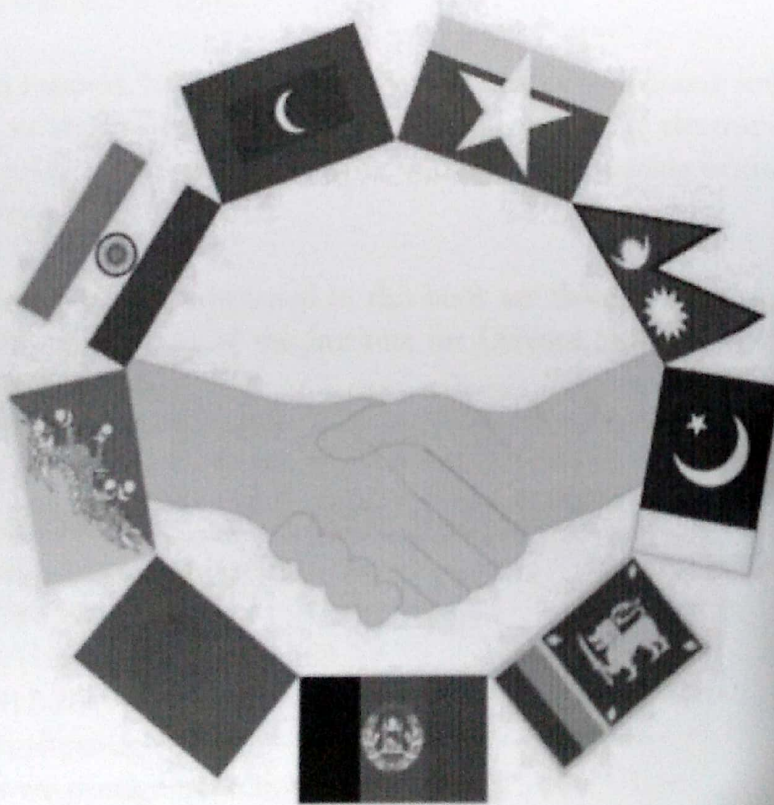


Cooperative Security Framework for **SOUTH ASIA**



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INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSIS

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Editor

Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia / Nihar Nayak (Ed)

First Published in 2013

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ISBN 978-81-8274-705-0

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Published by

PENTAGON PRESS
206, Peacock Lane, Shahpur Jat,
New Delhi-110049
Phones: 011-64706243, 26491568
Telefax: 011-26490600
email: rajan@pentagonpress.in
website: www.pentagonpress.in

In association with

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
No. 1, Development Enclave
New Delhi-110010
Phone: +91-11-26717983

Printed at Syndicate Binders, A-20, Hosiery Complex, Phase II, Noida-201305

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Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia: A Sri Lankan Perspective

W. I. Siriweera and Sanath de Silva

The concept of security has undergone changes over the last two decades as have the leading concerns of security strategists. Security, today, encompasses issues such as environmental pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, the influx of refugees, hierarchical social relations, feminist security, food security, etc. which fall into the category of “human security” or “comprehensive security”. The concept of “human security” came into prominence in the debate following the 1994 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The UNDP proposed that the focus should shift from traditional norms of security including nuclear security to human security. The Report redefined security thus: “For most people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from dread of a cataclysmic world event... Human security is not a concept with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity.”¹ While this concept may be useful in indicating the variety of human needs that must be satisfied, it is far too expansive and elastic to be an effective policy goal, and does not offer an appealing alternative to the traditional conception of security.

On the other hand, the production of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) has forced states to consider protecting themselves through new forms and ways such as prevention of proliferation of conventional and unconventional weapons. International terrorism, too, poses a threat that cannot be countered by instruments used by the traditional defence systems. It is in this context that the idea of “cooperative security” emerged to achieve traditional security goals.

South Asia in comparison with other regions in the world has experienced a large number of inter-state conflicts since World War II. Therefore, the need

for a cooperative security framework was not perceived in the region and for the region for several decades after the independence of the region's States that were under colonial domination. The influence of globalisation and the worsening security situation in different parts of the world has led South Asian countries to demand greater regional cooperation for development. These countries have realised that the costs of non-cooperation are higher than the cost of cooperation.

The ideal in the South Asian context would be to bring all the countries belonging to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to a common platform instead of seeking to redress power imbalances among themselves through assistance from external powers. Resolving political conflicts prevalent among the regional neighbours and developing a collective regional security architecture is the best means to deal with extra-regional threats. The realisation of the goal is an enormous challenge and a colossal task that cannot be achieved in a short span of time. SAARC can succeed in achieving the extra-territorial objective of regional cooperation only upon the willingness of its members to subordinate their mutual fears and suspicions.

Although the boundaries of traditional security have expanded noticeably, historical legacies play a key role in determining bilateral relationships and inhibiting the process of regional cooperation to deal adequately with security issues in the South Asian region. Sri Lanka and India would not be able to address future cooperative security issues unless they understand the root causes of the present cooperative security ambiguities. There are historic factors that hinder issues of cooperation between two countries. In the pre-colonial era, for instance, political factors and the segmented nature of the Indian states resulted in only South Indian power centres posing a threat to the Sri Lankan state under different dynasties.² Major North Indian kingdoms on the other hand, had maintained cordial commercial, religious and cultural relations with Sri Lanka. This state of affairs has changed as a result of the emergence of an independent Indian state. Even prior to India's independence, the Indian scholar-diplomat K.M. Panikkar had stated in 1945 that "a realistic policy of Indian defence was the internal organisation of India on a firm and stable basis with Burma and Ceylon."³ In the same year, Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of India's foreign policy, added that Sri Lanka "would be inevitably drawn into a closer union with India."⁴ But subsequently, on numerous occasions in the 1950s, Nehru repudiated any suggestion that India had designs to interfere with the island's sovereignty and assured Sri Lanka of India's goodwill and peaceful intentions toward her.⁵

Yet, the perception of threat from India was a very real element in security considerations in Sri Lanka, more specifically during the period 1948-56, but to a lesser extent after. Some of the statements of the Indian defence establishment too have contributed to this perceived threat. For example, Ravi Kaul, a former commander in the Indian Navy, wrote in 1974: "As long as Sri Lanka is friendly

or neutral, India has nothing to worry about but if there be any danger of the island falling under the domination of a power hostile to India, [it] cannot tolerate such a situation endangering her territorial integrity.”⁶

It was not unnatural for India to have its own perception of its regional security interests. It had demonstrated interests and concern over Sri Lanka's international relations, but it was also inherent in the geopolitical situation, in the locational determinism of India-Sri Lanka relations that a fear psychosis of India persisted in Sri Lanka to a greater or lesser degree. This depended on variables such as international situation, issues of domestic politics and the personality factor.⁷

Therefore, there had been tendencies on the part of Sri Lanka's decision-makers to seek diplomatic reinsurance in various forms against any attempt by India to dominate it. On India's part, there had been a tendency to regard Sri Lanka (together with other small neighbours), as a legitimate object of its interest and concern as a country located within its security sphere. India in many instances had assumed that Sri Lanka's foreign contacts had to be conditioned by the demands of Indian national security interests. Relatively recent concerns of India's security as well as concerns of Sri Lanka's security need to be understood in this broader context.

There are specific as well as general factors that need to be taken in to account in a situation of cooperative security paradigm between India and Sri Lanka. One of the important specific issues is the Indo-Sri Lanka maritime boundary. The maritime boundary between Sri Lanka and India is divided at three different sea areas: Bay of Bengal, Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar. Both countries have signed bilateral agreements on the maritime boundary as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

After years of dispute and a few rounds of negotiations, Indian and Sri Lankan governments agreed to recognize the territorial waters of each country by enacting maritime legislations in 1974 and 1976 by which the barren island of Kachchativu, 24 km northeast of Ramesvaram and 22.5 km southwest of the Delft Islands, was left to Sri Lankan ownership. A debate on Kachchativu has resurfaced in the recent past as Tamil Nadu politicians desire to extend the fishing area of South Indian fishermen. Jayalalitha Jayaram, the incumbent chief minister of Tamil Nadu, has been in the forefront of this debate, claiming that the maritime boundary should be re-demarcated so that Kachchativu will come within Indian territorial waters. Although the Central Government of India has not taken these agitations seriously, the issue needs to be sorted out permanently.

Related to the issue of maritime boundary is the problem of poaching by Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan territorial waters and Sri Lankan fishermen in Indian territorial waters. As a result of poaching, there have been frequent arrests of fishermen by the respective navies of both countries. As of 25 October 2011,

there were 23 Sri Lankan fishermen and 8 fishing boats of Sri Lanka in Indian custody.⁸ Reports of harassment by fishermen on both sides are frequent. Tamil Nadu politicians have attempted to highlight this as an important political issue. In response to a public interest litigation filed by lawyer B. Stalin, the Madurai branch of the Madras High Court on 14 October 2011 directed the Central Government to provide two-tier security for Indian fishermen by the Indian Coast Guard and Navy so that they are not subject to atrocities of the Sri Lankan Navy. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha has urged Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh not to look at the Sri Lankan Navy attacks on Indian fishermen as a solitary problem of Tamil Nadu. In a letter to Manmohan Singh, she has stated: "I would also like to emphasize that the harassment of the fishermen of Tamil Nadu should be viewed as an act of provocation and aggression against India by Sri Lanka, similar to acts of firing across the borders of India by neighbours such as Pakistan and China."⁹ Although it is evident that the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has over-reacted, resolving the issue of poaching by fishermen of both countries is vital to maintain healthy Indo-Lanka relations.

The *Setu Samudram* Canal project is another specific issue that needs amicable settlement between India and Sri Lanka. India does not have a continuous navigable route around the peninsula within her own territorial waters due to the existence of a shallow (1.5 to 3.5 metres in depth) ridge described as the Adam's Bridge between Pamban Island on southeastern coast of India and Talaimannar of Sri Lanka. As a result, ships calling at ports on the east coast of India have to go an additional distance of more than 400 nautical miles and 36 hours of ship time around Sri Lanka. The *Sethu Samudram* is a project to construct a navigation channel between India and Sri Lanka through the Palk Straits. This will enhance Indian coastal security and reduce shipping time as well as costs. It will also allow more flexibility to large Indian fishing vessels and will facilitate oil exploration in the Palk Bay.

Circumnavigation between the east and west coasts of India exclusively within Indian territorial waters has its defence implications. But since this project can impact Sri Lanka, the authorities have expressed concern over the following issues related to the project:

- 1) Lack of dialogue between India and Sri Lanka on the proposed project;
- 2) Environmental safety of the canal. The proximity of the proposed dumping areas of dredgespoil to the maritime boundary;
- 3) Need for a collaborative defence strategy for the Palk Bay area;
- 4) Impact on the commercial status of Colombo; and
- 5) Danger of oil spillage in case of leaks from ships.

These are only some of the specific issues related to India-Sri Lanka relations. On the other hand, certain general conditions which affect all other South Asian countries are also relevant to Sri Lanka. One is the feeling of insecurity among

the small South Asian nations created by the advantageous position of India in terms of size, geopolitical location, resources, population and military power. India needs to assuage such feelings of insecurity by diligently restoring to measures of confidence building. In fact, much of the responsibility devolves on India to promote goodwill and cooperation than on the states surrounding India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent address to India's Combined Commanders' Conference clearly indicates that India has the political will to take measures in that direction. He had said: "We have paid special attention to our immediate neighbourhood. This is based on our conviction that the task of India's socio-economic transformation will always be more difficult and less likely to succeed if we do not manage relations with our neighbours properly; more importantly, if we do not give them a substantial stake in India's economic progress and stability."¹⁰ An understanding of India's sentiments by its South Asian neighbours at the same time seems essential.

The nuclearisation of India and Pakistan is another reason that impinges on the security of the entire region; both countries should be sensitive to the security of their neighbours. Any nuclear exchange or accident may well impact them. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, it will be directly affected by any accident at the Indian Fast Breeder Reactor Complex at Kalpakkam near Chennai, the nuclear power reactor complex at Koodankulam and the experimental establishments in Kerala. A further threat to the whole region including India and Pakistan is the risk of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups. That would be an unimaginable nightmare.

The third is cross-border activities such as smuggling of arms and trafficking of drugs particularly by insurgents or terrorist groups. They legitimize their actions on the basis of the demand for drugs and arms in the world and the employment opportunities available in the drugs and arms trade. India and Pakistan are also vulnerable in this regard and they cannot be countered through direct military interventions.

Thus when South Asia is considered as a whole, the nature and magnitude of some of the security issues of the region are incredibly interrelated. It is difficult for any single South Asian country to address them in isolation; here a "cooperative security" framework becomes increasingly important and relevant. Besides, in an increasingly interrelated global security situation, it is difficult to isolate a crisis in one part of the world from affecting development in other distant areas.

Ramifications of external relations of South Asian countries obviously extend far beyond the region in to almost all parts of the world. In that context, too, regional cooperative security becomes absolutely essential. As Barry Buzan has noted, "Security is a relational phenomenon. It involves not only the capabilities, desires and fears of individual states, but also the capabilities, desires and fears

of other states with which they interact. Because security is relational, we cannot understand the national security of any given state without understanding the international pattern of security interdependence in which it is embedded.”¹¹

Political stability and order in the South Asian sub-system may not put an end to the influence of outside or global powers in the region. But resolution of political conflicts within the region will certainly reduce external involvements in the sub-system.



Notes

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7. S.U. Kodikara, no. 5, p. 25.
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10. *Ceylon Daily News*, 17 October 2011, p. 8.
11. Barry Buzan “A Framework for Regional Security Analysis” in Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi (eds.), *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Power*, Macmillan Ltd, London, 1986, p. 5.