



# Balancing Acts

## Considerations for Promoting Common Security in South Asia

BY ANURADHA CHENOY

**L**ike other diverse regions, South Asia faces complex entanglements, historically unresolved conflicts, and overwhelming human security challenges. Underlining the importance of strengthening common security in the region, two South Asian countries — India and Pakistan — possess nuclear weapons, and are not signatories to either the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of

Nuclear Weapons or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Yet if common security, human security, and development can be made to take precedence over contested border claims and militarist approaches, an alternative paradigm will emerge throughout the region and beyond. South Asia must navigate some roadblocks to achieve common security, but also has some nascent successes.



## Finding Security while Managing Imbalances

South Asian security paradigms are embedded in the region's history of British colonial rule and post-colonial state formation. The region borders Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East in the west; touches China in the north; and in the east continues into Myanmar and Southeast Asia. Historical continuities for nations in this area include the legacies of British colonialism, the 'Great Game' paradigm of inter-imperialist rivalries, and post-colonial competition between great and regional powers. South Asia is characterized by asymmetries and inequalities that stem from India's disproportionate size and historic influence, with many different South Asian identities — for example, the Tamil ethnic minority in Sri Lanka

and Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh — linked to this subcontinent. Such confluences and pluralities underlie security challenges as well as opportunities.

Each of the South Asian states (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and the Republic of Maldives) has specific security challenges. For India, the unresolved dispute over the demarcation of its border with China, Pakistan's claims on Kashmir, and the use of terror tactics as an asymmetric method to harm Indian interests are serious security issues. Pakistan sees its claim on Kashmir as unfinished business, and values its own border with Afghanistan and Central Asia for providing strategic depth and geopolitical leverage. Pakistan also maintains both a deep strategic partnership with China and close relations with the United States.

Interestingly, the smaller states of South Asia have fewer confrontational security issues with India, and are able to resolve potential conflicts. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean navigate diplomatically between India, China, and even the U.S. and Russia to secure their interests. Their shared position is characterized by neutrality in conflicts between their great neighbors, India and China; by abstaining from military alliances; and by not possessing weapons of mass destruction. These states have benefitted from their position of neutrality in the regional and international system, with an approach that makes them ideal candidates for the common security paradigm.

## The China-India Conundrum

Differing perceptions and claims regarding border demarcations along the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) in the Himalayan region are at the heart of the conflict between India and China. Infrastructure-building and transgressions by border patrols and villagers on both sides contribute to tensions, and a major war in 1962 remains a historic sore point. For several decades after that clash there was reasonable restraint, but since 2020, when India detected increased Chinese military activities on its border, tension along the Sino-Indian border has been high; skirmishes have included a December 2022 encounter in Doklam that injured several Indian military personnel. On the positive side, ongoing talks between commanders of the opposing forces have functioned successfully to prevent escalation, with the most recent round of talks (as of this

writing) held in March 2024. During the seventeenth round, both sides agreed to withdraw from some hot spots and to maintain military and diplomatic channels of communication. The Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs also meets regularly, with 30 events held between 2012, when the group was established, and August 2024.<sup>1</sup>

This tension, referred to by some observers as “the China factor,” is a driver of Indian strategic engagement with the U.S. and has made India an enthusiastic partner in the Quadrilateral Security Forum, known as “the Quad” (India, Australia, Japan, and the U.S.). In response to a resurgence of formal Quad activity after some years of dormancy, China increased the deployment of its Western Theatre Command along the LAC in 2022. The U.S., in its containment plans for China, sees India as a potential partner in the Indo-Pacific, and has signed a logistics agreement with India that allows U.S. Navy facilities in specific Indian ports. Meanwhile, India has kept up a deep strategic partnership with Russia since the 1950s. India’s defense imports and military equipment from Russia have decreased to about 45% of its total imports, but India refused to condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine and continues to increase the purchase of hydrocarbons from Russia.<sup>2</sup> In this context, India-China talks have made minimal progress, and Sino-Indian-U.S. tensions are fostering militarization and confrontational competition, while siphoning attention from common security approaches.

Pakistan’s foreign policy is managed by its military. Pakistan has deep strategic ties with the U.S., and provided logistic facilities for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan has continued its engagement with the U.S. since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan’s “all-weather” relationship with China and with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative assist in both ‘containing’ India and safeguarding Pakistani interests in its turbulent northwestern frontier and on the contested Durand Line border with Afghanistan. Pakistan faces internal security issues in its tribal areas like Balochistan.

Pakistan sees its interests strongly aligned with one or another great power. The country is deeply in debt, with an ongoing economic crisis — but nevertheless maintains high military spending.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan is unlikely to contribute to a shift toward common security in this region.

## For Promising Models of Stability, Look to the Small States

Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have become adept in practicing neutrality, first during the Cold War and more recently in the disputes between India and Pakistan and between India and China. In this balancing act, they preserve their sovereignty while looking to common security. Yet these nations have their own precarious internal issues. Sri Lanka’s 26 years of civil war ended with charges of genocide perpetrated against its Tamil minority citizens; currently, the nation is in a debt crisis and takes loans from the World Bank, India, and China. Landlocked Nepal has agreements with India that provide visa-free mobility to Nepali citizens, millions of whom work in India without permits since Nepali citizens do not require visas or work permits in India.<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh, whose economy is one of the fastest-growing in South Asia,<sup>5</sup> witnessed student-led mass protests that led to the dramatic fall of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and a takeover by the army. This small state will be unstable in the near future. Bangladesh has been reckoning with Islamic radicals, border issues, and Rohingya migrants from Myanmar — but in the last decade has signed border and development agreements with India, and has agreements with China, Russia, and other countries. Bhutan has resolved a contentious border issue with China and maintains close relations with India. The Republic of Maldives gets assistance from both India and China. The regimes in all these states use nationalism as a card in their elections, with political parties inclining towards one or another power within the region.

## Conclusion

All the countries of South Asia are developing, capitalist states with major domestic issues. They carry out strategic balancing with each other and with great powers outside the region. All of them call their foreign policies “multivector.”

India and Pakistan both have ambitions to become regional great powers, and each is leveraging its own strategic advantages in its relationship with world superpowers. Pakistan remains vulnerable because of its fragile economy, indebtedness, and compromised military-civil elite. India has a larger space for strategic autonomy; the U.S. appears to be looking for proxies in the region, but India is likely to remain strategically

independent, with multiple strategic allies that include the U.S., the E.U., and Russia. China is an important actor in this region, and it too is seeking to increase its leverage. Pakistan would like to support both the U.S. and China, but is under pressure from both. India allies with the U.S., since its own interests are against China. Neither India nor Pakistan will join any common security proposal until their border issues with each other are resolved. If not bilaterally managed, the hostility in Sino-Indian relations may fuel any other conflagration that erupts in the Indo-Pacific.

The smaller states are the space to watch, as their position inclines them naturally towards a common

security paradigm. Without contentious border hostilities to manage, these nations attain higher human development as measured by the United Nations Human Development Index. Experience shows that when small states manage their internal stability, sustain common understanding with their neighbors, and stay out of military alliances, they achieve stability and common prosperity. However, when they engage in majoritarian politics, as Sri Lanka did against its Tamil minority, they face civil conflicts. There is a lesson to be learned by using the ideas of common security both for domestic-national cohesion and for peace and development regionally and internationally.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Regional bodies for peace and development like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation should be revived and revitalized.
2. Smaller countries in the region should maintain non-alignment and strategic autonomy, since these policies have served them well.
3. The countries of South Asia should stay out of the coming great power confrontations and military alliances.
4. All outstanding issues between nations should continue to be negotiated bilaterally, and with regional support if chosen by the parties concerned.
5. The region should consider a common security platform for collective peaceful engagement.

## Endnotes

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024, August 1). China and India Holds 30th Meeting of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on China-India Border Affairs.
2. Baruah, R. (2024, February 20). Russia Remains Top Oil Supplier to India, Imports Climb 25% in December. *Mint*.
3. Kamran, Y. (2023, June 10). "Defence Budget Jacked Up by 16%." *The Express Tribune*.
4. Nepali Migrant Workers Start Returning to Work in India (2020, September 6). *The New Indian Express*.
5. Mavis, M. (2023, July 31). Bangladesh Ranks as Fastest Growing Economy in Asia-Pacific. *Dhaka Tribune*.