

# Empowerment of Smaller Powers in South Asian Security Cooperation



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## Executive Summary

When addressing regional security issues, discussions typically focus on the roles and concerns of larger powers. Their impact on regional balance becomes paramount often exacerbating already existing disparities with smaller powers within South Asia. Often, these smaller stakeholders feel neglected when they fail to receive due consideration on issues that are of great importance to them. This leads to dissatisfaction and damages the overall potential for regional cooperation. As a result, these stakeholders often play a crucial role in the balance of power shift in the region. This paper analyzes the security concerns of smaller powers in South Asia and their possible long-term impact on relations with other nations in the region and beyond and suggests means for cohesiveness and confidence building in order to achieve combined goals.

## Introduction

When addressing regional security issues, discussions often focus on the role and concerns of larger powers. Their impact on regional balance often exacerbates already existing disparities with smaller powers within South Asia: they feel neglected when they fail to receive due consideration on issues that are important to them. This leads to dissatisfaction and damages the overall potential for regional cooperation. A number of concerns related to historical background, local pressures, their perceptions of the neighbors actions, apprehension about intended or hidden objective, and insecurities, if not addressed properly, could lead to disharmony. This paper analyzes the concerns of smaller powers in South Asia and their possible long-term impact on relations with other nations in the region and beyond. Specifically, it will discuss four nations within South Asia: Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.

South Asia is comprised of eight nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. They differ in size, population, economic indicators, and face different environmental and development challenges and security concerns. At the same time, these countries share similar historical backgrounds and government structures. Due to globalization, incidents occurring in a particular state or

region often have transnational and trans-regional ramifications in the entire South Asian region. What makes the situation even more daunting is the expanding scope of security concerns and the link between traditional and non-traditional security threats. In the face of this interconnectivity of threats, efforts have been made in South Asia to pool resources to address them.

To this end, in the early 1980s, the former president of Bangladesh, late Ziaur Rahman, underlined the need for security cooperation between countries under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). While considered a smaller power, Bangladesh had a major impact on the creation of this organization due to Rahman's belief that peace and security were prerequisites for economic development in the region. Ironically, however, security was not included in SAARC's initial agenda with five other areas of cooperation since it was opposed by two larger member states - India and Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, SAARC has been quite effective when addressing such human security needs as counterterrorism activities, food and energy security, poverty alleviation, human trafficking, and assistance in natural disasters such as floods, tsunamis, and earthquakes. Despite the fact that SAARC is an inclusive organization, there are a number of common strengths and weaknesses that confront South Asia. They must be addressed before a more inclusive framework for cooperation among bigger and smaller powers can be created.

### **Common Strengths**

With the exception of Bhutan and Nepal, nearly all South Asian countries became independent during the 1940s. Common religious and cultural traditions, linguistic affinities, values, and social norms further provide grounds for developing common understandings of many issues. In addition, non-traditional security threats, such as immense poverty, illiteracy, ethnic discord, and other oppressive social orders, not only confront, but also unite the region. This confluence of common opportunities and threats has served as the basis of South Asian cooperation for decades.

For example, in the 1980s, South Asia, as a whole, adopted pro-growth policies. It opened up markets, replaced the public sector with the private sector, increased competition, and improved economic management. South Asia averaged an annual GDP growth rate of around 5.7 percent during 1980-2000, which further accelerated to 6.5 percent from 2000 to 2007. It is now the second fastest growing region in the world. In 2007, India experienced a GDP growth of 9 percent, while other South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka experienced a growth of 6.5 percent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rajan Bhattarai, "Cooperative Security in South Asia and Nepal's Security Concerns", pp. 118, in *Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia*, Nihar Nayak, editor, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, Pentagon Press, 2013

<sup>2</sup> "Accelerating Growth and Job Creation in South Asia", Ejaz Ghani and Sadiq Ahmed, editors, World Bank, October 2009, p.4; full report can be downloaded at

Furthermore, private investment has boomed, supported by rising national saving rates in South Asia. The region now attracts global attention because of rapid growth, global outsourcing, and skill-intensive service exports.<sup>3</sup> The scope for productivity gains from improved education, knowledge, and technology is tremendous for all South Asian countries. The continued opening up of the regions' economies to international trade, investment, and finance is an important indicator of improved prospects for acquisition of modern technology. This needs to be complemented with a more rapid pace of investment in education and skill development.<sup>4</sup>

### Common Weaknesses

Asymmetric relations between India and other South Asian countries has been one of the obstacles in developing and strengthening security cooperation in the region. None of the other South Asian countries can compare with India in terms of size, population, economic development, natural resources, and technological advancement. Consequently, South Asia remains India-centric.

All countries in the region share a border with India and none with each other, except Afghanistan and Pakistan. India likely does not intend its role as a regional power and its aspirations to become a global power to be viewed as a threat by its smaller neighbors. However, there is a widespread perception among the small states that a rising India is a threat to their survivability. They are not convinced by the argument that India's presence and its rise would ultimately protect them from external threats.

Since the partition of India into two nations in 1947 — India and Pakistan — the two countries have fought three wars. Pakistan does not trust India's assurance of protecting its fellow South Asian countries from an external threat. Both countries joined the "elite" nuclear club, which has made the region more vulnerable, unstable, and war-prone. As Ashley Tellis argues, the possibility of nuclear accidents, nuclear terrorism, nuclear blackmail, misperception, unauthorized nuclear use, and technological error have increased in the region. Failure of reconciliation between these two major powers over an extended period has further increased apprehensions among the region's smaller countries.

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<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22353040~pagePK:2865106~piPK:2865128~theSitePK:223547,00.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.5

## Smaller Stakeholders

To address the impact of the aforementioned trends on smaller powers, it is necessary to assess their overall differences in size, population, and gross domestic product as displayed in Table 1 below. Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka may be considered as smaller stakeholders in South Asia. Despite having voting power within SAARC, these countries have been unable to convince larger nations like India and Pakistan to focus on their concerns. To illustrate this dilemma and to find a way forward, it is useful to better understand some of the smaller powers' concerns.

**Table 1**

	Area (sq km)	Population (Estd. 2014)	GDP \$ (ppp estd)	GDP \$/head (ppp. Estd)	Sharing of border with
<b>Afghanistan</b>	652,000	32 million	62 billion	2,000	Pakistan
<b>Bangladesh</b>	144,000	166 million	536 billion	3,400	India, Myanmar
<b>Bhutan</b>	38,000	734,000	5.9 billion	7,700	India, China
<b>India</b>	3,287,000	1.24 billion	7.2 trillion	5,800	Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh,
<b>Maldives</b>	298	394,000	4.3 billion	12,400	Island state
<b>Nepal</b>	147,000	31 million	67 billion	2,400	China, India
<b>Pakistan</b>	79,6000	196 million	884 billion	4,700	India, Afghanistan
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	66,000	22 million	217 billion	10,400	Maritime border with India

*Source: CIA World Fact Book 2014*

## Nepal

Nepal has gone through major changes in its political structure in the last two decades. Armed conflict from 1996 to 2006 left the country in a state of chaos, instability and violence. People's desire for peace and democracy resulted in a massive uprising in April 2006, which forced the king to surrender power to the political parties and reinstate the parliament that was dissolved earlier. The newly created government was under tremendous pressure to free its people from the clutches of violence and secure basic needs such as sufficient food, shelter, education, healthcare, human rights, political stability, and security. Previous years of conflict have resulted in both internal and external migration due to escalation of violence in the rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of young people left the country in search of employment.

Beyond traditional security challenges, Nepal continues to face major challenges in meeting minimum health standards and tackling health disparities that exist among different population groups. Key health sector challenges faced by Nepal today include gender and ethnic/caste discrimination in provision of healthcare services, access to safe and adequate water supplies, and basic access to health services. Moreover, food production and distribution are among Nepal's most significant challenges for achieving food and water security. Nepal's government has had to shift financial resources from strengthening local capacity in these areas to supporting the military's counterinsurgency efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Nepal also faces geographic challenges. A combination of rough topography, steep slopes, an active seismic zone, and intense impact of monsoon rains has made this fragile environment vulnerable to hazards and disasters. In fact, Nepal is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Heavy rain and storms can cause severe flooding or trigger landslides that have an enormous effect on property, structures and lives. During the dry season, Nepal is prone to fires. In the mountain region, most common disasters are avalanches and snow storms causing physical damage and human losses. Moreover, Nepal is prone to other disastrous events such as epidemics and pollution. Every year a significant portion of GDP is lost because of natural disasters. Nepal's April and May 2015 high intensity earthquakes highlighted the need for advanced preparedness to minimize negative impacts, carry out rescue operations, and resettle citizens.<sup>6</sup>

## Bhutan

Bhutan is a small landlocked Himalayan country bordering China in the north and India in the south. The country's water and energy resources can satisfy a population of less than one million. Bhutan is the 30th least corrupt nation out of 175 countries,

<sup>5</sup> Nontraditional Security Challenges in Nepal, The National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report #36, [http://www.nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/preview/sr36\\_nepalnts\\_preview.pdf](http://www.nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/preview/sr36_nepalnts_preview.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Historical Disaster Profile of Nepal, Global Risk Information Platform/UNDP, Septem 2011, report available for download at <http://www.gripweb.org/gripweb/?q=countries-risk-information/documents-publications/historical-disaster-profile-nepal>

according to the Perceived Corruption Index 2014. The security capabilities of Bhutan are minimal, and close ties with India are integral to its security. Bhutan has mainly relied on non-military security alternatives such as national identity for cultural cohesion, and neutrality to renew its long-term security.<sup>7</sup> Bhutan's economy is also strongly dependent upon India. Hydropower projects rely on grants from India and are the primary sources of revenue generation. Pending mega-hydro projects that depend on the Indian energy market are expected to become the backbone of Bhutan's economy.

Bhutan is a signatory to SAARC's South Asian Free Trade Area agreement, but it is not able to take full advantage of it due to poor natural resources, and lack of labor, capital and technology along with challenges related to small size and geographic location. However, socio-economic development plans are fast transforming Bhutan into a modern state. Various development indicators are above the regional average. But development has come at a cost - cost of environment despite 73% forest coverage,, erosion of culture and tradition, dilution of people's faith, weakened communal and social solidarity and widening gap between the rich and poor.<sup>8</sup>

Climate change, poor management of irrigation water, which is in short supply, low crop yield, and limited and scattered availability of agricultural land are some of the issues related to food security in Bhutan. Seasonal variations in weather also affect food availability. Instances of crop damage by wild animals are quite common. Problems related soil erosion due to Bhutan's topography and an erratic rainfall pattern perceived as result of climate change are also experienced in the country.

In spite of these challenges, Bhutan, to maintain its concept of "gross national happiness," has undertaken impressive steps in the development of its social infrastructure including both healthcare and educational services that are provided to the population free of charge. Basic healthcare and education networks cater to otherwise inaccessible areas, covering an estimated 90 percent of the population and resulting in an extended life expectancy and educational boon.

## **Maldives**

Maldives is an important Indian Ocean outpost and is highly dependent on the sea for its growth and prosperity. Its archipelago is made up of 1,190 islands. Its 644-kilometer coastline generates an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of nearly 959,100 square kilometers in the Arabian Sea, which is much larger than the state's 300-square-kilometer land area. The Maldives population draws its livelihood primarily from the sea through tourism and fishing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Karma Ura, "Perceptions of Security", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, September 2013, pp. 126-136, Centre of Bhutan Studies and GNH Research

<sup>8</sup> Dorji Penjore, "Security of Bhutan: Walking Between the Giants", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 10. 2004, pp.127 & 129

<sup>9</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, "Maldives: Managing Maritime Challenges", *South Asia Defence and Strategic Review*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.defstrat.com/exec/frnArticleDetails.aspx?DID=407>

Further, it is strategically located astride the sea lane that connects the Straits of Hormuz to the Straits of Malacca. This sea-lane between Kerala and Lakshadweep in India and the Maldives facilitates heavy merchant traffic bound for Southeast Asia and Pacific Asia. There is a likelihood that some of this shipping involves illegal activities to include dumping of waste, which would have immense negative impacts on the marine environment. This, in turn, would bring dire consequences for tourism and fishing industries, major revenue earners for the Maldives. Therefore, maritime security has been a major concern for the Maldives.<sup>10</sup>

The adverse impact of climate change on Maldives security is quite visible. Maldives is made up of islands and coral atolls. At 2.4 meters above sea level, Wilingili Island in the Addu Atoll is the highest land point. According to the IPCC, because of rising sea levels, there is likelihood that some of the islands and atolls will be inundated and not able to support human habitation. Thus, there are fears that people of Maldives may soon be climate refugees.<sup>11</sup>

Another disturbing impact of sea level rise in the Maldives is the drying up of fresh water sources. Rainwater is the country's primary source of drinking water. In 2009, it was reported that there were at least a dozen islands in Maldives that have gone dry. Inhabitants are dependent on weekly water boats and bottled water to meet their needs.<sup>12</sup> Extensive erosion due to sea level rise impacts critical infrastructure, communication, housing, transportation, tourism, fisheries, human health, water resources, agriculture, and food security.

Maldives is a Sunni Muslim state and has been successful in keeping at bay radical groups and terrorists. While some of its students have visited madrasas in Pakistan to study Islam, they have so far remained insulated from religious fundamentalism. However, pan-Islamist groups, such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State and Al Shabaab among others, could attempt to influence events in the Maldives. Some of these groups have maritime capability, suggesting that Maldives could become a victim of terrorism from the sea.

## Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is concerned about several potential threats. These include possible reemergence of terrorism, rise of other extremist groups, deepening ethnic divisions and communal violence, challenges of maritime security and border control, growth in organized crime, foreign interference in domestic affairs, and non-traditional technology-driven threats to include social media.<sup>13</sup> Compared to other smaller countries in South Asia, Sri Lanka enjoys a strategic geographic position and better economic development

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, "Maldives: Managing Maritime Challenges", South Asia Defence and Strategic Review, May 23, 2013, <http://www.defstrat.com/exec/frnArticleDetails.aspx?DID=407>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sri Lanka's National Security Concerns, Ministry of Defence, June 13, 2013, accessed on April 30, 2015, [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=sri\\_lanka\\_national\\_security\\_concerns\\_20130613\\_08](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=sri_lanka_national_security_concerns_20130613_08)

indicators. However, the country's challenge is how to develop and stabilize conflict-affected areas.

In its northern provinces, the population is overwhelmingly Tamil. In addition to a mixture of Tamil and Sinhalese residents, its eastern province is characterized by a large Muslim population, so the area is under the risk of both ethnic and religious antagonism. The government of Sri Lanka needs to seek ways to promote development that takes into account the characteristics of conflict-affected areas. Due to dissatisfaction in the South with the budget being directed toward the northern regions where fighting was heaviest, there is a need to allocate budget resources in a balanced manner among all the regions.

Since Sri Lanka is an island country, it is also concerned with smuggling and illegal fishing in its territorial waters. Oil- and gas-laden ships travel from the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, around Sri Lanka and through the Malacca Straits and Indonesia's archipelagic sea lanes into the waters of South China Sea. Reciprocal traffic carrying finished goods comes from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan traveling in the other direction. During the voyage, they run a gauntlet of piracy, maritime terrorism, and interstate conflict.<sup>14</sup>

The Indian Ocean makes a remarkable contribution to Sri Lanka's economy. The coastal zone of Sri Lanka consists of around 25% of total land area, is home to one-third of the country's population, accommodates over two-thirds of all industrial facilities, and over 80 percent of the tourism infrastructure. Marine fisheries play a pivotal role in Sri Lanka's fish supply. According to the National Aquaculture Development Authority (NARA), in 2011, around 86 percent of total fish supply came from marine fisheries. The marine fish catch comprises of 58 percent from coastal area and 42 percent from off shore. Therefore, maritime security is a major concern for Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup>

Sri Lanka is also prone to natural disasters such as floods, landslides, cyclones, droughts, wind storms, and coastal erosion. These natural disasters have caused loss of life as well as enormous damage and destruction to property. One of the most severe challenges Sri Lanka faced in recent years was the 2004 tsunami that resulted in thousands of deaths and millions of people displaced from their homes.

## Recommendations

The complex array of issues confronting smaller powers in South Asia indicates the importance of their inclusion in regional initiatives promoting regional stability. Increasing interdependency provides a template for greater security cooperation. Since countries in South Asia share a common history and culture, they are well positioned to form a more cohesive neighborhood and community.

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<sup>14</sup> Rear Admiral RC Wijegunaratne, "Maritime Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka's Perception of Overcoming Challenges" Galle Dialogue 2012,

[http://galledialogue2012.navy.lk/assets/pdf/rear\\_admiral\\_rc\\_wijegunaratne.pdf](http://galledialogue2012.navy.lk/assets/pdf/rear_admiral_rc_wijegunaratne.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

But to achieve this goal, economic development of small powers in the region must be a priority. While they have equal voting rights within SAARC, these countries remain dissatisfied with its outcomes. Since there are disparities in development and lack of necessary infrastructure and resources in the region, a multilevel and multipronged approach is necessary. To create such an approach the following is recommended:

1. **India as a partner and not a threat:** In order to enhance cohesiveness and multilevel participation, trust deficits and resultant apprehension of neighbors about the ultimate objectives of India must be addressed and mitigated. India's role is crucial in confronting many of the aforementioned threats. Its position as the region's most powerful player indicates the need for India to earn the acceptance of other countries as a facilitator and driver of their development. The differences between countries have to be sorted out through creating a framework of mutual benefits. If this can be achieved between bigger powers, it will establish trust among smaller powers.
2. **Trust-building and multilateral efforts:** Establishing trust-building measures to improve the interaction between countries at the diplomatic and executive government levels, in commerce, trade, culture and sports as well as among citizens is imperative. Exchange programs and simplified visa regulations are important to this process. For example, visa-free travel between India and Nepal and India and Bhutan facilitates free movement. Introducing a similar regime between other countries in the region would be beneficial in other areas of interstate relations. Creating institutional mechanisms and sharing best practices would also contribute to unifying regulations and procedures. They would further remove ambiguity and create more openness and uniformity particularly in cross-border movement of people, goods, and services.
3. **Sharing of expertise and resources:** Sharing of experience and expertise would contribute to overcoming common problems in healthcare, education and social security, and would be beneficial for poverty alleviation and help with other challenges mentioned previously. The amount of financial contributions and efforts on the part of smaller countries would be relatively minimal. Maldives is the best example to benefit with comparatively lesser efforts in this respect since its per capita GDP is much better as compared to other small countries of the region.
4. **Improve trade and SAFTA:** Improved trade relations among South Asian countries and provision of necessary support to each other would boost exporting capabilities of small countries and help to remove barriers. Sri Lanka is the best example – the country can benefit the most from the cooperation in South Asian nations since it has the capabilities and potential to grow in trade.
5. **Disaster management and support:** As the biggest country in South Asia and one that shares its border with almost every country in the region, India is better positioned to quickly and effectively reach areas affected by disasters. Therefore, in order to handle any South Asian disaster or emergency, India should bolster its

capabilities and establish “Quick Response Teams” in such areas. The benefits of such a mechanism have been reflected in India’s rapid response rescue and medical teams sent to address the recent earthquake in Nepal and nearby areas.

6. **Curbing illegal activities:** Cooperation on law enforcement is of primary importance, particularly in the face of violent activities related to ethnic conflicts, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, illegal immigrants, hawala transactions, and other illegal activities that affect peace within South Asia. For example, Nepal is facing challenges in these areas, which is affecting its relations with neighbors.
7. **Development bank for South Asia:** India should take the initiative to establish a development bank targeting South Asia, one that would be similar to the World Bank or Asian Development Bank (ADB). The ADB has pegged the hole at some \$8 trillion between 2010 and 2020, which the existing institutions are unlikely to fill. A South Asian development bank would help to fill the gap of more than \$500 million between the projected funds requirement and funding by existing institutions. This could specifically cover such sectors as education, healthcare, energy, disaster preparedness, infrastructure development and others.
8. **Best Practices from multilateral platforms:** India should share with smaller powers the expertise and experiences it has gained from its participation in international organizations and groupings, to which smaller nations might not be a party. This applies to such areas as climate change, energy, food and water security, as well as nature conservation. Shared efforts are necessary in developing non-conventional sources of renewable energy.
9. **Providing security assistance:** India has one of the largest militaries in South Asia and one of the best navies in the world. The country needs to assure its neighbors of its readiness to provide emergency assistance and assistance in combating piracy and other threats. Involvement of military forces of these countries in joint programs and exercises would also help establish mutual trust and improve interoperability.

In order to develop mutual trust, increase cooperation in the region, and find long-term sustainable solutions to problems, multilevel bilateral and multilateral engagements in the region are required. This should not limit the cooperation with the outside world since no region is self-sufficient. Such cohesiveness would provide the region with a collective approach to dealing with shared concerns - opposed to the current fragmented approach - and a much needed sense of security.

The scope of multilateral cooperation on security matters in South Asia is increasing. Due consideration to the concerns of comparatively small stakeholders in the region and their effective solutions is imperative and crucial for success of any regional cooperation and each member’s security and prosperity. Progress in cooperation on non-traditional security challenges would act as a confidence-building measure among countries. This might provide the context for effective dialogue on hard security issues in the near future.

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