

# 1 State Capacity and South Asia's Perennial Insecurity Problems

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South Asia, which consists of eight states of different sizes and capabilities, is characterized by high levels of insecurity in interstate, intrastate, and human dimensions. Although most emerged as independent nations in the 1940s, the states in the region have not yet been able to settle their several conflicts—internal and external—while some have become the epicenters of both traditional and non-traditional security problems, especially transnational terrorism fueled by militant religious ideologies. The region also has not developed adequate institutional mechanisms and normative frameworks for solving its myriad security challenges collectively and nonviolently. One result of this is that even when some conflicts are resolved, others emerge in their place, often leading to the continuation of the cycle of violence in other parts of the region.

What explains the chronic insecurity of South Asia? A large set of variables have been presented in the literature for this multifaceted insecurity problem. They include: 1. irreconcilable national identities; 2. lack of political development (i.e., the absence of proper democratic institutions and procedures); 3. weak economies; 4. unsettled territorial disputes; and 5. lack of regional institutions.<sup>1</sup> While these factors can explain a great amount of the chronic insecurity of the region, especially at the interstate level, we still lack a compelling explanation that can cover substantial ground for the perpetual multidimensional insecurity of South Asia. Most of the literature on South Asian security deals with interstate dimensions; there has been a somewhat

excessive focus on the India-Pakistan rivalry and, in recent years, the nuclear relationship that has emerged between the two states.<sup>3</sup> As a result, scholarly and policy studies of the region's security problem do not treat it in a way that captures its multidimensionality or the relationship between internal, interstate, and human security dimensions.

I argue that South Asia's multidimensional insecurity can be explained largely by two critical factors: *the presence of weak states* and *weak cooperative interstate norms*. Both state capacity and weak cooperative norms act largely as intervening variables in causing regional insecurity, as they themselves may be caused by other underlying factors, which I do not cover in this chapter. Other chapters in this volume treat more closely the underlying factors for the weak state syndrome, such as difficulties with state formation and state consolidation in South Asia. It should be noted that state strength alone need not alleviate interstate insecurities, but in some instances it may exacerbate them.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the need for states that observe norms of cooperation, nonintervention and territorial integrity is all the more important for regional security. Moreover, state capacity becomes very crucial in dealing with internal security challenges, which tend to generate interstate conflicts, especially in South Asia.

Various estimates of state capacity place South Asian states among the weakest states globally. For instance, five of the South Asian states have entered the twenty-five weakest states in an annual index of 120 countries published by *Foreign Policy* magazine since 2006. These states—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—carry considerable conflicts internally and spillover effects externally.

The region also has weak norms of cooperative behavior. These norms or standards of behavior—often developed through institutional arrangements, as in the case of states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—could provide a compensatory mechanism for preventing violent conflicts even among weak states. In South Asia, what is noticeable is a paucity of nonintervention norms. In other words, the states in the region are not often willing to live by the imperatives of the territorial status quo, as they exhibit characteristics of revisionism to varying degrees. Moreover, internally, states tend not to have highly effective mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of conflicts through democratic means, generating opportunities for disgruntled groups to engage in violent conflicts that are also tempting targets for external intervention. Nevertheless, states in South Asia are exceptionally

sensitive to the norms of sovereignty and sovereign equality, even when they do not fully believe in respecting the sovereignty of their neighbors.

### What Is a Weak State?

Before discussing weak states, it is important to examine state capacity, a topic that has received considerable attention in the sociology and comparative politics literatures. I define state capacity as “the ability of a state to develop and implement policies in order to provide collective goods such as security, order, and welfare to its citizens in a legitimate and effective manner untrammelled by internal or external actors.” This definition modifies a view of a coercive state as a strong state by adding welfare and legitimacy factors into the mix of attributes for determining capacity. In the contemporary world, a proper democratic system may be essential for a state to have legitimacy. This definition draws from the existing scholarship on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

At the most general level, a weak state is a state low in capacity, defined in terms of its ability to carry out its objectives with adequate societal support.<sup>5</sup> Since this definition draws together characteristics of the state apparatus itself and its relationship to societal actors, scholars have identified many different phenomena that indicate the general concept of capacity. According to Robert Rotberg, a weak state suffers from deficiencies in the areas of (a) security (i.e., the state security forces, both military and police, are unable to provide basic security to all citizens in a legitimate and effective manner); (b) participation (open participation is limited as elections, if they take place at all, may not be fair and impartial); and (c) infrastructure (the physical infrastructure of the state is in very poor condition while health and literacy are accorded low levels of national priority).<sup>6</sup> A weak state, according to Kal Holsti, suffers from low levels or the absence of “vertical” and “horizontal” legitimacy. The former implies that “substantial segments of the population do not accord the state or its rulers loyalty.” The result is that the decisions and decrees of state rulers do not elicit “habitual compliance.” An absence of horizontal legitimacy refers to the definition and political role of the community; that is, there is “no single community whose members, metaphorically speaking, have signed a social contract among themselves. Instead, there are numerous communities and categories that shape the nature of politics and authority structures.”<sup>7</sup>

A weak state by its very nature is unable to provide sufficient levels of protection to all its citizens. Sometimes political or military elites have the

wherewithal to acquire wealth and develop capacity in some kinds of coercive instruments. But the ruling elite often lacks legitimate authority and control in much of the country and frequently will have to engage in brute force to suppress dissidence among disenfranchised ethnic or political groups. Possessing some capacity distinguishes this kind of situation from one in which the central government has no coercive resources at all. But this suppression neither creates peace nor increases the support base of the regime. The absence of legitimacy and the full allegiance of population are major chronic challenges that a weak state would face.<sup>8</sup>

The characterization of weakness has to be seen in relative terms, as most states have some elements of strength. A state may be weak in some areas while in others it may show relative strength. That is why not all weak states are “failed states.”<sup>9</sup> For instance, Pakistan has a fairly strong army for waging external wars, and to that extent it is able to provide a measure of security to its citizens against external threats, particularly vis-à-vis India, but it is weak in almost all other aspects of state strength. Moreover, we frequently find the pattern that a state has a modicum of coercive resources but lacks the ability to provide welfare and the legitimacy required for long-run stability—a kind of “strength” that “is ultimately based on fear, force, and coercion rather than on consent or voluntary compliance. It therefore suffers from a legitimacy deficit.”<sup>10</sup>

### *A Typology of Weak States*

Based on the above discussion, four types of weak states can be identified for the South Asian region: failed states, very weak states, weak states, and strong-weak states.

#### ***Failed State:***

This is a state that has failed in all crucial aspects of state strength: security, welfare, and legitimacy. Such a state may have limited control over the territory it contains. It depends heavily on foreign financial and military support for its daily existence. Afghanistan is the closest case in South Asia, as it survives largely through external support and has limited or no control over vast chunks of its territory.

#### ***Very Weak (Fragile) State:***

Such a state has somewhat better control over its territory, but this control is tenuous, especially since it is coupled with a lack of legitimacy and an inability to provide welfare. In South Asia, Nepal comes closest to this category.

**Weak State:**

The weak state may be weak in legitimacy, welfare, and ultimately security, but it has substantial coercive power. Due to its lopsided coercive capacity, it would use force to suppress internal dissidence but in the end not become much stronger. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh come under this category.

**Strong-Weak State:**

The state is strong in several aspects, especially in its legitimacy and control over most parts of the country. It is weak in terms of its ability to provide welfare and internal security. However, over time such a state exhibits the highest prospects for emerging as a strong state, given its advantages in legitimacy. India typifies such a state in South Asia.

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These categories are only for analytical purposes, and they need not capture all the nuances in assessing state strength. A state could move periodically from a very weak to a weak category and return to the former subsequently. The crucial point here is that all states in South Asia are weak in many dimensions of state strength and that the relationship between state capacity and security, broadly conceived, is complex and multidimensional.

### How Weak States Affect Security: Causal Linkages

Weak states contribute to insecurity in multiple ways.<sup>11</sup> It would be circular to define state weakness in terms of an inability to provide security and then see state weakness as a *cause* of insecurity. But a focus on state weakness helps bring out some interesting dimensions of insecurity challenges. In particular, weak states can face dilemmas in seeking to become strong, and state weakness sets up complex, multidimensional security challenges. First, weak states cannot often face internal security threats effectively, as they have poorly developed police and internal security forces. Facing a “state-strength dilemma,” rulers of these states attempt to increase their capabilities and presence, which “generates resistance that weakens the state. In attempts to overcome resistance, governments rely on coercive measures against local power centers of various types, as well as against communal/religious/ethnic groups.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, weak states have limited national institutional capacity to tackle security challenges effectively.<sup>13</sup> This generates personalist and ad hoc approaches to security threats, especially internal ones.

Second, secessionist and irredentist groups tend to operate from weak states and threaten the security and integrity of neighboring states. In such contexts, irredentism, which may combine with secessionism, is especially a problem, given that the same ethnic group may inhabit two neighboring states, and their allegiance to one or both states is often questionable.<sup>14</sup> Insurgents and terrorist groups could be tacitly or openly promoted by state elites or leaders of ethnic groups sympathetic to the cause of their co-nationals.

Third, regimes in weak states sometimes externalize internal conflicts to strengthen their domestic positions. The expectation is that diversionary wars or crises would distract popular attention from internal economic, social, and political problems while bringing legitimacy to the regime that engages in such activities. This would be supported by military, bureaucratic, and political institutions that thrive on such conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Engaging in external conflict can also allow a state to successfully pander to key interest groups. The actions they undertake would create negative security externalities or spillover effects for others, causing intensified security dilemmas not only in the traditional area of military security but in nontraditional domains such as human security.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, weak states offer fertile grounds for external powers, especially major powers, to meddle in their regions either as coalition partners or as sympathizers to antagonistic internal groups. The pathologies and behavioral attributes of weak states thus generate regional insecurity at the interstate, intrastate, and human dimensions.

How does South Asia fit into this characterization of weak states' insecurity dilemma? Before addressing this issue, I examine the chief characteristics of the South Asian region.

### South Asian Subsystem Characteristics

A region is a geographical cluster of states that are proximate to each other and thus are interconnected in spatial and cultural terms. This interconnectedness may manifest itself in strong security and, in some instances, economic ties. William R. Thompson defines a region as "a set of countries that are or perceive themselves to be politically interdependent," or as "patterns of relations or interactions within a geographic area that exhibit a particular degree of regularity and intensity to the extent that a change at one point in the system affects another point."<sup>17</sup> The states in a system thus interact regularly in a variety of ways, creating patterns of intricate relationships. David Lake

defines a regional system as “a set of states affected by at least one transborder but local externality that emanates from a particular geographic area. If the local externality poses an actual or potential threat to the physical safety of individuals or governments in other states, it produces a regional security system or complex.”<sup>18</sup> A regional subsystem has also been said to generate a set of “security complexes” which “rest, for the most part, on the interdependence of rivalry rather than on the interdependence of shared interests.”<sup>19</sup>

The definitions of region and regional security complex that rely exclusively on states suffer from problems, as they tend to offer very traditional approaches to the understanding of a regional subsystem. The main focus in such analyses is the interactions among states in an anarchic system, where the assumption is that states are the pivotal actors and have the capacity to engage in intense competition or rivalry. However, a regional subsystem can include both state- and societal-level interactions and insecurities.<sup>20</sup> Employing the lens of the state to view all the security problems of a given region may fail to capture the independent role of nonstate actors as players in security affairs.

Despite this major problem, the scholarship on regional subsystems has relevance to South Asia. Conflict and cooperation patterns in the regional subsystem may be a reflection of the particular interdependencies and externalities of the interconnected states as well as societal groups. The South Asian region has some subsystemic characteristics as well as different clusters of relationships that cannot be placed neatly under a systemic framework. Most of the South Asian states emerged in the decolonization era, and the two principal actors—India and Pakistan—underwent a bloody partition during that process. Although variations can be seen in the levels of state capacity (India with the highest and Afghanistan the lowest), almost all of the eight countries of South Asia are weak states with strong societies. They all have experienced difficulties with state formation and consolidation. State and nation are incongruent in these countries.<sup>21</sup>

The region is geographically and demographically India-centric, given that nearly 70 percent of the land mass and population lie with India; hence it is also called the Indian sub-continent. The region is also characterized by multitudes of divisions, based on religious, ethnic, and other identities. Though India-centric, South Asia cannot be described as a hegemonic subsystem, although India can exert quite a bit of influence over the smaller states such as Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal. Part of the reason for this lack of hegemony is the unwillingness of key states to accept Indian leadership, let alone dominance on

many issues. The region is not economically interdependent, and as a result a potential source of power that India could exert is missing. Unlike the Americas, where most of the smaller states have implicitly accepted U.S. hegemony in return for economic benefits and implicit or explicit security guarantees, South Asian states (barring tiny Bhutan and Maldives) neither have developed such a relationship with India nor do they have potential to do so in the near future. The newly emerging states are hypersensitive about their sovereignty, a theme that I will address later in this chapter.<sup>22</sup> More than that, India has yet to become overwhelmingly preponderant in the security and economic arenas, a development that may take place in a few decades given the country's recent rapid economic growth. The normative dispositions of most of the states are not quite congruent with the Indian ethos of democracy or secularism, lessening its power over the smaller neighbors. In many respects, these small states want to create a national identity dissimilar to India's.

### Weak States and Conflict Patterns in South Asia

The South Asian states generally exhibit weaknesses in terms of their ability to deal with security, including economic and human dimensions. However, they do carry considerable lopsided coercive power, as evidenced in the near impossibility of secession for disgruntled regions.<sup>23</sup> Secession might also have become difficult due to the unwillingness of outside powers to offer recognition and possibly due to the emergence of a territorial integrity norm in international politics.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that secessionist movements will simply fade away, as states appear unable to completely quell or integrate the groups clamoring for independence.

The security problems in the region have three key dimensions: interstate, intrastate, and human security. These three types of conflicts are interrelated and are influenced by the way the people and governments of the region interact. The weak state problem affects security at these three levels. At the interstate level, the India-Pakistan rivalry is the largest conflict. It has escalated to three major wars (1947–48, 1965, and 1971), one minor war (1999), and nine interstate crises.<sup>25</sup> The acquisition of nuclear weapons by the two states, especially in the aftermath of their nuclear tests in May 1998, has created a sort of deterrent relationship, marred by a stability-instability paradox, that is, some stability at the strategic level but instability at the substrategic level. Since 2004, the nuclear-armed neighbors have engaged in peace negotiations,

but chances look dim for a final termination of the rivalry or the settlement of the key issues dividing them in the near term. The Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict is yet another interstate conflict with strong internal dimensions. India and Bangladesh have a conflict over unsettled borders, although its intensity is not too strong. These interstate conflicts generate internal security challenges and in turn human security problems for a large number of people, especially ethnic minorities living on both sides of the border.

The intrastate conflicts are numerous and highly visible, and I discuss some of them below for each country. Here I want to highlight terrorism as one important kind of crossover between the intrastate and interstate security challenges. According to estimates, South-Central Asia registered one of the highest rates of terrorist attacks in 2007 and several previous years.<sup>26</sup> The Afghan conflict; the rise of the Taliban; Pakistan's past support for the Taliban and continued support for the Kashmir insurgency; and the active presence of terrorist cells in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh all denote a *mélange* of groups engaging in violent terrorist activity in the region for more than two decades. Terrorist incidents are becoming more frequent, and states appear unable to quell them, partly due to weak police and intelligence capabilities. Some terrorist groups indeed are challenging any move toward full democratic rule and any semblance of secular policies.

Human security implies people's freedom from both violent and non-violent threats. For human security advocates, people are the point of reference, in a departure from the national security state's focus on the security of territory or governments. Ensuring human security entails taking preventive measures to reduce vulnerability and minimize risk and taking remedial actions when violations take place.<sup>27</sup> Pervasive threats to human security constitute one of the region's most significant challenges. A low emphasis on human security in the region is tied to the historical underdevelopment of South Asia, its highly unequal social order, its multitudes of ethnic divisions as well as caste and class divisions, and the poor economic policies pursued by the governments of the region over the years. Although with increased economic growth rates some human security problems can be tackled, what is noticeable is that the reverse appears to be happening in a large segment of South Asia. Economic globalization and liberalization may indeed accentuate human security problems unless states become strong and are able to implement policies aimed at reducing the social dislocations that accompany these economic trends.