

4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Narayanan, Raviprasad (2014) "India and South Asian Security Issues: Problems Aplenty, Solutions Hazy, Prospects Unsettling," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol5/iss2/9>

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India and South Asian Security Issues: Problems Aplenty, Solutions Hazy, Prospects Unsettling

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David Brewster. *India as an Asia Pacific Power*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.

Marcus Franke. *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

D. Suba Chandran and P.R. Chari (Eds.). *Armed Conflicts in South Asia 2011: The Promise and Threat of Transformation*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2012.

Harsh though it might appear, the problem of South Asia and its intractable security issues is South Asia itself. The region is akin to a veritable petri dish for international relations scholars comprising every possible scenario involving security issues—terrorism, separatism, ethnic conflicts, nuclear issues, boundary disputes, resource disputes, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, failed states, non-state actors and flawed polities, to name a few. This petri dish is all the more fascinating when one considers the absolute venality of political and bureaucratic actors (with the latter not being accountable to electoral mandates) across South Asia who alternately are plainly indifferent and grossly intemperate in their understanding of and response to multiple security crises afflicting the region.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction facing the region is the central actor of South Asia—India. As the largest country in South Asia with a relatively developed economy, vibrant political culture and a historical continuity stretching thousands of years, India belongs to South Asia, yet doesn't. Its aspiring role as an Asia-Pacific power and the buildup of an image that firmly places it as an active member of the Group of 20 and the developing countries of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa attest to India's impatience at being grouped (and compared) with a region that otherwise reflects growing anomie and shackles India's quest for great power status.

The three books under review shed light on the region and its complex security issues, and are a welcome addition to the growing literature on South Asian studies. They should be considered primers to understanding the roots and variables of several contested security issues and debates involving the region.

David Brewster's *India as an Asia Pacific Power* presents a timely theme that captures the essence of India's attempts to reinvent itself as a nation not just confined to South Asia, but looking towards the Asia Pacific in quest of its manifest destiny as a great power. It was the end of the Cold War that allowed India to reorient its strategic behavior. Brewster argues that while India has the potential to swing the regional balance for and against China, it could end up providing "stability" to the region or make it more "complex." As an "outsider" India would be seen as an interloper and would need to have firm bilateral security arrangements with a few nations of the region, especially Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea and Australia. Three fundamental questions motivate the book: Will India have the material capabilities and political willingness to project power beyond Singapore into the western Pacific? Could there be any direct role for India and the Asia Pacific countries on security issues? Can the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region be considered as a strategic whole?

The 11 chapters that follow address these questions and clearly illuminate the transformation in Indian strategic thinking parallel to its emergence as an economic power in the region. There exists a gap between India's ambitions and capabilities, but this has not stopped India from becoming more engaged with the region, especially with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India's "Look East Policy" has certainly succeeded with it becoming a sectoral dialog partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a full dialog partner of the ASEAN in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996, a member of the East Asia Summit in 2005 and signing a Free Trade Area pact with the ASEAN in 2009.

The intellectual justifications made by India's strategic community calling for an expansionist profile in the Asia Pacific run counter to two arguments. First, after ending up on the losing side of the Cold War, India is increasingly comfortable adopting a posture of strategic autonomy that some have described as NonAlignment 2.0.¹ Second, as George Tanham had pointed out, India's strategic culture is considered to be 'defensive' and its history reveals a temperament averse to an 'expansionist military tradition' (p. 28). India's endeavor to be a stakeholder in the Asia-Pacific also runs into the ambitions of its nemesis—China. While both countries deny any rivalry, especially maritime, China's rapid ingress into the Indian Ocean is thought to be one of the reasons motivating India to play a larger role in the Asia Pacific and causing it to constantly reiterate its zone of maritime influence as stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca.

A growing security role for India in the Asia Pacific could also be alternately seen as something akin to a work in progress. China's growing belligerence in the maritime domain of East Asia is creating its own dynamics and established actors like the United States, Japan and a worried ASEAN could informally make use of India as a "hedge" player. Apart from the security factor, the Asia Pacific is going through a process of strategic convergence with India at multiple levels. India's economic profile and integration with the Asia-Pacific region is a reality with almost all of its signed FreeTrade Area agreements (FTA's) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA's) with countries and multilateral institutions of the region - namely with Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore Japan, Korea and the ASEAN. India engages with the region by announcing its preferences for a multipolar regional order and subscribing to strategic autonomy without "bandwagoning" with alliances. Most importantly, India seeks recognition as a global actor expanding its strategic space into the region.

While the Asia-Pacific region may be large enough to accommodate India as an emerging stakeholder in the region's security, that development may come with peril for India as China encroaches into the Indian ocean and expands alliances—commercial or otherwise—that can only come at India's expense. India also faces a couple of existential questions—can she go it alone in the Asia-Pacific region or should she work in synchrony with the United States, Japan and Australia? Beyond the rhetoric, can India demonstrate significant commitment to provide security to the region (p. 164)?

Brewster realistically captures the stated aspirations of India in the strategic domain, detailing the confusion in implementation of policy, which comes across as both hesitant and awe-stricken at the ever-growing strategic might of China.

Global aspirations aside, the idea called "India" is yet to find acceptance by ethnic minorities located in northeast India. Of the many groups fighting and challenging the Indian state, the Nagas are perhaps a unique instance of a militant group that has successfully managed

¹ See Sunil Khilnani et al, *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century*, New Delhi, Centre for Policy Research, 2012.

to “lock in” the Indian government with a process of negotiations during which levels of violence have appreciably come down. What prevails is a stalemate, where the Indian state cannot claim to have pacified the region, while the Nagas cannot claim a victory. Marcus Franke’s *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas* exemplifies one of those rare instances when a scholar has comprehensively deconstructed not just the “problem” as it exists, but also unravels the social agents and historical narrative that created the problem in the first place. Franke’s work connects to a wider historical framework that establishes the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Naga conflict with the Indian state.

Tracing roots of the conflict to a colonial past where the East India company viewed hilly tracts inhabited by Naga tribes as a strategic interlude between Assam and Burma, the attempts made by the company to militarily dominate the region invited fierce resistance from local tribes. The eventual British prevailing over the Nagas gave way to measures designed to sustain their hold on the region, including boundaries and subdivisions to be fixed and revenues to be raised to finance administrative costs (pp. 34-35). A societal transformation subsequently took place with the grafting by the British of a tribal hierarchy onto a hitherto equal social structure. New authorities—elected or appointed headmen—emerged to collect revenue, and colonial conquest was followed by disarmament of the population, removal of village defenses, registering of the labor force, introduction of settled cultivation, and most importantly, transfer of commonly held forest resources to a bureaucratic order for administration and revenue generation (p. 46).

Colonial rule, however, brought about a Naga consciousness represented by an elite spectrum “conscious of its own nation-being” and a confidence that the Naga people “could consequently form themselves into a national organization” (p. 47). Franke attributes several factors to the rise of this consciousness: categorization (“Naga” as an identity), administration (visible evidence of government through schools and medical dispensaries), Christianity (spread of a new faith to a newly settled population), and the two world wars (where hundreds of Naga soldiers fought on the allied side and saw a wider world). In many ways, the colonial administration became a dominant frame of reference to the Nagas. In contrast, the post-colonial phase to many Nagas represents a period where the Indian state adopted a stance of giving verbal assurances about constitutional safeguards without implementing them, leading to alienation for many, especially the Nagas (p. 67). Complicating the equation was the manner in which the Indian state reacted by adopting a heavy-handed approach every time demands for autonomy were made from the periphery. The rationale motivating decision makers in New Delhi was that if demands for autonomy were acquiesced to, the balkanization of India was a tangible prospect.

Alienation from India for the Nagas also stemmed from the outrageous attempts made by the authorities at depopulating villages and creating settlements where several villages’ inhabitants were corralled together. To the Nagas, for whom each tribe was akin to a nation, these retrograde developments led to a collapse of traditional patterns of life and consequent increase in support for those who sought independence. Adding new complexities were the influx of traders from the plains, new laws, and the feeling that a state project of forced assimilation was being implemented. With Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rejecting the results of a plebiscite conducted by the erstwhile Naga National Council (NNC) led by Angami Zapu Phizo in May 1952, the concept of a Naga nation gained further clarity and legitimacy even amongst those Naga tribes not entirely in agreement with the dominant Ao’s and Sema’s.

The conflict with Nagas and many other ethnic minorities in India’s northeast has been a learning experience for administrators and security forces who have over time learnt to divide and rule the region and its many groups. By keeping the region divided and playing favorites

with one faction or the other of militant groups, the region is kept within India and with limited democratic space open for political entrepreneurs who will play along to what New Delhi wishes (p. 123). Unlike the rest of India, democratic space in northeast India (especially in the states of Manipur and Nagaland) is constricted owing to the enforcement of the provocative Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958. That a much-advertised democracy like India should have such laws is eminently condemnable since it not only violates basic human rights of the individual, but also strips the individual of dignity and confers impunity upon the enforcers of such a draconian piece of legislation!

The stalemate that prevails arises from another set of complex realities—institutionalized corruption of the polity in most parts of northeast India that end up strengthening New Delhi, establishment of institutionalized interests that circumvent initiatives to settle outstanding issues, tacit acknowledgement by the Indian state of the existence of a parallel administration in Naga-dominated areas by various factions, and the requirement of a pacified northeast as a variable in India's Look East policy.

Franke's book comes across as perhaps the most detailed study done on an internal security issue that not many in India are even aware of—or care about!

The volume titled *Armed Conflicts in South Asia 2011: The Promise and Threat of Transformation* by D. Suba Chandran and P.R. Chari addresses two questions—whether armed conflicts in South Asia have transformed, and how they might evolve further.

By undertaking a comprehensive survey of the conflicts plaguing the region, this volume, divided into two parts, brings together an eclectic group of scholars and practitioners. In outlining a framework, Chari makes two clear arguments. First, armed conflicts in South Asia are intra-state conflicts, not inter-state, and second, religious fundamentalism and non-military security threats have gained salience in recent years. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza's chapter captures the Afghan conflict and its array of internal and external actors with their diverse interests and competing agendas, but inexplicably leaves out India as an actor in this conflict. Suba Chandran's chapter predicts that when it comes to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the status quo will continue with the Pakistani state being unable to comprehensively take on the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the TTP not able to overthrow the state of Pakistan. On Kashmir and the seemingly unending conflict, Kavita Suri's chapter concludes that the political process in the state has to be revived, there is a need for a visible militarization accompanied by a handing over of security duties and challenges to the police, a phased withdrawal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act is needed, and deeper and wide-ranging cross-border trade should be encouraged. Tracing the failures of the Indian state in the northeast to the lack of civil society initiatives, Mirza Zulfiqar Rahman says in another chapter, "Civil society actors in the region must be harnessed to create a platform where purposive dialogue can happen to resolve insurgencies, conflict situations and other concerns facing society instead of the largely formalized process of peace negotiation between the state and insurgent groups." (p. 108)

Rajat Kumar Kujur's chapter details the Naxal movement in central India and ascribes a cynical nexus of administrative failures and coercion on the part of the security forces for aggravating the situation. With corporate interests wanting to mine the riches below the forests of central India, the government has introduced a cynical element by patronizing vigilante groups that work in tandem with security forces increasing hardships to the common people.

What are South Asian conflicts all about? In trying to unravel their typology, Suba Chandran identifies the following as distinguishing features of South Asian conflicts: latent and

manifest, recent and long-standing, local and cross-border, secular and communal, continuous and intermittent, insular and contagious, internal and imposed (p. 138). Ashok Bhan in his chapter on Jammu and Kashmir calls for the need to manage the internal dimensions by engaging the people of the state and to allow for a process to emerge that would generate peace with dignity. Wasbir Hussain, in his chapter on the conflict in the northeast, attributes the sustainability of the conflict to several reasons: the plethora of armed groups in a region which is an ethnic mosaic, the existence of porous borders making the situation complicated, the development process undertaken by the union government to work hand-in-hand with anti-insurgency operations, need for the Armed Forces Special Powers Act to be repealed or amended, and the lack of a regional anti-terror network. In his chapter on Nepal, Nischal N. Pandey argues that the deep divides in Nepal's politics are to be considered an outcome of the processes that led to the country becoming a new republic and its need to consolidate democracy with a constitution as its bulwark. On Sri Lanka, N. Manoharan details the methodology and dilemmas faced by the Rajapaksa administration in a post-conflict scenario in the form of four "Ds". "Demilitarization," or D1, in Sri Lanka is done in a manner to ensure that the LTTE does not regroup. "Development," or D2, undertaken in former conflict areas is slow and relies on external support including from India. "Democratization," or D3, as a project has suffered since the Rajapaksa regime is moving in the opposite direction, and "Devolution," or D4, is a subject on which there has been no forward movement. Radha Vinod Raju, in his chapter on religious fundamentalism, argues that the prospect of economic development benefitting the majority more than the minorities could pose a challenge since minorities who do not benefit from economic development could get further alienated. The final chapter by Medha Chaturvedi and P.G. Rajamohan adopts the argument that naxalism² in India is a socioeconomic issue and not a law-and-order problem as the government of India sees it.

Suba Chandran and Chari's edited book not only narrates the complexities of South Asia's security issues and ongoing conflicts, but also lays out parameters by which issues can be managed and conflict levels reduced.

² 'Naxalism' is the generic term used in India to describe the violent acts precipitated by various Maoist groups to undermine the writ of the state in several parts of the country. As a term 'Naxalism' owes its origin to the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal state in eastern India where a peasant uprising in 1967 calling for land reforms was brutally suppressed by the government of the day and inspired several similar uprisings that continue on a much larger scale in parts of India today.