attention for their cause, but not so much as to alienate public support. Today, it is different.

The trend toward higher casualties reflects, in part, the changing motivation of today's terrorists. Religiously motivated terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Ladin's group, Al-Qaida, which is believed to have bombed the U.S. Embassies in Africa, are an expression of a growing hatred towards the United States policies. Other terrorist groups are driven by visions of a post-apocalyptic future, and some are purely motivated by ethnic hatred. Such groups may lack a concrete political goal other than to punish their enemies by killing as many of them as possible, seemingly without concern about alienating sympathizers. Increasingly, attacks are less likely to be followed by claims of responsibility or clear political demands.

The shift in terrorist motives has contributed to a change in the way some international terrorist groups are structured. Because groups based on ideological or religious motives generally lack a specific political or nationalistic agenda, they need not a strong hierarchical structure. Instead, they entertain loose affiliations with like-minded groups based in various countries. The only common cause they shared is hatred towards the United States.

Al-Qaida is the best known of those transnational terrorist organizations. In addition to pursuing its own terrorist campaign, it calls on numerous militant groups that share some of its ideological beliefs to support its violent campaign against the United States. But neither Al-Qaida's extremist politico-religious beliefs nor its leader, Osama bin Ladin, are unique. If Al-Qaida and Osama bin Ladin were to disappear tomorrow, the United States would still face potential terrorist threats from a growing number of groups opposed to perceived American hegemony. Moreover, new terrorist threats can suddenly emerge from isolated conspiracies or obscure cults with no previous history of violence.

These more loosely affiliated transnational terrorist networks are difficult to predict, track, and penetrate. They rely on a variety of sources for funding and logistical support, including self-financing criminal activities such as kidnapping, narcotics, and petty crimes. Their networks of support include both front organizations and legitimate business and nongovernmental organizations. They use the Internet as an effective communications channel.

Guns and conventional explosives have so far remained the weapons of choice for most terrorists. Such weapons can cause many casualties and are relatively easy to acquire and use. But some terrorist groups now show interest in acquiring the capability to use chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) materials. It is difficult to predict the likelihood of a CBRN attack, but most experts agree that today's terrorists are seeking the ability to use such agents in order to cause mass casualties (4).

The widespread dispersal of terrorist activities is the combination of relatively new factors such as the increase in the destructive capacity of the individuals thanks to technological advances in engineering, the chemistry of poisons and explosives, and the miniaturization of electronics. To that, one may add progress in information and communication systems, which led to cyber terrorism: hackers breaking into computer systems and extracting or distorting information. A third factor has been the penetration of technologies within the economic sphere, especially in the West. All systems are becoming increasingly vulnerable due to their increasing complexity and interdependence. Materials, energy, information are pushed in large quantities through a small number of nodes, which are vulnerable to attacks. The consequence is that, in this asymmetrical war, the advantage seems to have shifted towards the terrorists.

The immediate purposes behind specific terrorist attacks may be numerous. Media coverage remains often the most suspected common purpose

of an attack. The terrorists need the attention of the media and they are prepared to resort to increasingly spectacular attacks to secure their attention. In turn it could be said that the media feeds on terrorism, as it produces headlines and spectacular sales. With the expanding coverage of the media, the temptation to commit terrorist acts is also bound to expand. Then, financial gain cannot be entirely discarded as a purpose for some groups. Most of the terrorist groups are money-minded although the perpetrator himself may not be aware of it. The goal of martyrdom and immortality is also for some of the actors a prime purpose. Finally, socio-economic or political aims are also seen as essentials motive behind violent activities.

In addition to all these, we are witnessing the emergence of new groups with new aims. For example, there are now eco-terrorists. They believe that nature is more important than man and that only violent action can save it. Others include agro-terrorism, violence against abortion clinics, and gay-lesbian organizations. The above categorization, however, is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the changing and expanding nature of terrorism and the growing difficulty of eliminating it.

The renaissance of regional cooperation

The challenge posed by terrorism in South Asia has been a major destabilizing factor in building the environment of trust and confidence needed for a better regional cooperation. Since 1970 onwards, South Asia has witnessed a steady growth of terrorist organizations posing a serious challenge to the State. Bomb blasts, suicide attacks, assassinations, kidnappings, hijacking and other acts of terrorism became a normal feature in the region.

Among the countries of South Asia, three of them, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, stand out with three decades for the number of terrorist acts but many others were also affected at a lower but significant level. The Afghan war unleashed as a sequel of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 spilled over into Pakistan, which sustained hundreds of terrorist acts resulting into thousands of deaths. Similarly, India experienced unprecedented terrorist acts in its North Eastern States and Punjab.

In Sri Lanka, the Tamil-Sinhala conflict resulted into the unwarranted use of force against the non-combatants causing massive loss of innocent lives. Years of civil strife in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh led to unwarranted violence from both the state forces and the insurgent Chakma groups.

The recent phase of political violence in Nepal in the shape of the Maoist insurgency is yet another manifestation of the failure of a state and its society to follow a peaceful path for the resolution of their conflicts. Insecurity and chaos have now destabilized Nepal's fragile political order.

Above the challenge of terrorism in different South Asian countries were the charges of state and cross border terrorism levied by India and Pakistan against each other in relation to Kashmir. Events unfolding after September 11, 2001 further compounded the issue of terrorism as a major bone of contention between New Delhi and Islamabad with both sides blaming each other for encouraging and promoting terrorist acts. And if currently violence has subsided, it is not eradicated. The current situation should not be considered more than a pause until a political solution takes shape.

South Asia remains one of the most volatile regions on the globe, with the persistent threat of widespread transnational Islamist terrorism. The response mechanisms evolved thus far have not been sufficient or effective. Indeed, a valid concern has often been voiced on whether the countries of the South Asian region have any coherent, consistent or effective policies against Islamist terror. The strategic reconstruction of South Asia seems now to be on a more solid foundation than before if viewed from the perspective of the global coalition built to eliminate the menace of terrorism. Yet, it remains volatile. This is in spite of the adoption of the Convention on Suppression of Terrorism by SAARC member countries at the 1987 Katmandu SAARC summit.

Notwithstanding, since then the menace of internal insurgencies and cross border of terrorism has not decreased but increased in alarming proportions. The twelfth SAARC summit held in Islamabad (2004) too adopted an Additional Protocol to the existing Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. The Additional Protocol of the Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was also described as a 'landmark' agreement. Its focus was on the financing of terrorist activities. It reaffirmed a condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as it affected the security, stability and the development of the region. The Protocol reiterates the commitment of the SAARC countries to implement all the relevant international Conventions to which they are a party.

Yet, at a time when there is an increasing economic disparity between the industrialized and the developing countries, spending on defense in South Asia has never been so high. Such divergence, between the needs of the people

and the needs of the State is bound to trigger off sooner or later some other forms of social, economic and political crises in the region that may evolve into further terrorist acts.

Religious fanaticism has always found a breeding ground when there is large-scale depredation and desperation within a given population facing no prospect for the future on this earth. Poverty has been designated as a grooving multi-faceted crisis engulfing the whole of South Asia and if regional poverty is not eradicated within a decade with the full participation of the poor in development and governance, all bets are off (5). Any agenda for the reconstruction of the region needs to curb religious fanaticism at all levels. But this can only be achieved if poverty is alleviated across SAARC.

While intra-regional trade needs to be boosted to increase economic activities, reduce poverty and enhance economic integration, at present, intra-regional trade within SAARC is insignificant (less than three percent to total trade). While this problem originated a long time ago from prevailing trade barriers in each country, the more substantive constraint lies in the structural asymmetries existing between the national economies. Of course, moving towards SAFTA is a first step in the process of deepening economic cooperation, but more will be needed.

The continued strained and cautious relations between India and Pakistan and the concomitant defense build-up and militarization on both sides have greatly contributed to a deterioration of the security outlook in South Asia. Yet, efforts by the Head of States of both countries and also track II diplomacy are currently playing an important role in initiating confidence-building measures (CBMs). De-escalation of tensions is an absolute pre-requisite for the reconstruction of the region. Sincere efforts should be made to overcome all political differences, through dialogues, interactions and periodic meetings and consultation. But it remains a fragile process.

It is unfortunate that what unites South Asia is its poverty. This region contributes the largest share of the world's poor, illiterate, hungry and medically deprived. Any move to integrate South Asia cannot, therefore, think of bypassing this distressing social reality (6). Eradication of poverty and social disparity, improvement in the quality of education, development of sense of complementary in economic relations and practice of cooperative foreign security policies of the regional countries would by and large contribute to strengthening the SAARC process.

Channeling resources for constructive purposes such as socio-economic programs for the deprived people would go a long way in reconstructing the region. The clear need is for governments in South Asia to focus on development. Building infrastructures, creating an environment aimed at full employment and fashion patterns of economic and technological cooperation, which would promote the well beings of people of SAARC nations. But that requires new visions.

The overarching problem that the countries of the region have to face collectively is to become conscious of the fact that by the year 2026, the population in the SAARC region would be around 2 billion, about one-fourth of humanity. At that point, the land to people ratio is going to be critical. In such a situation, large-scale migrations due to economic pressures seem unavoidable. Yet they would immediately negate the national territorial boundaries of the SAARC countries and create chaos.

Unfortunately, most countries of the region are seemingly guided by their petty regime interests or by such factors that come to them as historical legacies. The result is adversarial strategic competition among the countries, sustained by deep-rooted distrusts and conflicts. This vision remains a negative factor for regional co-operation. New directions for SAARC in the twenty-first century would remain elusive if the countries of the region continue to be haunted by the conventional mindsets and post-partition legacies.

Yet, within the civil society, there is a strong and growing demand for a greater cooperation within South Asia. Citizens in the region do want to travel across borders as freely as do the citizens of the European Union or ASEAN and to live without the threat of war or fear of terrorism.

However, the constraints to cooperation in virtually every area originate in the tendency of member governments to politicize issues for reasons of domestic expediency. The leaders of the SAARC countries need to respond to the needs of their citizens and demonstrate the statesmanship to resolve their short and long-term conflicts. These conflicts can be more readily addressed within a framework of open regionalism where borders and nationality do not become constraints to the intercourse of people and commerce.

Co-operation is a clear practical feasibility but such co-operation is constantly delayed because of what we call "emotional political platforms" and undoubtedly the burdens of the past colonial history of the members of the

SAARC. But for all, the eradication of poverty, illiteracy, ill health and promotion of education and information technology is a necessity.

Conclusion

Among the wider ramifications of terrorism which touch the day-to-day lives of people throughout the world, UN Security Council Resolution 1373 of September 28, 2001 contends that there is a need to suppress the financing of terrorists, to eliminate the supply of weapons to terrorists, to interdict the movement of terrorist groups across borders, to halt the cynical abuse of refugee and asylum status, and the imperative for domestic legislative measures to deal with the extensive international terrorist networks.

With terrorism threatening peace and stability in South Asia, and in the rest of the world, the fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations has to be comprehensive and sustained. No nation can guard its national interest in isolation but has to do so as a member of the international community. Thus a multilateral approach integrated in specific regional groupings seems the best-suited framework. Towards this end, member states should agree to adopt necessary measures to strengthen cooperation among them. Failure to do so would only encourage further cynical abuse of the poor of the region, i.e. further terrorism emanating from the combination of disfranchised groups and policy failure.

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Sonu Trivedi's endnotes.

1   See I.P.Khosla (2003).
2   For further understanding of the concept refer to Thomas J. Badey (1998).
3   Text of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's speech at University of Oxford, July 8, 2005.
4   Countering the changing threat of international terrorism, Report of the National Commission on Terrorism http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/commission.html
5   For details see The Report of the Independent Commission on Poverty Alleviation headed by Nepal's former Prime Minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai entitled 'Meeting Challenges'.
6   Sobhan Rehman (2004).

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