



NIAS-IPRI Brief

State of Peace and Conflict in South Asia in 2021

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Introduction

The South Asian region (the Indian sub-continent as it is popularly known) offers an interesting case to investigate the state of conflict and peace. The paradoxes of its visible diversities in terms of governance systems of respective nation-states yet, the historical and cultural commonalities of the region make the case for investigation interesting. The close connections among the states in terms of sharing territories, people-to-people contacts, and historical ties often find the conflicts in a particular state having their implications at the bilateral and regional levels. Despite the differences in the governance systems, one finds some common threads in terms of the nature of conflicts that the South Asian states witness. The disagreements on the nature and functioning of democracies, assertion of identity politics, and the prevalence of violent extremism (in its multiple forms) are some of the major forms of conflicts one can observe as commonality among the South Asian states. This brief intends to reflect upon the theme of the 'state of conflict and peace in South Asia' for the year 2021. In doing so, I limit the investigation to the major developments in 2021. Given the limitation of the size of the paper, I may be excused for not being able to cover the entire range of conflicts and the peace process that have taken place during this year. Accordingly, the brief begins with highlighting the major developments in various states in South Asia and offers a critical analysis in terms of their implications at the national, bilateral, and regional levels. The next section identifies and makes sense of the trends and the issues of conflicts and peace processes in South Asia. The last section of the brief offers a forecast in terms of analyzing what would be the scenario in the next year.

Violent Incidents, Protests, and Extreme Apprehensions: Major Developments in 2021

The major developments covering the state of conflict and peace in South Asia can be categorized around three broader perspectives of violent incidents, popular protests against the existing regimes and policies, and extreme apprehensions among the citizens induced by political instabilities. The available data provided by South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) shows that in the year 2021 (till December 4, 2021) the region witnessed 1666 violent incidents which killed 9533 people (civilians, security forces, and militants). The majority of these cases are mostly confined to the states of

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Talking about the violent incidents as an important form of conflict, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan can be considered as a major development. Such a development has its critical implications not only on the state of Afghanistan but also on the entire region as well. As the US and NATO declared a complete pull out of their forces from the land of Afghanistan, the violent march of the Taliban in seizing territories and taking the state of affairs to complete control was rather unexpectedly fast and worrisome. Once the state of Afghanistan has come under full control, the Taliban continues to brutally crackdown through its Ministry of Promotion of virtue and Prevention of Vice to enforce prohibitions on the practices deemed 'un-Islamic'. Continuing its legacy, the Taliban has restricted the freedom of women and only permits women's education in gender-segregated classrooms and wearing Islamic attire. The newly established Islamic Emirate by the Taliban is seen as a victory of radical Islam and is considered to be a threat to the neighboring countries as the like-minded groups seem to be influenced by this.

The impact of the Taliban can be directly visible with the anti-state activities by terrorist groups like the Tehreek-E-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) and the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). While the presence and activities of the terrorist groups in carrying forward the state activities and subverting them as well are never new in Pakistan, the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has certainly strengthened the activities of these groups. For example, the ban imposed on the TLP- a far-right Islamist organization- has been lifted by the present government after months-long violent protests by the former. Back in India, the Kashmir valley witnessed terrorist attacks by a newly formed organization, The Resistance Force (TRF). After the abrogation of Article 370 and the split of the former state into two union territories in August 2019, Jammu, and Kashmir (J&K) witnessed a relative peace for a short period of a year or so. While many attributed the uneasy peace in the valley to the fatigue factor among the radicalized youth, the Taliban factor has believed to have substantially contributed to the rise of TRF. Apart from the religious violent incidents, the Indian state also continues to witness violent activities carried out by the Communist Party of India-Maoist (Maoist in short) and by the various militant groups operating in some of the Northeastern states.

The protests demanding the change of a regime or against a particular policy by existing governments were witnessed in many countries in South Asia. In India, the year-long farmers' protest demanding the revocation of three farm laws enacted by the existing National Democratic Alliance-2 (NDA-2) was a major conflict between the Union Government and a section of the farmer-citizens. While the Government has repealed the law in November, this section of the farmer citizens continues to protest demanding a guarantee on more legislation in their favor. While the former protest has been able to create a discourse around it and has been much discussed in media and policy circles alike, there are some important but overlooked protests mostly by the marginalized sections of the society. The tribal and other marginalized groups in the Central and Eastern states of India, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, have been protesting against state policies that are perceived to be a major threat to their rights and entitlements, and their survival. Unfortunately, these protests as major conflicts in society are hardly highlighted through a discourse. On the other hand, Pakistan, despite its murky experience with democracy, witnessed civil protest against the existing regime. The year 2021 witnessed massive and popular protests against the Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaf (PTI) government led by Imran Khan. Termed unprecedented, the

protests by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiat-Ulema-Islam reflect upon multiple grievances of the people that range from poor governance, foreign policy, and the rise of extremism in Pakistan state. These protests have also been vocal against the present government's policies in supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in which Pakistan has been an important ally.

The violent incidents and the protests have contributed substantially to extreme apprehensions among the people of the region. With the political power changing hands in Afghanistan and the optics of civilians' struggling for basic human rights under the Taliban the fundamental aspects of human rights and survival comes in conflict with ideas of freedom, equality, liberty, and fraternity. However, in the case of states like Nepal, the apprehension among the citizens is not really because of the existence of violence but because of political instability and lack of governance during an unprecedented pandemic period. Despite having a new constitution and relatively peaceful environment for one and half decades following a bloody civil war by the Maoists, the state of Nepal continues to wait for political stability that would ensure the rights and entitlements of its citizens through governance. The over-ambitious political parties and a manufactured divide between the political elites in the Terai and the Hilly regions have been the important factors for political instability in Nepal. The change of governments before completing their tenures (the latest being the change of government led by K P Oli to Sher Bahadur Dubey) testifies such instabilities. These major developments in the states of South Asia call for identifying the issues and the trends around which they function.

Issues and Trends

One of the main issues leading to conflicts in South Asia is violent extremism. It will be safe to argue that barring Bhutan, all South Asian states have been victims of violent extremism in multiple ways. From the existing body of definitional frameworks, one can conclude that violent extremism initiates, condones, and carries out violence as a method to further religious political, social, and national interests. In a South Asian context, violent extremism has its deep root in history. In the present context, we observe the consolidation of the extremist groups as they increasingly get their legitimacy through garnering social support. Violent extremism in South Asia can be observed in three major forms: religious, ideological, and ethnic. Arguably, the Islamist radical forces dominate the religious violent extremism discourse. Religious violent extremism, especially the Islamist ones, operate through two dominant ways; assertion of a particular version of Islam where they are majority and legitimization of violence through victim card in the places where they are a minority. However, in both cases, intolerance towards the people following other religions exhibited openly with motives to cause harm and eliminate the perceived opponents. In 2021 we have witnessed such violent religious extremism in terms of lynching foreign workers, destroying religious establishments of the minority Hindus and Sikhs in the states of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Similarly, In India, we have also observed an open call for the beheading of a Hindu priest by a section of Islamist extremists.

Apart from the religious violent extremism, violent extremism influenced by Maoist thoughts has been a serious threat in India. The Maoists, as they are widely known, continued to carry out violent activities killing the security forces and the civilians. Though the Maoist-related violent activities have come down drastically, it remains a

major conflict as the idea of the use of violence against the state continues to be celebrated. Similarly, some of the states of India's Northeast witness ethnic extremism. It is important to highlight that, in 2021, we have observed the alliance among the fringe ethnic militant groups in Manipur and Nagaland in carrying out militancy. The case of the Singat ambush in Manipur on November 13 is a good example.

Violent extremism does not necessarily confine its scope in inducing domestic conflicts. In the South Asian context, it has serious implications on disturbing bilateral relations and thereby contributing to bilateral conflicts. The lynching of a Sri Lankan worker in Sialkot, Pakistan, The Hefazat-E-Islam led anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh following the Indian Prime Minister's visit in March 2021 have substantially contributed to bilateral mistrust. Moreover, violent extremism, in the South Asian context, unfortunately, has been condoned by some state machinery to further its national interest.

Secondly, the assertion of identity politics has been an important issue of conflict in the South Asian states. Not confined to merely the religious sphere, assertive identity politics covers a host of factors like region, ethnicity, ideology, and nationalities. Grievances and demands around assertive identities often induce competing group formation leading to both implicit and explicit conflicts. The demands for greater autonomy by the ethnic Nagas, Kukis, Bodos (to name a few) in the Northeastern states of India continued their assertive identity conflicts. Similarly, the demands by the rebelling Balochi nationals for autonomy and the systematic annihilation of the Baloch nationals by the Pakistan Security forces have been a disturbing testimony of identity conflict in Pakistan. Going by the figures of Human Rights Councils of Balochistan (HRCB) in 2021 (till November 10) 301 Balochi nationals have disappeared and 298 civilians have been killed by the Pakistan army. We have also witnessed such violent identity conflicts in Bangladesh between the radical Islamist forces and the minority Hindus. In Sri Lanka, the identity conflict refuses to die down among the minority Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the ruling Buddhist majority. As mentioned before, in Nepal the identity conflict has been in terms of regional identities (Pahadi and Madheshi). The conflicts induced by assertive identity politics also critically reflect upon the state of democracy in South Asian states.

The status and the functioning of democracy have been an important issue around which most of the conflicts have functioned in South Asia. It is interesting to note that the countries with robust democratic governance mechanisms in place witnessed less violence compared to the countries with fragile democratic systems. The case of Afghanistan and Pakistan with their fragile and vulnerable democratic governance mechanism witnessed massive violent conflicts. India with a strong and stable democracy, on the other hand, witnessed several protests against the ruling regime and some of its policies. However, these protests remained largely peaceful within the democratic rights of the citizens. While Nepal is yet to experience a stable government, its experience with democracy has been rather impressive. Despite some sort of political instability, we did not observe major violent incidents in Nepal in 2021. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's experience with democracy has not been encouraging in 2021. The fall of the democratically elected government to the Taliban terror has been a cause of concern to the entire region. The Sri Lankan case has been a conflict between majoritarian democracy and minority grievances. While Bangladesh, under the Awami League government, continues to consolidate its position, the visible fault line between

the democratic forces and the religious extremists offers a conflictual situation and a matter of concern. Drawing from these experiences, one can argue that democracy (both as a governance mechanism and value system) has completely deteriorated in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. At the same time, countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal look promising. Having discussed the issues and the trends of conflicts in South Asia, the last section of the brief offers a forecast of the future course of conflict and peace in the region.

Forecast for 2022

Drawing from the dynamics of conflicts in the previous years, one can safely argue that there won't be a drastic change in 2022. However, the change of a regime in a particular country might alter the nature of the conflict. The issues of violent extremism and assertive identity politics will continue to dominate the conflict landscape in most of South Asia. In India, the Maoist violence in Central and Eastern India and the ethnic conflicts in Northeastern states will remain a major cause of concern. Though several militant groups in the Northeast are already part of the ongoing peace process with the government, the absence of any visible positive outcome of these processes raises questions on the state of peace in this region. As the peace processes with various militant groups fail to deliver leading to the emergence of newer and smaller militant groups, the sustainability of conflict in 2022 should not be doubted. Similarly, unless the government initiates a dialogue with the Maoists, Central and Eastern India will continue to witness conflict as well. The emergence of TRF in carrying out terror activities against the civilians and security forces, the involvement of Pakistan, and the influence of Taliban victory in Afghanistan will have direct implications on the conflict in J&K.

In the case of Pakistan, one should not expect radical changes in the conflict landscape in Pakistan. The deep roots of the extremist forces will be difficult to be uprooted even if the present regime of Imran Khan gets replaced by the protesting 'democratic forces. the vicious nexus among the political elite, army, and extremist forces, and the poverty and debt trap will not allow altering the nature of conflict in Pakistan in 2022. However, given the present situation in Pakistan, one can expect the addition of new stakeholders to the ongoing conflict.

In the case of Afghanistan, the course of the conflict in 2022, arguably, will involve extremist forces like the Taliban and ISIS-K. Such a conflict will be on the issue of proving more radical than the other. The people supporting democracy will have a very little scope and political power to take on the extremist forces. Deprived of peace and basic human rights, Afghanistan will continue to be under the control of the Taliban.

Despite its economic growth Bangladesh will continue to witness the conflict between the liberal democratic forces and the radical Islamist groups. The organizations like the Jammāt-e-Islami-Bangladesh (JeI-B) and Hefazat-E-Islam with their robust social base will continue to mobilize their supporters in furthering their agenda. The rise of a new phase of JMB is going to be a concern for Bangladesh.

In the case of Nepal, one does not see any major violent conflict in 2022. However, the regional divide between the Pahadi and Madheshi will be a major conflict unless the

country works on the personal political ambitions of the leaders that often leads to political instability.