



Confidence Building in South Asia: Concept & Major Issues

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Confidence Building Measures (CBM) have emerged as an important tool for fostering good relationships among nations and for avoiding wars and conflicts. The need for CBMs has been recognised and accepted worldwide. In South Asia, where hostilities and tensions persist, the need for CBMs acquires great significance. Over the years, the countries of the region have pursued CBMs, with mixed success, and they need to continue the exercise in order to reduce tensions, lessen hostilities and avoid the threat of war, especially nuclear war. This paper briefly reviews the concept and major issues of confidence building in South Asia. It first explains the concept of CBM, then examines the status of confidence building in South Asia, and finally reviews confidence building between India and Bangladesh.

Defining "Confidence Building Measures"

The purposes of confidence building measures are to prevent wars, limit hostilities in case wars do break out, and terminate wars through dialogues between adversaries. CBMs are meant to introduce transparency and contain crises that may lead to wars. These measures tend to foster openness, reduce tensions, and improve the atmosphere for dialogues between antagonist states. They are aimed at removing distrust, apprehensions and misperceptions by creating a climate in which the adversaries can better un-

derstand one another's position and build effective working relations between them.

Confidence building measures have been variously defined in the literature (RCSS 1999). Broadly speaking, CBMs can be defined as activities that generate confidence amongst adversaries and foster an atmosphere that prevents the outbreak of hostilities. These activities are directed at reducing tensions, lessening hostilities and preventing the outbreak of wars amongst adversaries. CBMs encompass a very wide variety of activities ranging from arriving at simple understandings on contentious issues to the signing of treaties between states. CBMs are bilateral or multilateral acts that build confidence avert crises that may lead to wars, and encourage adversaries to make contact for negotiations.

It should be borne in mind, however, that CBMs are not thoroughgoing peace treaties and as such cannot prevent wars if states are determined to achieve ends through military means. They are only a reassurance that adversaries will not attempt to launch surprise military attacks on one another. CBMs are seen to be investments in crisis and conflict management and they have the capability to help in war termination if by chance armed conflicts do take place.

Categories of Confidence Building Measures

CBMs have been grouped in many categories like communications measures, transparency measures, consultation

measures, goodwill measures etc. These are briefly discussed below.

Communication measures are aimed at improving direct communication amongst important political, military, government, and non-governmental personnel of adversary countries. These measures involve the establishment of "hotline" between the heads of state, military commanders (army, navy and air force) and high officials. These CBMs also include direct people to people contacts in the form of Track II diplomacy and dialogues amongst various non-governmental groups of voluntary organisations, professionals, academics, etc.

Transparency measures are directed at dispelling mutual suspicions, distrust and misperceptions of the military capability of adversary states. Examples of these CBMs include inviting observers to watch military exercises, publishing annual defence reports, public negotiations for arms purchase, etc. This category also includes all notification measures and successfully concluded agreements between the countries in question.

Consultation measures are aimed at holding regular discussions amongst top-level officials on issues of mutual interest (military, political, economic, cultural, environmental, etc). These involve setting up joint commissions to resolve outstanding and contentious issues that may pose a treat to the normal working relationship between nations.

Goodwill measures aim at building confidence by organising seminars and exchange programmes in which senior military and civilian officials participate and discuss issues of mutual interest. These CBMs also include exchange of sports and cultural teams.

Confidence Building Measures can also be categorised in terms of the type of issues that they address. Thus, CBMs can be declaratory, military, political, economic, cultural, and environmental, etc.

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The views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of CPD)

This special report has been compiled with selected papers presented to International Seminar On "Economic Cooperation in South Asia": Problems and Prospects Held at Hotel Tangerine, Kalutara, Sri Lanka On 2-3 March, 2001 Organized by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka.



Confidence Building Measures in South Asia

South Asia is one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints for escalating conflicts due mainly to the bad and deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan. Relations between the two countries have traditionally been bad and have been marked by suspicion and mistrust of each other's political and military designs. Both the countries have routinely blamed each other for trying to destabilise the region. Kashmir has been, and continues to be, the focal point of contention. India blames Pakistan for encouraging and helping the secessionist forces in Kashmir, while Pakistan considers India to be occupying the province against the wishes of its people. The Kargil conflict was the latest in the long history of Indo-Pakistan armed hostility. Relations between the two countries have seriously deteriorated in the post-Kargil period, threatening the overall security environment in the region. The possession of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan makes the situation all the more dangerous.

Confidence building measures pursued over the years obviously have not been very successful in stopping hostilities. Since gaining independence in 1947, India and Pakistan have signed a number of important agreement to build confidence and reduce tensions. Mention may be made of the Liaquat-Nehru Pact (1951), Indus Water Treaty (1960), Tashkent Agreement (1966), Rann of Kutch Agreement (1968), Simla Agreement (1972), and Salal Dam Agreement (1978). In some of these agreements, mutual pledges of security were made. For instance, in the Simla Agreement both countries formally renounced the use of force to settle outstanding disputes. However, as the events in Kargil demonstrated, this mutual security pledge was not honoured and both sides in the conflict resorted to the use of military force. Communication measures, such as hotline exchanges between the military com-

manders, and transparency measures, designed to remove mutual suspicion, apparently failed to prevent the armed conflict. Kargil has also proved that the nuclear capability of the countries did not act as a deterrent to conventional fighting. Given the present scenario, there is an urgent need for increasing and strengthening confidence-building measures in the region.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and Confidence Building

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a major institution for promoting peace, stability and socio-economic development of the region. It can be used for generating confidence and reducing tensions amongst member states. It is the only regional forum where heads of state and government of South Asian countries can meet on a regular basis, discuss im-

portant issues affecting the region, and take decisions that can contribute to the relaxation of tension and hostilities. It can play a major role in confidence building between India and Pakistan, provided there is the political will on both sides.

leaders, which was to have been held in November 1999 in Kathmandu, was postponed at the insistence of India after the military take over in Pakistan. Political differences between the two countries have grown sharply since Kargil and the confidence generated by the Lahore Declaration of February 1999 has been lost. Summits have been postponed in the past as well. In fact, since its inception in 1985, there have been only 10 summits, although the SAARC charter calls for holding at least one summit every year. Political differences, especially between India and Pakistan, have come in the way of letting SAARC function smoothly. This indicates the inability and unwillingness of the political leadership to realise the full potential of SAARC as a regional grouping. By deliberately choosing not to address bilateral and contentious issues and try to resolve

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How successful has SAARC been in building confidence in the region? A review of its performance shows that its success in this field has been rather limited (Lama 2001). One of the reasons for this is the bad relations between India and Pakistan, which have negatively impacted on the functioning of SAARC. For instance, the 11th Summit of SAARC

them within the framework of SAARC, the leaders of these countries have missed out on the opportunities provided by this forum.

In recent years, SAARC has taken a number of positive steps in fostering economic cooperation among member countries (Lama 2001). Such steps will help in confidence building. For instance, SAARC adopted a common position in relation to the meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in December 1999. The countries of the region had worked closely in developing a common strategy for addressing their



common concerns and problems in advance of the Seattle meeting. SAARC has also signed Memoranda of Understanding with a number of international organisations for developing economic cooperation. These organisations include the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Commission, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and others. SAARC has also developed close ties with the Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN) and the European Union. By interacting with these organisations SAARC will gain from their experience of regional cooperation and economic integration.

The confidence building measures applied in South Asia have mainly concentrated on political and military issues. These have not been very successful, as attested by the state of Indo-Pakistan relations. There is a need for strengthening non-military CBMs, especially CBMs in the fields of business and economics. Business and economic cooperation among the countries of the region will help in fostering peace and prosperity. The adoption of the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) is a step in the right direction. The proposed SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) is designed to establish an intra-regional free trade regime in South Asia. Both these initiatives will contribute positively to confidence building in the region.

Non-governmental Initiatives in Confidence Building in South Asia

There have been a lot of initiatives in confidence building from civil societies in South Asian countries. Non-governmental organisations, academics, professionals, and others have been very actively pursuing Track II diplomacy. A number of regional organisations, which are involved in promoting South Asian cooperation in various fields, have been established. Mention can be made of the

Coalition for Action on South Asian Cooperation (CASAC) and the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS). These organisations have brought together eminent persons, specialised groups and research institutions from the region and have organised workshops and studies on issues of regional importance. A number of national non-governmental institutions have been active in discussing and studying regional issues relating to water, energy, infrastructure, economy, trade, etc. business people and national and regional chambers of commerce and industries have been actively pursuing Track III activities. In short, non-governmental initiatives at confidence building have increased at a time when official SAARC activities have registered a sharp decline.

Confidence Building between India and Bangladesh

Generally speaking, Bangladesh enjoys good relations with all of its SAARC neighbours. However, from time to time there have been security problems with India, with which Bangladesh has a long and porous border. These problems have been amicably settled in the past through negotiations and dialogue. There are outstanding issues that are being, or will be, negotiated. In this section, we briefly review the main elements of Indo-Bangladesh relations and the confidence building measures that have been employed to avoid conflicts and hostilities.

Indo-Bangladesh relations started on a friendly footing in 1971 when Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan with the support of India. However, after the military coup in Bangladesh in August 1975 relations deteriorated as the military rulers took an anti-Indian and pro-Chinese position, largely to gain support of the religious right and the Maoist left.

The commissioning of the Farakka Barrage on the river Ganges and the unilateral withdrawal of water by India resulted in an ecological crisis and was perceived to be a major threat to the economic viability of Bangladesh. A joint Rivers Commission (JRC) was set up

by the two states to study, discuss and resolve the problem of sharing the water of Ganges and other rivers. After prolonged negotiations, the Ganges Water Treaty was signed in 1996 bringing to an end a major irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Another contentious issue, from Bangladesh's viewpoint, was the alleged Indian support for the insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). With the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1998 and return of Chakma refugees, this irritant was also removed and Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship was back on an even keel.

A number of outstanding issues between India and Bangladesh remain to be resolved. The most important of these are: territorial issues; border management issues, and water sharing issues. These issues have security implications but have not reached a level that could lead to the use or threat of use of the armed forces of either country (Khan 2001). These issues are briefly discussed below:

Territorial issues

Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides and their common border extends to 4,095 kilometers. Myanmar is the only other country that Bangladesh has a border with. The entire length of the Indo-Bangladesh border has been demarcated, except for 42 kilometers, which run through the following sectors: Mizoram-Chittagong Hill Tracts sector; Tripura-Sylhet sector; Bhagalpur Railway line; Shibpur-Gaurangala sector; Muhuri river (Belonia) sector; Remaining portion of the Tripura Noakhali/Comilla sector; Feni river; Rest of the Tripura-Chittagong Hill Tracts sector; Beanibazar-Karimganj sector; Hakar Khal; Baikari Khal; Hilli sector; and Lathitilla Dumbari sector. In many of these sectors, there have been regular incidents of violence, border skirmishes, exchange of fire by the border security forces, abductions and killings. In order to resolve these



problems, several flag meetings have been held over the years, culminating in a high-level conference of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) in July 2000. The conference agreed to resolve such incidents in the future only through peaceful means. In December 2000, the Foreign Secretaries of the two countries agreed to resolve outstanding issues, including demarcation of the remaining sectors.

The matter of exchanging enclaves is an important territorial issue. In 1974 the Bangladesh-India Border Agreement was signed. Among other things, it provided for the speedy exchange of enclaves between the two countries. Currently, there are 110 Indian enclaves, consisting of 10,000 acres, in Bangladesh, and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves measuring 7,000 acres that remain in India. Discussions are underway for completing the exchange of the enclaves, which has proved to be a complex and legally complicated process (Khan 2001).

The issue of demarcation of river and maritime borders has not been resolved. Negotiations have taken place between the two sides on how to draw a firm and permanent line on border rivers that shift their courses but firm decisions have not been taken. Maritime demarcation has not been agreed upon and there are differences in the approach proposed by the two countries in this matter. There is a need and scope for cooperation between India and Bangladesh in areas such as training of rivers, protection of river erosion, management of coastal zone, protection of coasts from pollution, saving bio-diversity, etc.

Border management issues

Failure to properly manage movements across the long and porous Indo-Bangladesh border has raised a number of contentious issues. There are grievances on both sides. India, for example, believes that insurgents from its north-eastern states are receiving sanctuary in Bangladesh and

arms are being transited through the latter's territory. It also claims that a large number of Bangladeshis have illegally migrated to different parts of India and the process is still going on. In an attempt to stop the inflow of illegal migrants, India has decided to put up fences along the common border. Bangladesh denies these charges. For its part, Bangladesh is concerned about the steady inflow of small arms and drugs from across the border. It is also worried about the trafficking in women and children, who are lured into India and Pakistan by gangs of organised criminals. There is a huge volume of illegal trade between the two countries. Among the goods smuggled are arms and drugs. These issues need to be addressed through dialogues and the two countries need to cooperate to effectively manage cross-border movements of people and goods.

Water sharing issues

As mentioned above, sharing of Ganges water was a contentious issue in the past. Although that issue has been amicably resolved, new agreements have to be reached for sharing the water of 53 other rivers. The Joint River Commission in its latest meeting in the beginning of this year addressed a number of important issues including sharing of the Teesta water, flood control and forecasting, mitigating the arsenic problem, involving Indian expertise for the proposed Ganges Barrage, etc. The JRC meeting arrived at a consensus on some points. To expedite the resolution of outstanding water issues it was decided that JRC should meet twice a year. It was also decided to find an interim agreement for sharing water of the Teesta River, pending the completion of a scientific study. Regular meetings of JRC will help in managing and sharing water amicably and efficiently.

It may be mentioned that Track II activists have played a significant role in addressing the issue of water sharing between India and Bangladesh. Think tanks like the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad and the Centre for Policy Research have com-

missioned studies and organised dialogues and workshops in which the problems related to water sharing and water management have been discussed in great detail. These activities have raised public awareness of the relevant issues and dispelled many misconceptions and misperceptions, which had created misunderstandings in the past.

Conclusion

Confidence building in South Asia is largely influenced by the state of Indo-Pakistani relationship. The events of Kargil and its aftermath have shown that the military and political confidence building measures undertaken by these countries have not been successful in avoiding armed conflicts, mutual suspicions and distrust. SAARC has not been able to instill in their relationship a spirit of cooperation and goodwill that one would have expected it to do. There clearly is an urgent need for strengthening CBMs, especially economic CBMs, which have a good track record of fostering cooperation among nations. In view of the diminished role of SAARC in confidence building in the region, Track II and Track III activities acquire great significance. Fortunately, these are being pursued actively. While encouraging people-to-people contact, civil societies in the region should persuade the governments of India and Pakistan to renounce the use of force and have serious and meaningful dialogues between themselves in order to resolve their differences peacefully.

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