

A Year-end Security Review of Southern Asia

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The year gone by saw both China and Pakistan become militarily more assertive on India's borders than ever before in the last decade. While China launched a major incursion into the DBO sector of Ladakh and took several weeks to take the PLA troops back across the LAC, Pakistan repeatedly violated the cease-fire agreement and once again stepped up infiltration of terrorists across the LoC to launch strikes in Kashmir after lying low for several years.

Topping the charts of the unstable regional security environment in Southern Asia is Afghanistan's endless conflict. The present situation can be characterised as a stalemate at the strategic and the tactical levels. This will continue with the Taliban and the Afghan-NATO-ISAF forces alternately gaining local ascendancy for short durations in the core provinces of Helmand, Marja and Kandahar. The Afghan National Army is still many years away from achieving the professional standards necessary to manage security on its own. It will, therefore, be difficult for the NATO-ISAF forces to conduct a responsible drawdown of troops in 2014. The US forces are likely to continue to launch drone strikes in Pakistan against extremists sheltering in the Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa and FATA areas despite the adverse diplomatic fallout. A gradual drift into civil war appears to be the most likely outcome.

Pakistan's half-hearted struggle against the remnants of the al Qaeda and the home grown Taliban like the TTP and the TNSM, fissiparous tendencies in Baluchistan, continuing radical extremism and creeping Talibanisation in the heartland, the tentative counter-terrorism steps of the new civilian government, the floundering economy and, consequently, the nation's gradual slide towards becoming a 'failed state', pose a major security challenge for the region. Unless the Pakistan army gives up its idiosyncratic notions of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan and fuelling terrorism in India and concentrates

instead on fighting all varieties of Taliban that are threatening the cohesion of the state, the eventual break-up of Pakistan may be inevitable.

Sri Lanka's inability to find a lasting solution to its ethnic problems despite the comprehensive defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has serious repercussions for stability in the island nation. Despite the election of a civilian government, the gradual resurgence of the LTTE remains likely as the core issue of autonomy has not been addressed. The rising tide of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism in Bangladesh, even as it struggles for economic upliftment to subsistence levels, could trigger new forces of destruction if left unchecked. Much will depend on which party emerges as the largest after the elections scheduled in January 2014.

The Maoist ascendancy in Nepal and its adverse impact on Nepal's fledgling democracy, as also Nepal's newfound inclination to seek neutrality between India and China, are a blow to what has historically been a stable India-Nepal relationship. Simmering discontentment is gathering momentum in Tibet and Xinjiang against China's repressive regime and could result in an open revolt. The peoples' nascent movement for democracy in Myanmar and several long festering insurgencies may destabilise the military Junta despite its post-election confidence. The movement for democracy could turn violent if the ruling Junta continues to deny its citizens basic human rights. The spillover of religious extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan and political instability in the CARs are undermining development and governance. Other negative factors impacting regional stability in Southern Asia include the unchecked proliferation of small arms, being nurtured and encouraged by large-scale narcotics trafficking and its nexus with radical extremism.

India's internal security environment has been vitiated by Pakistan's two-decade old proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir, continuing insurgency in several of India's north-eastern states, the unchecked rise of Maoist or Naxalite (left wing) extremism in Central India and the new wave of urban terrorism, which peaked with the dastardly attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2008. During 2013, there was little improvement in the state of internal conflicts. In fact, the Maoists are gradually establishing their ability to strike at will at a point and time of their choosing. The security forces continue to lose men, arms and ammunition in these strikes.

Though the central government's cease-fire with the Nagas has now held for over a decade even while internecine quarrels among the Nagas have continued unabated, progress in negotiations with both the Issak-Muivah and the Khaplang factions of the NSCN has been rather limited. The ULFA in Assam has begun negotiations with the central government without any pre-conditions except for the break-away military wing led by Paresh Barua, who is said to be taking shelter in Myanmar and is getting covert support from the Chinese.

Besides Central and State government paramilitary and police forces, the Indian army has been deployed in large numbers to gain control over internal uprisings, most of which are supported, sponsored and militarily aided by inimical foreign powers, especially the Pakistan army and ISI. However, India's fight-back is haphazard and lacks coherence, both in the formulation of a comprehensive internal security strategy and its successful execution. The acquisition and dissemination of intelligence for preventing terrorist strikes are also patently flawed.

India's standing as a regional power that has global power ambitions and aspires to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has been seriously compromised by its inability to successfully manage ongoing internal conflicts and external conflicts in its neighbourhood, singly or in concert with its strategic partners. In fact, the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan could deteriorate beyond the ability of the international community to control. These conflicts are undermining Southern Asia's efforts towards socio-economic development and poverty alleviation by hampering governance and vitiating the investment climate.

With a history of four conflicts in 60 years and three nuclear-armed adversaries continuing to face off, Southern Asia has been described as a nuclear flashpoint. It appears inevitable that in 2014 the Southern Asian region and its extended neighbourhood will see a continuation of ongoing conflicts without major let up and also face the possibility of new conflagrations.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.