# South Asian Security and the Implications for Small States

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## I.    Introduction

Security involves some form of minimization of conflict endangering life, liberty and property or the pursuit of happiness. But conflict is also natural. As Bernard Shaw in his play "Arms and the Man" so succinctly stated, "No conflict, no life". Indeed, without conflict of ideas, thesis and antithesis developing toward a synthesis, as Hegel saw it, and varied challenges to the status quo and the responses thus generated, progress as a concept would increasingly become meaningless. But everything has its limit and so do the functions of conflict. Without mutual trust and respect, conflict can very easily become dysfunctional, often generating centrifugal forces and thereby undermining, if not destroying, the chances for peaceful resolution at whatever level of human existence. In this exposition, conflict can produce different types of security issues and problems.

Security, as I see it, necessarily relates to a state of mind leading to perceptions of well-being on the basis of understandable, non-threatening factors in different mileus, *e.g.,* social, political, economic, religious, educational, as well as local, regional, national and interna-tional. Conceivably, according to this approach, a perception of smooth, if not entirely healthy, relationships between and among some, if not all, of these factors would prevent unnecessary anxiety and apprehensions in the perceiver. This could decrease the chances of conflict becoming dysfunctional, unmanageable and dangerous. Conceptually, however, potential conflict factors, involving some form of perceived threat to individual, group, ethnic, regional and national interests, and the fear of losing freedom due to factional and ethnic violence would certainly diminish psychological and physical state of security. A comparable effect on security can be brought about by a mass exodus related to any threat from an ideological and non-ideological threat factors are interconnected. Addressing one would usually involve understanding others on vertical or horizontal or on both planes, *e.g.,* ideologically generated threat factors like censorship and selective application of the due process of law, and a

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given public policy on access to resources, particularly involving the disadvantaged, are usually linked both vertically and horizontally. And, deeper the understanding of the perception about the conflict factors, the less difficult will be for humans to discover a common ground on which negotiations can be carried out peaceably or, at least, with minimal dysfunctional effects, such as further complication of issues, recurring postponements of dialogue, and an increase of mutual or unilateral perceptions of threats.

Using the expectancy theory[1] framework, one can argue that it is not the level of understanding of conflict factors but the expected outcome of negotiations as perceived by humans which will determine the success or failure of their negotiating efforts. This is more so for small states. Lacking the option to put pressure on opponents which can be backed by the actual or perceived ability to use force, it becomes imperative for small states to learn, by whatever means, to understand how mutuality of interests can be developed and applied for negotiated settlement of conflict.

But having tasted power and taken ego trips, few leaders would consider sharing power externally and/or internally without a fight, often destroying, or at least, undermining security. This becomes a particularly critical question for leaders of small countries, such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, who may perceive any type of compromise as a threat to their very existence. For small countries, particularly the problem-ridden ones with weak institutions and low level of defensive capability, negotiation for settlements of conflict which involves compromise could be a painfully tortuous process, making it much more difficult to achieve a closure. For the people of the Third World and former communist countries of Europe, "Democracy first" may be a nice principle, but "security" becomes the vital issue in their continuing debate on how best to resolve conflict relating to ideological differences in regard to the allocation of values, often reduced to the question of preserving and advancing self interest. In the process, policy makers tend to use security factors—internal and external—as justifications for decisions and actions of authoritarian and suppressive nature. Whether it involved Yeltsin's bombardment of the Russian Parliament building or his indiscriminate use of firepower on Chechens, or Hussain's unprovoked attack on Kuwait, or imprisonment of opposition leaders by Indira Gandhi, security factors have been put often to questionable use by leaders to protect self-interest.

In regard to the perception of external security, according to the above line of argument, small countries of South Asia in negotiations with their giant neighbor, India, face a much higher level of difficulty in making compromises on water sharing form international river systems, on border questions, on off-shore drilling for oil and natural gas, on ethnic demand for autonomy or equitable resource sharing, etc. The case with India is not only its much larger size and wider resource base than its neighbors, but it also includes every linguistic-ethnic group located in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. India acts "as though it does not know where its borders are, and treats neighboring states as though it is almost a domestic problem".[2] West Bengal's past intransigence in meeting the previous border agreements between Bangladesh and India over the Tin Bigha strip and the sharing of water from the Ganges underscores the point.

Often the leadership's manipulations of such security factors as territoriality, available and potential resources, ethnicity, technological capability, political stability and the socio-economic well being of the citizenry serve to increase not only the perception of insecurity of smaller states but as well the complexity of negative perceptions.

The reality and the perception of security factors in their different dimensions need adjustment in every culture. What is perceived by people, often under the influence of vested interests which include the politico-bureaucratic elite, may not have a realistic basis at given points in time. But with a persistent collusion between certain sections of the elite, the perceptions of insecurity can sometime be transformed into reality. The Gulf of Tonkin triggering the expansion of American misadventurism in South Vietnam, Iraq's conquest of Kuwait and the subsequent deployment of the American armed forces against Iraq, and Russia's continuing crackdown of Chechnya's independence struggle have underscored such transformation from manipulative perception of national security to the allocation of vast resources against a significantly smaller political entity. For small nations such manipulation in transforming a perception of insecurity into offensive armed action can be seriously detrimental to nation-building and identity resolving goals. Both historically and ideologically such a move is untenable and