

Rethinking Regional Security Paradigm: Non-Traditional Security Threats and the Role of Regional Dialogue in South Asia

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Abstract

In the post-9/11 era, the South Asian region faces a complex security landscape dominated by both traditional and non-traditional threats, including climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases, and transnational crime. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for collaborative efforts to address these challenges. This research focuses on analysing six key areas -- climate change, food security, water scarcity, infectious diseases, mass migration, and terrorism -- within the context of South Asia, emphasising the importance of regional dialogue as a vital mechanism for effective mitigation. The primary emphasis of this research study is on a significant transformation within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), envisioning it as a dynamic platform for addressing non-traditional security challenges. It underscores the necessity for tailored strategies that account for the multifaceted factors shaping these issues, advocating for regional dialogue to reshape the SAARC as a more effective platform for collective action. By capitalising on shared experiences and values, regional dialogue not only strengthens regional stability but also reaffirms the commitment to enhancing the well-being and resilience of South Asia's diverse populations, thereby promoting sustainable development and

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Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

security in the region. This, in turn, is seen as a meaningful contribution to sustainable development and security in the area. Ultimately, the research advocates for a novel perspective that aligns with the evolving nature of threats in the region, positioning SAARC as a pioneer in reimagining the regional security paradigm.

Keywords: Non-Traditional Security Threats, South Asia, Regional Dialogue, Terrorism, Post-COVID-19 World.

Introduction

The concept of security has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War, leading to the recognition of non-military or “non-traditional threats” to security. Non-Traditional Security (NTS) encompasses a broad range of issues related to the well-being of individuals, including climate change, limited availability of resources like energy, food, and water, the spread of infectious diseases, natural disasters, transnational crime, trafficking of humans and drugs, and large-scale migration.¹

South Asia, consisting of eight countries, namely Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan, is home to a population of two billion individuals,² nearly one-third of the global population, and faces many security challenges that encompass traditional and non-traditional aspects³ These interconnected challenges often reinforce one another, rendering the region increasingly vulnerable to the notable challenges, such as resource depletion, poverty, food insecurity, water scarcity, climate change, environmental degradation, and inadequate healthcare services. They directly impact the lives of millions of people in South Asia. Any calamity in these domains can potentially exacerbate conditions that contribute to conventional security threats within the region.

Climate change poses significant threats to the region, impacting agriculture, food security, water availability, and overall environmental sustainability.⁴ Droughts, floods, and extreme weather events are

¹ Mely Caballero-Anthony and Alistair DB Cook, “Non-Traditional Security in Asia: Issues, Challenges and Framework for Action” (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

² “Southern Asia Population 2023,” accessed August 15, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/southern-asia-population>.

³ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, *Regionalism and Regional Security in South Asia* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013).

⁴ World Bank, *Climate and Development in South Asia* (South Asia: The Country Climate and Development Reports (CCDRs), 2022), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia-region>.

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

becoming more frequent, leading to food insecurity and displacement of communities. Addressing these environmental challenges requires collaborative efforts, sharing of best practices, and investment in sustainable technologies and practices.⁵ Health security is another crucial aspect of NTS in South Asia. Infectious diseases and pandemics can have devastating effects on communities and economies.⁶ Enhancing healthcare infrastructure, strengthening disease surveillance systems, and fostering regional cooperation in public health response can build resilience against health crises.⁷ Additionally, the issues of human-trafficking, drug-trafficking, mass migration, terrorism, and other transnational crimes threaten the safety and well-being of individuals in the region. Collaborative efforts to combat these challenges through intelligence-sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and targeted initiatives can effectively mitigate these NTS threats.

The root causes of the major threats in the South Asian region are persistent territorial disputes, differences in ideologies, and disagreements regarding the distribution of natural resources. The protracted existence of conflicts in South Asia has undeniable repercussions on the geopolitics of the entire region, often leading to localised armed struggles and wars.⁸ India and Pakistan, the two great powers in South Asia, allocate significant financial resources to their defense systems, despite the pressing needs of their citizens for civic necessities.⁹ The economies of these countries suffer, the populations lag in development, and crucial

⁵ Asian Development Bank, *Climate Change in South Asia: Strong Responses for Building a Sustainable Future* (Asian Development Bank, 2010), <https://www.adb.org/publications/climate-change-south-asia-strong-responses-building-sustainable-future>.

⁶ Swagata Saha and Sukalpa Chakrabarti, "The Non-Traditional Security Threat of COVID-19 in South Asia: An Analysis of the Indian and Chinese Leverage in Health Diplomacy," *South Asian Survey* 28, No. 1 (2021): 111–32.

⁷ Summar Iqbal Babar and Hassan Zubair Malik, "COVID-19 and Human Security Challenges to Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture* 43, No. 1 (2022).

⁸ Tahira Mumtaz et al., "Nuclear Powers and Terrorism: An Unfinished Crisis (A Case of Pakistan and India)," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* (2023): 1278–84.

⁹ Mariam Tahir, Javed Ali Kalhor, and Ashfaq Ahmad, "The Emerging Intelligence Architecture of Internal Security & New Regional Dynamics in South Asia (2015–2018)," *Global Social Sciences Review* (2019).

sectors such as healthcare, infrastructure, and human development lack adequate investment. Moreover, both nations persist in a relentless arms race due to their rivalry which upsets the regional balance of power.

The region's failure to take action and the absence of political will to confront NTS challenges indirectly intensify conventional security threats as well. Hence, this mutual distrust between the archrivals, India, and Pakistan, adds an element of uncertainty to regional stability. While maintaining the current level of confidence-building measures and deterrence against traditional security threats remain crucial. All South Asian nations must redirect their attention to collectively address non-traditional security challenges.¹⁰ This requires a united commitment to safeguard their interconnected security concerns. Nonetheless, ineffective governance, lack of transparency, political instability, inadequate strategic planning, corruption, and an inability to adapt to evolving geopolitical dynamics hinder the efficient allocation of resources in South Asia.

Efforts to foster regional cooperation on nontraditional security issues in South Asia can have long-term benefits in addressing persistent traditional security challenges. The SAARC is the primary organisation in the South Asian region capable of facilitating peaceful dispute settlement and fostering regional cooperation through dialogues.¹¹ Geopolitical rivalries and disputes have hampered the organisation's effectiveness. The South Asian nations must transcend their differences and prioritise collective security over individual interests to unlock the potential of regional cooperation. Investing in NTS threats improves the population's well-being and enhances the region's resilience to conventional threats. It reduces the risk of conflicts and discourages arms race.¹²

¹⁰ Inayat Kalim, Sohail Ahmad, and Arshad Bashir, "Human Security in South Asia: Characterizing Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Threats," *Journal of Political Studies*, 2019.

¹¹ Lawrence Saez, *The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): An Emerging Collaboration Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹² Li Li, "Promoting Cooperation on Nontraditional Security Issues," *Policy Perspectives* 9, No. 1 (2012): 27–35.

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

In order to ensure a comprehensive examination of the prominent NTS challenges prevalent in South Asia, a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology has been adopted along with literature review. The regional dialogue in South Asia on NTS issues such as climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity, infectious diseases, mass migration, and transnational crime involved in the South Asian region have also been analysed by the application of Communicative Action Theory. It aims to answer how NTS threats evolved and what is their impact on the overall security landscape? How can regional dialogue on NTS threats foster shared norms and values to develop a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding among the South Asian nations?

Moreover, it aims to answer how have NTS threats such as climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases, and transnational crime, evolved in the South Asian region, and what is their impact on the overall security landscape and how can regional dialogue on NTS threats foster shared norms and values to develop a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding among the South Asian nations?

The Nexus of Communicative Action Theory and Regional Dialogue on NTS Threats

Communicative Action Theory (CAT), developed by philosopher Jürgen Habermas, offers a profound perspective on the significance of regional dialogue in addressing NTS threats in South Asia.¹³ This theory emphasises the pivotal role of open, inclusive, and transparent communication in democratic deliberation and decision-making processes. In the context of South Asia, effective regional dialogue on NTS threats should involve a diverse array of stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, and civil society, ensuring a comprehensive and informed decision-making

¹³ Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

process.¹⁴ Furthermore, it stresses the importance of fostering mutual understanding among dialogue participants, allowing them to share diverse perspectives, priorities, and interests related to NTS threats. Through rational deliberation based on evidence and reasoning, regional dialogue can lead to consensus-based solutions that are more likely to be sustainable and accepted by all parties involved. This approach also upholds the principles of legitimacy and accountability, bolstering the effectiveness of NTS threat responses. Moreover, by promoting peaceful conflict resolution, regional dialogue can serve as a means to de-escalate tensions and foster cooperation in South Asia's complex security landscape.

CAT complements this by underscoring the role of dialogue in this process. Within the framework of Communicative Action Theory, regional dialogues in South Asia become crucial platforms where securitisation efforts unfold. The theory's emphasis is on open and inclusive communication. It aligns with the idea that the framing of NTS threats as security issues occurs through discursive interactions among various actors, including political authorities, international organisations, and civil society. Understanding the motives and consequences of securitisation efforts, as highlighted by the Copenhagen School, becomes particularly relevant in the context of regional dialogues, where decisions regarding resource allocation, policy priorities, and cooperative strategies are negotiated. The amalgamation of these two theoretical perspectives enriches our comprehension of how communicative processes contribute to the securitisation of NTS threats in South Asia's regional discourse.

The nexus of Communicative Action Theory and regional dialogue on NTS threats involves a comprehensive understanding of how communicative processes shape the perception and management of these threats within a regional context, such as South Asia. Regional dialogues in South Asia play a crucial role as forums for multilateral discussions and

¹⁴ Lars G. Lose, *Communicative Action and the World of Diplomacy*, in *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

negotiations. It provides a platform where nations can collectively address shared challenges, particularly NTS threats. These dialogues serve as arenas for open discourse and cooperation among South Asian countries, allowing them to deliberate on pressing issues like climate change, infectious diseases, and resource scarcity. Given the interconnected nature of these challenges, regional dialogues enable participating nations to share insights, exchange information, and collaboratively devise strategies to mitigate the impact of NTS threats. Through these discussions, countries can explore common ground, enhance mutual understanding, and foster joint initiatives, ultimately contributing to the development of comprehensive and cooperative approaches to address the complex security landscape in the South Asian region.

In regional dialogues, the communicative processes unfold as a dynamic arena where NTS threats are not only discussed but also framed as immediate concerns with security dimensions. The articulation and discussion of these issues within the dialogues significantly impact their collective perception and subsequent addressing. Through effective communication, participants engage in shaping the narrative around NTS threats. It generally emphasises urgency and the need for coordinated responses. The framing of these challenges within the discourse of security influences the decision-making process, steering the collective focus toward allocating resources, formulating policies, and fostering cooperative strategies. In essence, the communicative dynamics within regional dialogues act as a catalyst. They shape the collective understanding and response to NTS threats in a manner that reflects the immediate security concerns of the participating nations.

Moreover, CAT's emphasis on inclusivity, finds resonance within regional dialogues where diverse perspectives converge to address NTS threats. Inclusivity, a central tenet of this theory, ensures that regional dialogues become platforms for a rich and comprehensive analysis of NTS challenges. By accommodating the perspectives of various stakeholders, including governments, experts, and civil society representatives, these dialogues provide a holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of

NTS threats in the South Asian context. The incorporation of diverse viewpoints enriches the deliberative process, fostering a more nuanced and informed discourse that takes into account the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of these challenges. Participants engage in open and inclusive communication, sharing diverse perspectives and expertise to formulate strategies that are comprehensive and responsive to the complex challenges posed by NTS threats. The application of CAT principles in these decision-making processes ensures that the outcomes are not only collective but also reflective of a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

Transparency and trust building, as explicated by CAT, play pivotal roles in fostering effective collaboration within regional dialogues. Open communication promotes transparency, allowing participating nations to share information openly. This transparency, in turn, contributes to the establishment of trust among the nations involved. Trust is fundamental in creating an environment where countries are more willing to collaborate sincerely, share resources, and jointly address shared NTS challenges. The application of CAT principles in regional dialogues thus establishes a foundation of transparency and trust, facilitating more effective cooperation in the face of complex security threats.

Identifying Common Non-Traditional Security Threats in South Asia

This research offers a comprehensive examination of the prominent NTS challenges prevailing in South Asia, which encompass climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity, infectious diseases, mass migration, and terrorism.

Climate Change and Environmental Security in South Asia

Climate change, as defined by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), embodies changes attributed to human activities, either directly or indirectly, resulting in shifts within the global

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

atmospheric composition.¹⁵ This perturbation distinguishes itself from natural climatic variability observed over analogous temporal spans. The South Asian region, marked by its susceptibility to climatic shocks, contends with an evolving paradigm characterised by emergent climatic patterns, typified by heightened instances of severe heat waves, cyclones, droughts, and inundations. These occurrences collectively challenge the adaptive capacities of governmental institutions, local communities, and businesses. Remarkably, more than half of South Asia's population, encompassing approximately 750 million¹⁶ individuals across the eight nations, has directly faced the impacts of one or multiple climate-related disasters over the past two decades. Notably, a substantial demographic, up to 800 million people, confront the risk of pronounced diminutions in their quality of life due to climate-induced adversities, amplifying the vulnerability of marginalised segments.

¹⁵ Jamil Afzal and Zuhaib Nishtar, "A Substantial Study on History of Climate Change in South Asia for Sustainable Development," *Journal of History and Social Sciences* 14, No. 1 (2023): 101–12.

¹⁶ World Bank, *Climate and Development in South Asia* (South Asia: The Country Climate and Development Reports (CCDRs), 2022), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia-region>.

Rethinking Regional Security Paradigm: Non-Traditional ...

Figure 1: World Map of the Global Climate Risk Index 2000 – 2019
Source: Germanwatch and Munich Re NatCatSERVICE

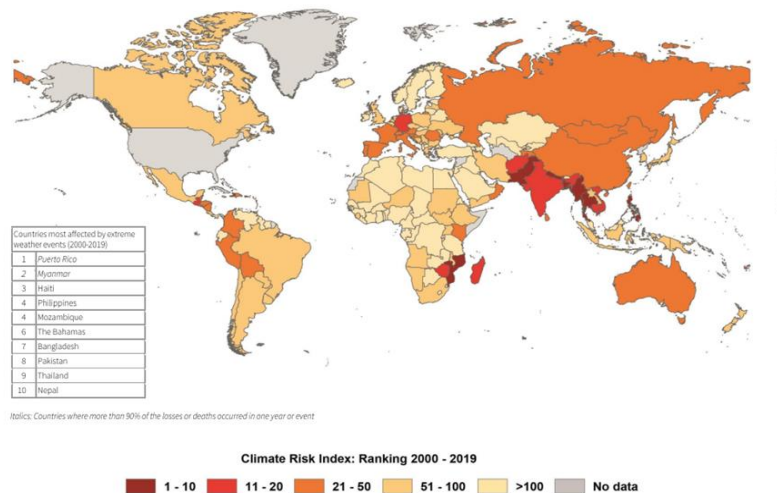


Figure 1: Source: Climate Risk Index 2019, Germanwatch

The South Asian region faces exacerbated natural disasters and climate change impacts due to abnormal monsoon patterns and intensifying storms. Based on data provided by Germanwatch, South Asia is situated among the global regions most susceptible to seismic activity, encompassing natural and manmade disasters (Figure 1).

In South Asia, flash floods emerge as a consequential climate change impact, exerting substantial threats to both human settlements and the ecosystem.¹⁷ Flash floods, stemming from heavy rainfall, are a common occurrence in the region, leading to loss of life, displacement of communities, infrastructure damage, and disruptions to livelihoods.

¹⁷ Center for Disaster Philanthropy, “2022 South Asian Floods,” (Washington D.C CDP, 2022), <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2022-south-asian-floods/>.

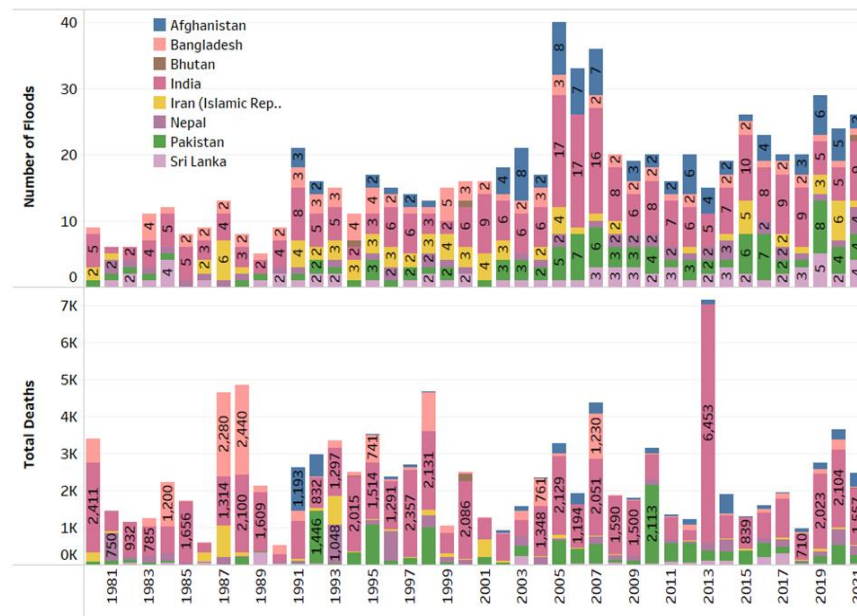


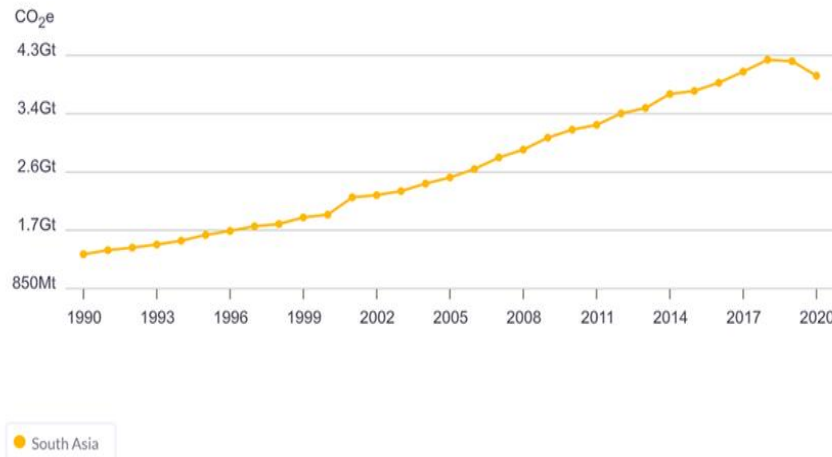
Figure 2: Number of Flood Events and Death, South Asia (1980-2021);
Source: EM-DAT; Sanrachna Analysis

Furthermore, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, driven by burgeoning populations, exacerbate environmental pressures, resulting in inadequate infrastructure, concentrated poverty, and resource depletion. Mounting emissions from industrialisation further exacerbate the region's vulnerability. Urban areas are particularly at risk due to poor drainage systems and haphazard urban planning. The South Asian region has witnessed a notable increase in carbon emissions in recent times, primarily attributed to rapid industrial and urban development. This upsurge in emissions presents substantial hurdles to the region's endeavours to combat climate change, emphasising the urgency of adopting comprehensive approaches to tackle this critical environmental issue.

Historical GHG emissions

CLIMATEWATCH

Data source: Climate Watch; Location: South Asia; Sectors/Subsectors: Total including LUCF; Gases: All GHG; Calculation: Total;
Show data by Regions.



Source: *Climate Watch*

Furthermore, the Indo-Gangetic Plains, home to a substantial portion of the global population, suffer from extreme smog episodes, adversely affecting air quality, public health, and the economy. Given the trans-boundary nature of this challenge, there exists a unique opportunity for cooperation, potentially reshaping diplomatic dynamics between India and Pakistan.

To address these issues, comprehensive strategies are essential, encompassing improved urban planning, resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and international collaboration. Mitigating climate change impacts necessitates a cooperative regional approach, founded on shared understanding, policy harmonisation, and coordinated actions. Addressing the multifaceted challenges, stemming from climate change within the South Asian context, underscores the urgency of

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

intergovernmental collaboration, proactive policy formulation, and an unwavering commitment to safeguarding human security and ecological well-being.

Food Insecurity: An Interplay of Dimensions within South Asia

Food security, as articulated by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), encompasses a complex interplay of four fundamental dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability.¹⁸ These dimensions collectively address various aspects of food supply, economic means to obtain food, nutritional value, and the resilience against shocks. Within the South Asian region, where food insecurity looms large, these dimensions manifest intricate connections, influenced by a confluence of climatic patterns, economic structures, and societal dynamics. As of 2021, a substantial proportion of 21 per cent populace of South Asia was grappling with food insecurity.¹⁹

The availability of food in South Asia rests heavily on its agrarian economies, which pivot on monsoon rainfall and temperature fluctuations. The Himalayan glaciers, a crucial water source for major rivers like the Ganges, Indus, and Brahmaputra, are diminishing rapidly, amplifying the region's vulnerability to climate change. Rising temperatures and erratic climatic events threaten agricultural productivity, especially for critical crops like wheat and rice. Furthermore, increasing temperatures can indirectly affect water availability, soil moisture, and the proliferation of pests and diseases. This particularly affects small farmers with limited adaptive capacities.

¹⁸ "Policy Brief: Food Security," *Relief Web*, June 30, 2006, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/policy-brief-food-security-issue-2-june-2006>.

¹⁹ "South Asia: Prevalence of Severe Food Insecurity 2021," *Statista*, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180323/south-asia-prevalence-of-severe-food-insecurity/>.

Table 1
Prevalence of Undernourishment in South Asia (2005-2021)

Years	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Prevalence of Undernourishment (%)	20.5	15.3	14.1	13.1	12.4	12.3	13.2	15.9	16.9
Number of Undernourished people (millions)	96.6	65.3	49.4	43.3	39.1	38.8	36.9	38.6	42.8

Source: FAO

Within the ambit of SAARC, a significant populace grapples with the distressing realities of hunger and malnutrition. Contemporary assessments reveal that an estimated 14.9 per cent of individuals²⁰ in this region endure hunger and undernourishment, concurrently marked by a persistent prevalence of malnutrition. The impending impact of climate change is projected to significantly affect food security, with the highest concentration of vulnerable individuals also situated in South Asia.

In the fisheries sector, climate change is linked to El Niño events, potentially disrupting fish larval abundance in the marginal waters of Southeast and South Asia.²¹ Prolonged growing seasons, and elevated temperatures in temperate Asian regions, can lead to increased pest populations, impacting crop yields. These climate-induced shifts in

²⁰ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in South Asia*. (Washington D.C: FAO, 2017), <https://www.fao.org/3/ca4574en/ca4574en.pdf>

²¹ Asian Development Bank, *The Economics Of Climate Change In Southeast Asia: A Regional Review* (Jakarta: ADB, 2009).

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

species composition can reshape grasslands and ecosystems, affecting community resilience and stability.

The consequences of food insecurity ripple across multiple dimensions, impacting society, economy, and geopolitics. The South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) is a regional effort aimed at addressing the chronic malnutrition challenge.²² SAFANSI's two phases have facilitated advocacy, capacity-building, and behavioural change to enhance food and nutrition security across South Asian nations.²³

The ramifications of food insecurity extend beyond dietary concerns. Socio-economic disparities, political instability, and cross-border migration can all stem from this challenge. This intricate interplay underscores the multifaceted nature of food insecurity as a NTS threat, necessitating comprehensive strategies for the well-being and stability of the region.

Water Insecurity's Impact and Trans-boundary Dynamics in South Asia

Water holds a pivotal role in various facets of human well-being, affecting health, social ties, and food security. Water insecurity has emerged as a significant NTS threat in South Asia, impacting its socio-economic fabric. With low per-capita water availability and significant water use, the region is highly water-scarce. Over 385 million people lack safe water access, affecting health, education, and livelihoods.²⁴ Beyond health concerns, water scarcity disrupts education, perpetuates poverty cycles,

²² World Bank, *South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI)* (Washington D.C: WB, 2017), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/safansi>.

²³ World Bank, *South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI)*.

²⁴ UNICEF, *The Value of Water Becomes Clear When You Don't Have Any* (Nepal: UNICEF, 2022), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/blog/value-water-becomes-clear-when-you-dont-have-any>.

and threatens stability. Unfortunately, by 2025, except Bangladesh, all South Asian countries are projected to face acute water shortages.²⁵

South Asia shares water resources, uniting nations despite economic fragmentation.²⁶ Major rivers like the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra cross multiple borders. The region's economic growth has increased water stress due to urbanisation and industrialisation. Geopolitical tensions, like the India-Pakistan relationship, complicate water management. India's actions impact neighbouring countries' water resources, affecting hydroelectric projects and energy needs. Water competition in South Asia has the potential to escalate conflicts, disrupt livelihoods, and destabilise states.

South Asia's water security is threatened by complex challenges that transcend regional boundaries. Achieving urban water security requires addressing challenges like, rising demand and depleting resources. Engineering interventions can enhance efficiency, and address inefficiencies in urban water distribution. Promoting equity through interventions like urban water metering is crucial. Moreover, collaborative, multidimensional strategies are necessary to address these challenges. Harmonised water management, technological advancements, and collective awareness are essential for ensuring sustainable water security in the region.

Infectious Diseases as Non-Traditional Security Threat in South Asia

Infectious diseases have emerged as a significant NTS threat in South Asia, challenging conventional notions of security. While security concerns are often centered on military and geopolitical factors, the profound reach and implications of infectious diseases are reshaping the regional security discourse. This shift is particularly evident in the field of

²⁵ Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan, "Non-Traditional Security Threats to South Asia," *Margalla Papers 2009*, pp- 53.

²⁶ World Bank, *One South Asia* (WB, 2023),
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration>

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

security studies, where a limited body of literature has explored the intersection of infectious diseases with human and national security.

South Asia, constituting nearly 20 per cent of the global population within its densely populated landscape, confronts shared health vulnerabilities.²⁷ Climate change amplifies susceptibility to vector-borne diseases in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Tuberculosis and other diseases disproportionately affect the region due to socioeconomic disparities, rapid urbanisation, and human migration.²⁸ Climatic conditions, environmental degradation, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure further contribute to vulnerability.

Malaria, tuberculosis, dengue fever, and waterborne diseases like cholera and typhoid are prevalent in South Asia. Vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, and polio also persist due to access challenges. Emerging threats like avian influenza periodically affect both animal and human health. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in healthcare systems, revealing the multifaceted impact of infectious diseases on various aspects of human security.²⁹ Within the global panorama, approximately 8 million of the 23 million inadequately immunised children are in South Asia. Regrettably, the region is behind its targets for eradicating polio, measles, maternal and neonatal tetanus, and overall immunisation coverage. Infant fatalities are common in the region, with nearly 60 per cent of children succumbing before the age of five. Preventing these neonatal deaths necessitates unified endeavours encompassing various societal tiers from households and communities to healthcare practitioners and governmental bodies. The dearth of sufficient

²⁷ The BMJ, *Health in South Asia* (United Kingdom, 2018), accessed August 16, 2023, <https://www.bmj.com/health-in-south-asia>.

²⁸ Gigi KwikGronvall, Brittany Bland, Thomas Inglesby, Anita Cicero, “Global Health Security in South Asia,” *Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security Report from the meeting in Washington, DC*, July 10, 2018, http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2018/180913-global-health-security-south-asia.pdf

²⁹ Yawen Wang et al., “Impact of Climate Change on Dengue Fever Epidemics in South and Southeast Asian Settings: A Modelling Study,” *Infectious Disease Modelling* 8, No. 3 (September 1, 2023): 645–55.

infrastructure remains a deterrent to unhindered access to vaccination services. Notably, polio continues to persist in two nations, Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁰

South Asia's cross-border interactions facilitate rapid disease transmission. Global interconnectedness, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the need for proactive infectious disease management. Yet, historical mistrust and political rivalries hinder regional cooperation. Effective disease management necessitates coordinated efforts transcending geopolitical differences. The region faces challenges in achieving immunisation targets, eradicating diseases, and reducing infant mortality. Strengthening public health infrastructure, disease surveillance, and research and development are crucial. Regional cooperation must prioritise health security as a shared interest, while efforts to raise awareness, combat misinformation, and ensure equitable healthcare access are paramount for building societal resilience.

Mass Migration as a Non-Traditional Security Concern in South Asia

Migration, a historical facet of human history, has been prominent in South Asia, involving movements within and beyond its borders. The partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, triggered a notable wave of permanent migration, primarily driven by ethno-religious and ideological factors. Countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have experienced substantial outflows of migrants due to conflicts and environmental degradation. Notably, Pakistan and India have experienced extensive migration patterns originating from diverse causal factors, while also hosting substantial migrant populations.³¹

Mass migration carries significant implications for migrants themselves as well as for both sending and receiving nations. Cross-border migration,

³⁰ UNICEF, *Health* (South Asia, UNICEF, 2019), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/health>.

³¹ UNICEF, *Health* (South Asia, UNICEF, 2019), accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/health>.

particularly irregular migration and human-trafficking, presents intricate challenges transcending legal considerations, encompassing demographic, social, economic, and political dimensions. Irregular migration, characterised by its multifaceted threats, holds the potential to precipitate demographic imbalances, social unrest, economic strains, and political vulnerabilities. It also serves as a conduit for the infiltration of extremist elements, heightening the security risk of terrorism and organised crime, thus presenting a pressing security challenge.³²

The phenomenon of migration, encompassing the refugee crisis, stands out as a NTS threat across South Asian countries. It is essential to address issues posed by malevolent actors within migrant populations, even though not all migrants are perpetrators.³³ The destabilising impact of forced migration, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugee inflows further exacerbate the security architecture of South Asia. Migration, being a complex demographic challenge rooted in factors such as poverty and internal conflicts, exhibits a pervasive nature throughout the region. Nations like India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh have confronted the challenges of hosting diverse refugee populations, giving rise to a spectrum of security challenges. The phenomenon of internal displacement stemming from natural disasters, repatriation efforts, and refugee influxes amplifies the array of security concerns.³⁴

The aftermath of civil conflicts, as seen in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, underscores the profound implications of migration on regional security. For instance, the civil war in Sri Lanka led to a significant refugee inflow to neighbouring India, resulting in security repercussions for both nations.

³² Srivastava, Ravi, Pandey, Arvind Kumar, "Internal and international migration in South Asia: drivers, interlinkage and policy issues," Discussion paper at UNESCO Office New Delhi, 2017, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000249459>

³³ Vinod K Bharadwaj, "Migration and Security in South Asia, Emerging Challenges and Concerns," *Academia* (2016), https://www.academia.edu/6856846/Migration_and_Security_in_South_Asia_Emerging_Challenges_and_Concerns.

³⁴ Srivastava, Ravi, Pandey, Arvind Kumar, "Internal and international migration in South Asia: drivers, interlinkage and policy issues," Discussion paper at UNESCO Office New Delhi, 2017, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000249459>

Rethinking Regional Security Paradigm: Non-Traditional ...

Similarly, Pakistan's entanglement in the Afghanistan conflict has catalysed internal instability and security threats, thereby influencing its demographic dynamics and domestic security. The inflow of Afghan refugees, coupled with ongoing instability, has rendered Pakistan susceptible to illicit trans-border activities, encompassing arms, drugs, and human smuggling.

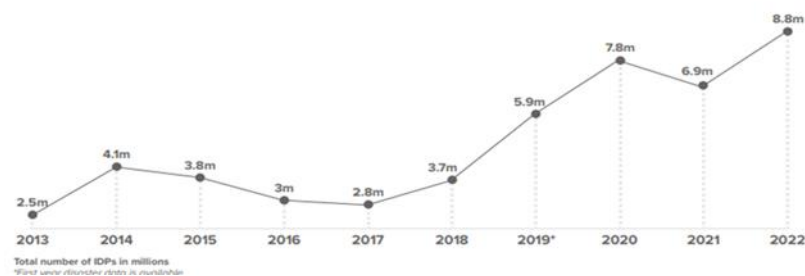
Total number of IDPs as of end of 2022



Five countries with the highest number of IDPs in South Asia as of end 2022



Total number of IDPs in South Asia at year end (2013-2022)



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

In South Asia, the majority of internal displacements stem from disasters, a trend consistent in 2022.³⁵ The year saw a recorded 12.5 million such displacements, a twofold increase from the 10-year average of 6.3 million.

³⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, *2023 Global Report on Internal Displacement* (Geneva: IDMC, 2022), accessed August 28, 2023, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2023/>.

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

The upsurge was predominantly driven by extensive flooding during the monsoon season in Pakistan.

This surge in migration exerts economic pressures on both host and sending countries, shaping economies, labour markets, and social welfare systems, often leading to discernible inequalities and social upheaval. The assimilation of migrants into host communities frequently sparks cultural conflicts and social challenges, thereby affecting social cohesion. Irregular migration escalates concerns over human trafficking and exploitation, heightening human rights issues. Movement across porous borders facilitates concealed illicit activities, including human smuggling and arms trade, augmenting apprehensions regarding transnational criminal activities and terrorism.

Migrants exert a pronounced impact on political dynamics, potentially fueling political instability, reshaping the socio-political landscape, and inciting conflicts. Healthcare systems experience heightened strain, elevating the susceptibility to disease outbreaks. Environmental degradation and natural disasters compound migration patterns, intensifying resource competition and potential for conflict. Mechanisms of governance addressing mass migration underscore vulnerabilities, contributing to instability and posing challenges to state authority. Regional cooperation is of paramount importance, yet historical animosities and concerns of national sovereignty impede collaborative efforts. Addressing this multifaceted challenge is crucial for establishing stability, security, and resilience in the South Asian region.

Terrorism in South Asia: A Persistent Non-Traditional Security Challenge

Terrorism constitutes a significant NTS threat in South Asia, and its implications extend both regionally and globally. Unlike conventional military aggression, terrorism employs asymmetric tactics to induce fear, disrupt societal functioning, and advance political, ideological, or

religious agendas.³⁶ In the complex landscape of South Asia, historical, political, and socio-economic factors have fostered an environment conducive to terrorism, with several extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and indigenous factions, finding a foothold, contributing to regional volatility.³⁷

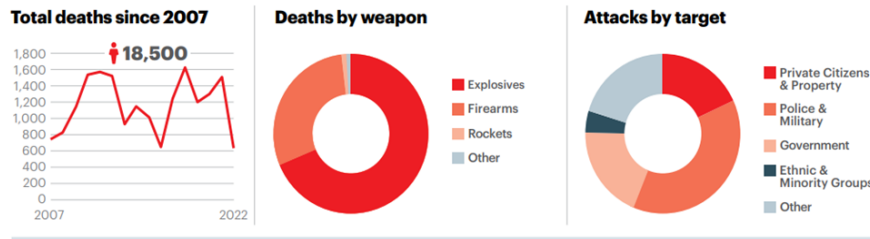
Terrorism in South Asia can be classified into three categories based on motivation: nationalist, religious extremism-driven, and ethno-nationalist separatist groups. The impact of terrorism is profound, affecting nearly every country in the region. In 2022, Afghanistan remained the most terrorism-affected nation for the fourth consecutive year. Terrorism-related fatalities decreased significantly to 633, the lowest since 2007, with a 75 per cent reduction in incidents and a 58 per cent decline in casualties compared to the previous year.³⁸ Afghanistan's share of global terrorism deaths dropped from 20 to 9 per cent.³⁹ Terrorism affected 26 out of 34 provinces, with Kabul having the highest casualties, primarily due to Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK). Kabul saw a 50 per cent decrease in fatalities, from 549 in 2021 to 217 in 2022. Suicide bombings reduced from 11 to 7, resulting in a 72 per cent decrease in fatalities, from 276 to 78. Bombings caused the most deaths (434) compared to armed attacks (186). Since the regime change in August 2021, ISK became the most active terrorist entity, responsible for 115 incidents and 422 deaths, including attacks on Shia mosques with 50 civilian casualties each.

³⁶ Todd Sandler and Walter Enders, "Economic Consequences of Terrorism in Developed and Developing Countries: An Overview," in *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness*, ed. Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza, (CUP, 2008), 17–47

³⁷ Qasim Saleem et al., "Impact of terrorism on economic growth in south Asian country," *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues* 10, No. 4 (July 10, 2020): 185–91.

³⁸ "ReliefWeb," Global terrorism index 2023 – world, March 14, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2023>

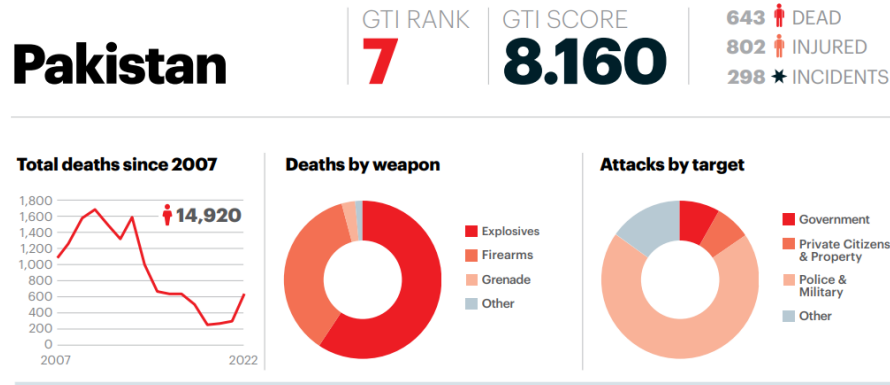
³⁹ "ReliefWeb," Global terrorism index 2023 – world.



Source: Global Terrorism Index Report 2023

In 2022, Pakistan experienced a significant doubling of terrorism-related deaths despite a stable number of incidents. Attacks became deadlier, averaging 2.2 fatalities per incident, with military personnel comprising 55 per cent of all victims.⁴⁰ The majority of attacks occurred along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) surpassing Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as the most lethal group, responsible for 36 per cent of deaths. The deadliest attack, attributed to BLA, claimed 195 soldiers' lives in Balochistan province. Historically potent terror groups like IS, ISK, and BLA saw resurgences, with BLA attacks surging by 77 per cent, while ISK recorded 23 incidents and 78 deaths. Terrorism is expected to persist along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border due to the Taliban's control of Afghanistan and the region's appeal as a potential safe haven for terrorist groups.

⁴⁰ Ramesh Chandra Das and Sovik Mukherjee, "Determinants of Terrorism in South Asia: Insights from a Dynamic Panel Data Analysis," in *Cyber Warfare and Terrorism*, ed. Information Resources Management Association (IGI Global, 2020), 1598–1617, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2466-4.ch094>.



Source: Global Terrorism Index Report 2023

The rise of separatism, extremism, and ethnic nationalism in South Asia is attributed to corruption, poverty, unemployment, and the marginalisation of minority groups and small provinces. These factors hinder inclusive development, exacerbating existing fault-lines and rendering the region susceptible to NTS threats. Terrorism, in this context, has emerged as a significant concern, adversely affecting economic growth. Acts of terrorism result in substantial economic costs, including the destruction of infrastructure, disruption of activities, and deterrence of foreign investment.

The emergence of *Hindutva* ideology in India has led to internal tensions and has potential cross-border implications.⁴¹ Bangladesh grapples with a rising tide of extremism, with instances of domestic and transnational terrorism,⁴² while the Maldives and Nepal face their own unique challenges. Sri Lanka has a history of internal conflict with the Liberation

⁴¹ Dr Khurram Iqbal, "The Rise of Hindutva, Saffron Terrorism and South Asian Regional Security," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 5, No. 1 (2019): 43–63, <https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.005.01.0100>.

⁴² Sajjan M. Gohel, "Bangladesh: An Emerging Centre for Terrorism in Asia," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, No. 3 (2014): 84–91.

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and has also experienced transnational terrorism, exemplified by the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings.⁴³

The digital realm has amplified the terrorist threat, facilitating the spread of extremist ideologies and recruitment through online platforms. International efforts, including those by the United States, European Union, and United Nations, are aimed at combating terrorism in South Asia through capacity building, intelligence sharing, and tackling the financing of terrorism.

Regional cooperation, particularly through organisations like SAARC, plays a crucial role in countering terrorism, as demonstrated by initiatives such as the SAARC Terrorism Monitoring Desk. However, despite these efforts, terrorism remains a formidable challenge, eroding trust among regional states and hindering peace talks. The inability of states to effectively address NTS threats has given rise to significant non-state actors as security concerns in the region, compounding the complexity of the issue.

Relevance of Regional Dialogue on NTS Threats in South Asia

The study of regional dialogue holds immense relevance in addressing the multifaceted NTS threats facing South Asia. This importance stems from the unique nature of the challenges prevalent in the region and the necessity for cooperative and inclusive solutions.

Firstly, South Asia is a highly diverse region, both culturally and politically, with a history of complex interstate relations and historical conflicts. Regional dialogue provides a structured platform for countries in South Asia to engage in constructive discussions, fostering mutual understanding and trust. Such dialogue mechanisms, like SAARC, enable nations to address shared challenges collaboratively, including environmental issues, transnational terrorism, and health crises. Through

⁴³ Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2008).

diplomatic negotiations and shared commitments, regional dialogue can pave the way for collective solutions, emphasising cooperation over confrontation.

Secondly, NTS threats often transcend national borders, necessitating a regional approach. For instance, climate change and environmental degradation affect entire ecosystems, and their impacts can extend across borders. By engaging in regional dialogue, South Asian nations can coordinate efforts to mitigate these threats collectively. Additionally, NTS threats like cyber-attacks and transnational terrorism often require intelligence sharing and joint efforts to counteract effectively. Regional dialogue mechanisms provide a framework for information exchange and the development of common strategies to address these challenges.

Furthermore, economic vulnerabilities and disparities within South Asia can be mitigated through regional economic cooperation and dialogue. Initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) aim to promote economic integration, reduce poverty, and foster regional development. Such economic dialogues can help alleviate some of the root causes of instability in the region.

Finally, regional dialogue fosters a sense of regional identity and cooperation, which is essential for effective crisis management. During health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, regional dialogue and cooperation are pivotal in ensuring timely vaccine distribution, sharing healthcare resources, and addressing public health concerns collectively.

Role of Regional Frameworks in Addressing NTS threats in South Asia

Regional dialogue in South Asia serves as a dynamic catalyst for bolstering collective capacity development and conflict prevention, particularly in the context of NTS threats. This platform enables the exchange of best practices, cross-border knowledge dissemination, and equipping South Asian nations with innovative tools for mitigating NTS

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

challenges. By fostering a culture of mutual learning, it optimises responses to public health crises, environmental degradation, and cyber vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, regional dialogue plays a pivotal role in preempting conflicts driven by NTS threats by providing a structured framework for diplomatic engagement and early crisis management. It allows nations to collaboratively address underlying factors that could escalate into conflicts, reducing the potential for misunderstandings and miscalculations. This preemptive and resolution-oriented approach enhances regional stability and underscores the transformative power of dialogue in curbing conflicts related to NTS threats.

Moreover, regional dialogue facilitates coordinated policy alignment among South Asian nations to ensure that policies and strategies are harmonised to collectively address multifaceted NTS challenges. This alignment optimises resource utilisation, facilitates the sharing of best practices, and enhances preparedness and response capabilities. Given that NTS threats often transcend national boundaries, a unified policy framework cultivated through dialogue strengthens the region's resilience in facing challenges like pandemics, transnational crime, and environmental crises. Tangible outcomes, such as joint task forces and standardised protocols, exemplify the concrete benefits of regional dialogue in fostering a well-coordinated and efficient approach to NTS threats in South Asia.

Similarly, trust and confidence can be cultivated through open and transparent communication, often guided by the principles of Communicative Action Theory. Regional dialogues that include representatives from all South Asian nations foster inclusivity, ensuring that every nation has an equal stake in addressing NTS challenges. Transparency in discussions and decision-making processes further strengthens trust by reducing suspicions and misunderstandings.

Moreover, these dialogues promote mutual learning, as nations openly share their perspectives and experiences related to NTS threats. This exchange of ideas enhances empathy and deepens the understanding of each other's challenges. Coordinated policy alignment among South Asian nations also plays a crucial role in trust-building. Harmonising policies and strategies demonstrate a shared commitment to addressing common challenges and fosters a sense of partnership among nations. Standardised protocols, monitoring mechanisms, and compliance verification further contribute to transparency and confidence-building. These trust-building mechanisms are essential for creating a more stable and secure environment in South Asia in the face of evolving NTS threats.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation on NTS Threats within SAARC

The SAARC was established in 1985 with a secretariat in Nepal and comprises eight member nations in South Asia.⁴⁴ SAARC's objectives include enhancing the well-being of the region's population, promoting economic and societal advancement, and engaging with like-minded international and regional entities. Despite challenges, SAARC can serve as a neutral and inclusive platform for member states to engage in diplomatic discussions, bridge differences, and foster mutual understanding regarding NTS threats. It can facilitate information sharing, establish shared norms and best practices, and focus on capacity building through training programmes. SAARC can also drive regional projects on disaster preparedness, climate change adaptation, and public health, raising public awareness and supporting research on these threats while mediating disputes and developing regional agreements for crisis management.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ S.S. Colombage, "Payments and Monetary Cooperation in South Asia: Developments and Perspectives," *South Asian Survey* 2, No. 2 (1995): 213-224.

⁴⁵ "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)," European Union External Action, November 21, 2021, accessed August 18, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/south-asian-association-regional-cooperation-saarc_en.

Leveraging SAARC as a platform for promoting regional dialogue on NTS threats in South Asia can be achieved by adopting a multilateral, cooperative, and inclusive approach.⁴⁶ SAARC, while not primarily focused on addressing bilateral issues, can provide a conducive environment for member nations to collectively address shared NTS concerns. This can be achieved through various initiatives discussed below:

- **Specialised Working Groups:** SAARC can establish specialised working groups or committees dedicated to NTS threats. These groups would comprise experts and representatives from member countries who focus on issues like climate change, public health, disaster management, cyber security, and counter-terrorism. These groups can meet regularly to share information, best practices, and research findings on NTS threats, fostering collaboration and understanding among member states.
- **Regular Summits and Conferences:** SAARC summits and conferences can include sessions or tracks specifically dedicated to NTS threats. These gatherings would allow member nations to discuss and deliberate on the latest developments, challenges, and opportunities related to NTS issues. Prominent experts and organisations working in these fields can be invited to share their insights and recommendations.
- **Information Sharing and Capacity Building:** SAARC can facilitate the sharing of information and expertise among member nations. This can include joint training programmes, workshops, and capacity-building initiatives related to disaster response, public health preparedness, and cyber resilience. By pooling resources and knowledge, member countries can collectively enhance their capabilities to address NTS threats effectively.
- **Data and Research Exchange:** SAARC can encourage the exchange of data and research findings related to NTS threats. Establishing a regional database or information-sharing platform can help the member's access to vital information on issues like

⁴⁶ Joy Mitra, "SAARC: Pakistani Perspective," *FPRC Journal*, 20 (2015): 155-159.

disease outbreaks, environmental trends, and emerging security threats. This data exchange can inform evidence-based policymaking and response strategies.

- **Public Awareness and Education:** SAARC can support public awareness campaigns and educational programmes aimed at informing citizens about NTS threats and the collective efforts being made to address them. Promoting a sense of shared responsibility among the public can generate greater support for regional cooperation on these issues.
- **Policy Coordination:** SAARC can facilitate policy coordination among member nations to ensure that national policies are aligned with regional priorities for addressing NTS threats. Standardised protocols and joint policy frameworks can be developed to streamline responses to common challenges.
- **Resource Mobilisation:** SAARC can explore mechanisms for resource mobilisation, including regional funds or partnerships with international organisations, to support initiatives related to NTS threats. This would ensure that member countries have the necessary resources to respond effectively to crises.
- **Engagement with International Partners:** SAARC can engage with international partners, such as the United Nations, regional organisations, and donor agencies, to access technical expertise, funding, and best practices in addressing NTS threats. Collaborating with these partners can amplify the impact of regional efforts.
- **Track-II Diplomacy:** SAARC can encourage Track-II diplomacy initiatives involving think tanks, academics, and civil society organisations from member countries. These non-governmental dialogues can generate innovative ideas and solutions for addressing NTS threats, which can then be presented to policymakers.

By taking these steps and promoting NTS discussions on the sidelines of SAARC events, member nations can collectively address the diverse and

Dr Summar Iqbal Babar

evolving security challenges facing South Asia. This collaborative approach can enhance regional resilience, preparedness, and cooperation in mitigating NTS threats.

Conclusion

The evolution of the security concept demands a paradigm shift in South Asia's approach to security challenges. To address South Asia's complex security challenges, the regional countries must focus on a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that prioritises human security and development. By recognising the interconnectedness between traditional and non-traditional security issues, governments can better allocate resources to tackle the root causes of these challenges. Overcoming geopolitical rivalries and working together towards common goals will be the key to unlocking the full potential of South Asia's cooperative strength.

The regional dialogue on NTS threats in South Asia emerges as a clarion call to action for addressing the contemporary complexities facing the region. As South Asia grapples with a myriad of NTS challenges, a focused regional dialogue becomes imperative for innovative approaches. While SAARC stands as a pivotal organisation for facilitating such dialogues, the effectiveness has been hampered by geopolitical rivalries. Transcending these differences, prioritising collective security, and investing in addressing NTS threats are essential for improving well-being, resilience, and reducing the risk of conflicts and arms races. A redefined regional security paradigm in South Asia, shaped through collaborative and inclusive dialogue, not only acknowledges the urgency of addressing NTS concerns but also charts a course toward a more secure and resilient South Asia. ■

