

Conflicts in South Asia – Challenges to SAARC Regionalism

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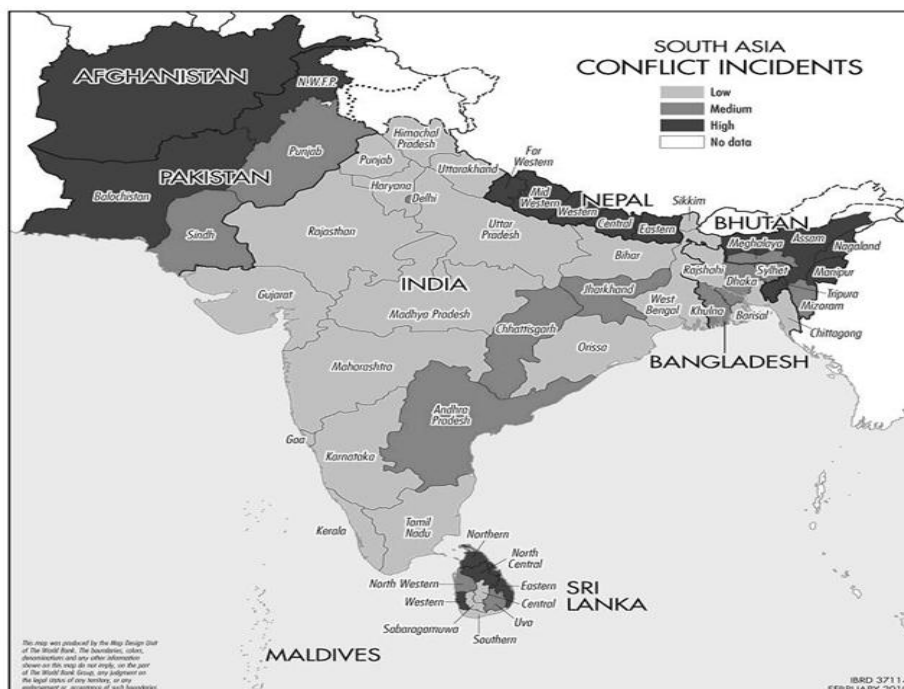
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1. INTRODUCTION

Richness in material and human resources has warranted a constant interaction between countries in South Asia and the outside world. South Asian states have also been aware of their geopolitical advantages and need to integrate into a regional force. Efforts were made earlier¹ to create institutional mechanisms for regional integration in order to enable the fostering of a common regional identity and a cooperative growth strategy making optimum use of inter-regional trade and social and political development. A culmination of such an understanding was the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The South Asian region currently faces a grave security threat due to increasing extremism and terrorist activities. The politics of violence and extremist trends in South Asia can be linked to the contradictions arising as a consequence of faulty national policies. The South Asian states tend to operate in the interests of a coalition of classes and ethnic groups, thereby influencing development policies and the distribution of resources. The pace, content and dynamics of the uneven development patterns in South Asia are among the predominant causes of violence in the region. Terrorism and the rise of extremism has been occurring in South Asia for a variety of reasons, including perpetration by tyrannical and aggressive regimes and rebel groups, social injustice, ideological contradictions, religious beliefs and foreign interference. However, deteriorating socio-economic conditions, government policies and outside interference in all South Asian countries have been the primary factors responsible for the rise of extremism in the region. Terrorism and its political consequences have directly and visibly affected interstate relations in South Asia and have also led to destabilization in the region.



Map1: South Asian Countries

While South Asia had never been a coherent geopolitical region, it has a distinct geographical identity Map1. Shows that in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, conflict is concentrated in the lagging regions. Conflict rates are higher in the lagging regions of Pakistan (Baluchistan, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and North-West Frontier Province), India (Maoist insurgency in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Orissa), Sri Lanka (North), and Nepal. Lagging regions have experienced more than three times the number of terrorist incidents per capita, compared with leading regions, and almost twice as many deaths per head of population in such incidents.

Created in 1985, SAARC follows the principles of: focus on social and economic matters; decisions by consensus; and non-discussion on contentious bilateral issues. According to the SAARC Charter (1985) member states are ‘desirous of peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and Non-Alignment, particularly, respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all disputes’. This charter was signed by heads of states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, in 1985 in Dhaka. Over the years, SAARC has attempted to address several regional concerns, for instance, drugs and human trafficking, economic cooperation among south Asian states and the forging of a south Asian social identity, and most recently efforts have been made to tackle the menace of terrorism in the region. ‘Regionalism’ has a different meaning and purpose for each nation when they become a part of any regional organization. In most cases, states that join hands in any regional cooperation mechanism have certain basic differences; for most, regional cooperation is limited only to economic cooperation through free-trade agreements. Differences among member states of the regional cooperation organizations are greater in the presence of inter-state conflicts between the member states. Even if states seem to agree on some issues at the platform of that particular regional cooperation organization, their intentions behind the concept and purpose of regionalism are fundamentally different. Inter-state conflicts have posed hurdles to regionalism. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the functioning of the SAARC. The Geographical factors which favor insurgency, economic factors such as poverty, social diversity, and also institutional factors, such as poor property rights. Nation level regressions for SAARC show a strong correlation between the incidence of poverty and the intensity of conflict, over and above the impact of geographical factors like altitude or the presence of hills and forests. This is consistent with the trend of rising conflict in lagging areas, and provides further evidence of the link between economic backwardness and violence.

2. DATA

Any empirical analysis of terrorism or conflict is complicated by data constraints. First, there are long-running separatist movements in SARRC countries (Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka);

Table1: *Types of conflict between the member states of SAARC*

Territorial conflicts	
SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	Deadlock on issues of Siachen glacier, Kargil and Sir Creek. Kashmir dispute which has resulted in two major wars
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Durand line issue
Cross-border terrorism	
SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	On several occasions there have been blames from both sides (India and Pakistan) on each other for carrying out terrorist activities or supporting such acts in their country.
India-Bangladesh	Illegal immigration of Bengalis into India.
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Pakistan has decided to shut down refugee camps under increasing pressure to crack down on cross-border militancy.
Cross-border terrorism Nepal-Bhutan	Over repatriation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

The second source of internal violence in South Asia comes from incidents perpetrated by extremist groups (“Naxalite” movements) in many countries of South Asia. The geographical spread of such groups has been rising in recent years in 2007.

The third source of increasing violence in South Asia stems from incidents of terrorism in SAARC countries. Such incidents, typically the use of bombs in crowded locations, have been on the rise. In recent years, there have been several instances of multiple coordinated bomb blasts in South Asia

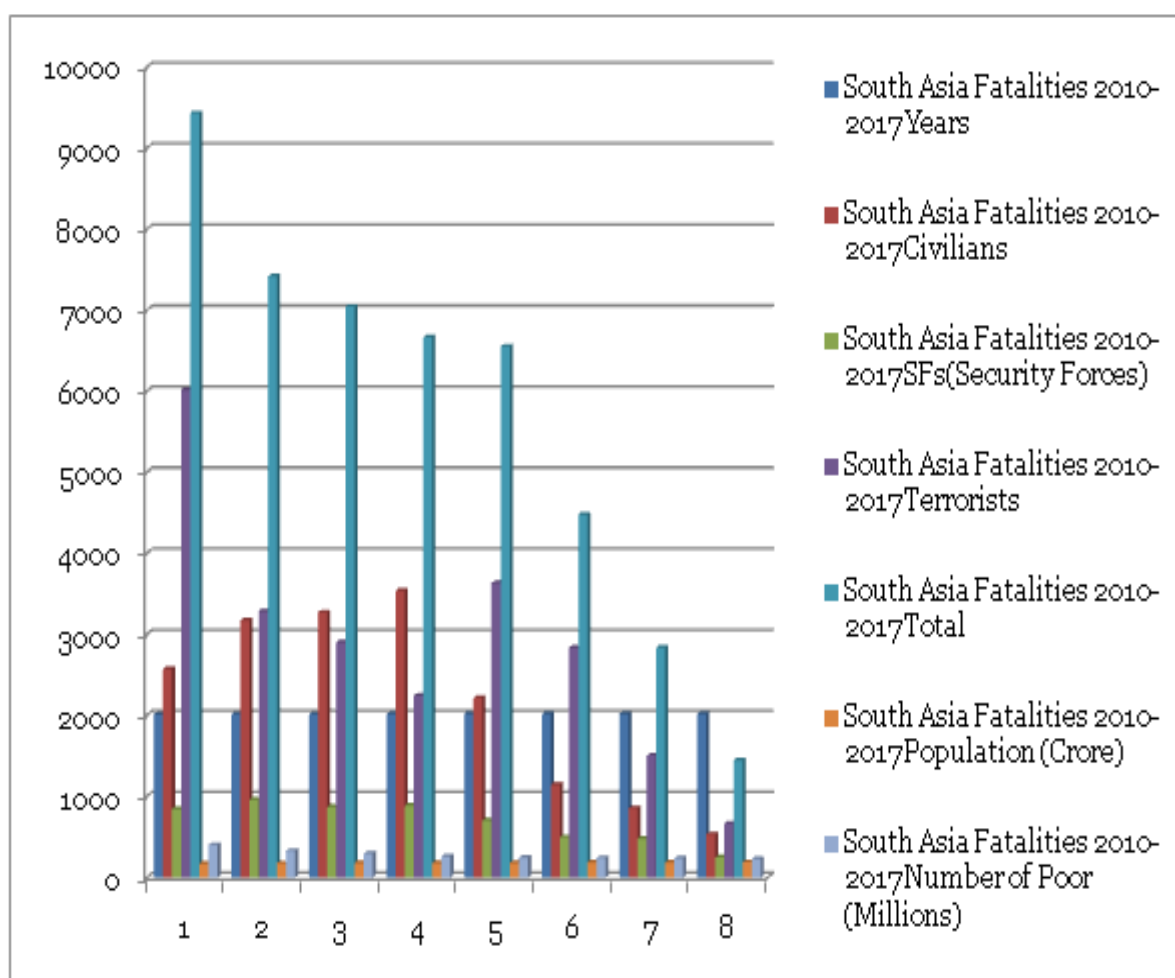
Table2: Conflict over natural resources

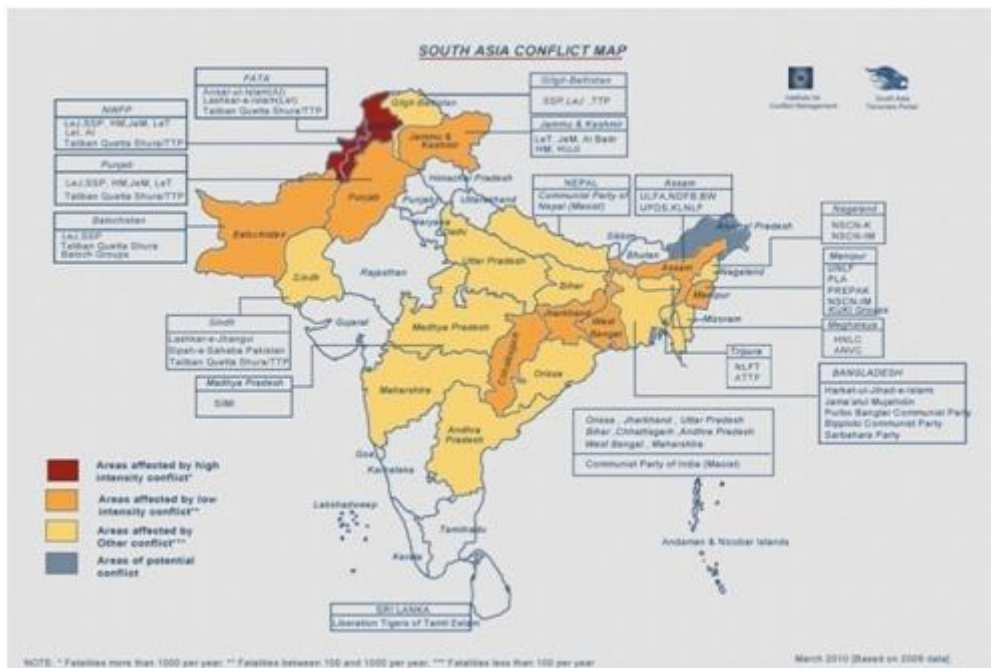
SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	Both countries are having dialogue regarding the Baglihar dam being built over River Chenab in Indian-administered Kashmir.
India-Bangladesh	Bangladesh wants a fair share of Ganga river by opposing the construction of Farrakha Barrage in India

Table3: South Asia Fatalities 2010-2017

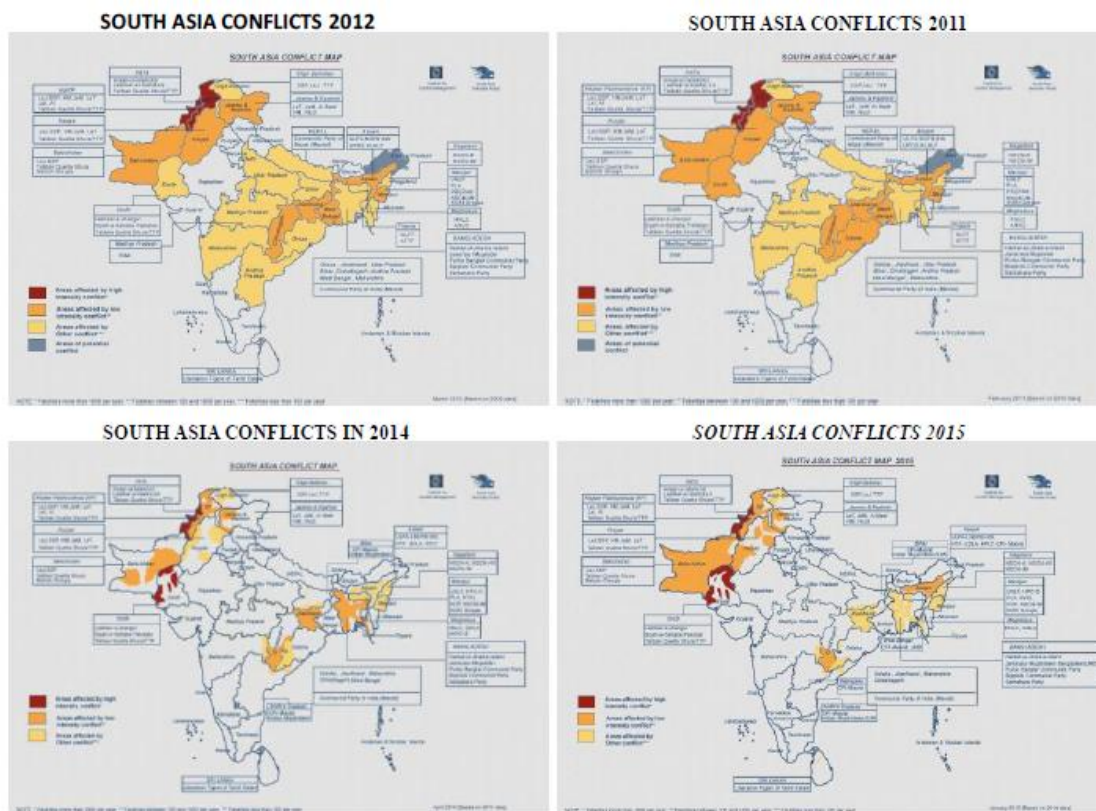
Years	Civilians	SFs(Security Forces)	Terrorists	Total
2010	2571	844	6016	9431
2011	3173	962	3284	7419
2012	3270	871	2902	7043
2013	3536	887	2244	6667
2014	2217	703	3631	6551
2015	1144	496	2837	4477
2016	854	476	1505	2835
2017	533	249	663	1445
Total				

* Data till August 6, 2017





Map2: South Asia Conflicts 2010



Map3: South Asian Conflicts In 2011,12,14,15

Conflicts in South Asia, or for that matter in most of the other parts of the world, can be broadly put in four categories, namely (i) those imposed and escalated by the global political, strategic and developmental dynamics, including the role of great powers; (ii) those inherited and strategically induced in inter-state engagements; (iii) those precipitated and nurtured by the internal political turbulence, socio-cultural fault-lines and developmental distortions; and (iv) those that are caused and covered by the non-state actors. The first category includes conflicts inflicted by the forces and factors from outside the region. (For a discussion of the negative aspects of globalisation, including on South Asia, see, George Heine & Ramesh Thakur (Ed.), *The Dark Side of Globalization*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, New York, Paris, 2011.)

It is acknowledged in South Asia that one of the greatest obstacles to the success of regional cooperation under South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been the conflict between India and Pakistan. As bilateral trade channels are being activated between India and Pakistan, it is hoped that regional trade will grow to the advantage of all the member countries. Conflict and regional rivalry between India and Pakistan is also obstructing the prospects of their mutual cooperation with Afghanistan, which, if facilitated, can in turn help both Pakistan and Afghanistan fight their internal insurgencies better.²⁶(26 See Shahid Javed Burki, *South Asia in the New World Order: The Role of Regional Cooperation*, Routledge, New York, London, 2011.)

Most of the cross-country literature on the incidence of civil war shows that poor countries are at greater risk of internal conflict (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). The latter study also finds that geographical conditions which favor insurgency, such as the presence of forest cover, is significantly associated with the incidence of conflict. Do and Iyer (2007) found similar results in an analysis of conflict intensity across the districts of Nepal. Many policymakers cite the lack of economic opportunities, and specifically the extent of landlessness, as a primary determinant of the Naxalite conflict in India.¹⁹ (19 “A large proportion of the recruits to extremist groups come from deprived or marginalized backgrounds or from regions which somehow seem disaffected by the vibrant growth in many other parts of the country.”

The economic and geographic circumstances as well as social divisions are often cited as a driver of conflict. For instance, the separatist movement in Sri Lanka began with the demands of ethnic Tamils for greater autonomy. Similarly, the Maoist rebels in Nepal often claim to be fighting on behalf of marginalized sections of society, such as members of the lower castes. India’s northeastern states, which are the scene of long-running separatist movements, are also socially and ethnically different from the majority of the states in India. I examine some correlations between the incidence of conflict and the geographic, economic and societal characteristics of South Asian regions. Table 12 summarizes the correlations of the number of incidents and number of fatalities in terrorist incidents with demographic variables (population density, urbanization, literacy rates) and economic variables (% of population in poverty). Consistent with the idea that economic backwardness matters, we find a negative correlation between conflict intensity and measures of literacy and urbanization; however, we do not see the expected positive correlation with poverty (Table 12, Panel A).

South Asia Fatalities 2010-2017

Years	Civilians	SFs(Security Forces)	Terrorists	Total	Population (Crore)	Number of Poor (Millions)
2010	2571	844	6016	9431	170.2	400.3
2011	3173	962	3284	7419	172.7	327.9
2012	3270	871	2902	7043	175.1	293.3
2013	3536	887	2244	6667	177.5	256.2
2014	2217	703	3631	6551	177.9	244.3
2015	1144	496	2837	4477	182.2	239.2
2016	854	476	1505	2835	184.6	233.1
2017	533	249	663	1445	187.0	227.4

* Data till August 6, 2017

Correlations			
		Terrorist_activity	Population
Terrorist_activity	Pearson Correlation	1	-.855**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.007
	N	8	8
Population	Pearson Correlation	-.855**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	
	N	8	8

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation between Number of Terrorist incidences (2010-2017) and Population in South Asia

Correlations

		Terrorist_activ ity	Poor_populati on
Terrorist_activity	Pearson Correlation	1	.846**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008
	N	8	8
Poor_population	Pearson Correlation	.846**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	
	N	8	8

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation between Number of Terrorist incidences (2010-2017) and Number of Poor Population in South Asia

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Poor_populati on ^b		Enter

- a. Dependent Variable: Terrorist_activity
- b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.846 ^a	.716	.668	917.498

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Poor_population

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	12723220.35	1	12723220.35	15.114	.008 ^b
	Residual	5050815.148	6	841802.525		
	Total	17774035.50	7			

- a. Dependent Variable: Terrorist_activity
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Poor_population

Regression, Anova and Coefficient of Coorelation between Number of Terrorist incidences (2010-2017) and Number of Poor Population in South Asia

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-3333.513	1632.157		-2.042	.087
	Poor_population	22.393	5.760	.846	3.888	.008

- a. Dependent Variable: Terrorist_activity

3. THE SECURITY APPROACH

South Asian countries have therefore adopted many strategies to augment the effectiveness of the police forces to deal with internal conflict: devoting more resources to existing police forces, raising local militias, and calling in the armed forces.

In India, the security manpower has been increased by deploying 33 battalions of Central Paramilitary Forces to conflict-affected states, and by sanctioning the recruitment of a further 32battalions of India Reserve forces. The central government also disbursed Rs 5 billion to states affected by Naxalite violence in 2005-06 to reimburse states for their expenditures on training, ammunition,

communications, transport, rehabilitation of surrendered Naxalites, ex-gratia payments to families of Naxalite victims and insurance for police personnel (Joseph, 2007, p 94). More controversially, the state of Chhattisgarh has helped local militias like the Salwa Judum in Dantewada district, which were organized as self-defense groups against Naxalite violence.

The record of such informal militias has been mixed in the other South Asian countries as well. In Sri Lanka, some Tamil groups (such as the Razeek group of the formerly militant EPRLF) have been used as paramilitary forces by the Sri Lanka Army.

3.1. The Military Approach

In extreme cases, when police forces turn out to be insufficient, the armed forces are called in to deal with the insurgency. In most cases, this has not proved to be a successful strategy in South Asia. The Maoists went on to win the largest number of seats in the Constituent Assembly elections in April 2008. The Sri Lankan Army has battled the LTTE for more than two decades without any lasting solution; only in early 2009 was the army in a position to conclusively defeat the rebels.

In 1984, the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar in a major operation against Sikh separatists. This perceived desecration of the Sikh religion's holiest shrine led to heightened insurgency in Punjab state for the next eight years, before tough police action finally brought the situation under control.

In Pakistan, the use of armed forces has had some successes to its credit. For instance, the local insurgency in Balochistan has been considerably scaled down after the assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti by the military in 2006

3.2. The Political Approach

The peace talks between the government of Andhra Pradesh and the People's War Group (PWG) in 2004 were undermined by the fact that other states were conducting counter-terrorism raids against the PWG at the same time. Similarly, the proposed talks with the ULFA in Assam have floundered because the ULFA wanted the sovereignty of Assam to be on the agenda, which the Indian government did not agree to. In contrast, the limited autonomy desired by the Bodo militant groups was discussed and ultimately granted.

3.3. The Economic Approach

This is consistent with the view of economic backwardness as one of the root causes of conflict. The government of India has designated all the northeastern states as "Special Category" states for purposes of funding: all of these states received more than Rs. 1000 per capita from the Planning Commission in 2003-04, compared to the nationwide average of Rs. 438. Are such economically oriented incentives effective in reducing conflict? In general, it is hard to quantify the impact of such measures on the intensity of conflict, partly because of the paucity of data on exact amounts allocated at the very local level.

3.4. Regional Cooperation in Conflict Management

The Maoists in Nepal had formed close links with the Maoist movements in India. Many separatist groups in India's northeastern states have camps in neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Taliban in Afghanistan obtain significant support from Pakistan's border areas. The LTTE and other Tamil separatist groups in Sri Lanka have traditionally enjoyed support from Tamil populations in India and abroad. In such a context, regional cooperation is an essential part of any counter-insurgency strategy. India had a hands-off policy towards the conflict in Nepal as well. India did provide material assistance, such as helicopters, to the Royal Nepal Army. But there was no direct intervention by the Indian government such as facilitating negotiations with the rebels, or sending in peace keeping forces.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The increasing trend in internal conflict in South Asia in the new millennium. My analysis has highlighted that poverty is statistically and economically significant in explaining the spatial variation in conflict intensity in the post- 2010 period. However, economically lagging regions did not always have higher conflict in previous decades, and there is no corresponding increase in other crimes or

violent incidents not aimed at spreading terror. These facts suggest that a change in the global environment after 2001 may also have played a role in the observed trends.

Policymakers in South Asia have tried various policies to reduce conflict. The most common approach to deal with insurgencies, terrorism, or internal violence is to use the police forces to establish law and order in the affected areas. The police forces in South Asian countries, however, tend to be understaffed and underequipped. In cases where police forces are insufficient, the armed forces are called in to deal with the insurgency. In most cases, this has not been a successful strategy. Even when these measures are successful in defeating the insurgents, as in Sri Lanka, the human cost associated with military operations is very high.

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- [6] In Pakistan, the usual criminal codes and police jurisdiction do not apply in the FATA region, on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pakistani government therefore signed a peace deal with the local tribal leaders ("maliks"), who are in charge of local administration.
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- [8] FATA is governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulations, originally framed by the British in 1901. Universal adult suffrage was introduced to FATA only in 1996.)
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