Regional Conflict Resolution Mechanism for South Asia - A Primer

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Introduction

   Post Post-Cold War international system poses new challenges especially with changes in the strategic interest of superpowers and their allies who have become less concerned with the developing world. Some of these nations are economically weak and have to depend solely on external resources[1]. The mode of exploitation and management of these resources brings about contest resulting in divisiveness and conflicts. These conflicts are not only between states but also increasingly within states, with some being fuelled by external forces or even neighbours over various issues as natural resources, boundaries, identity and so on. It is not that these intra-state conflicts did not exist before but are resulting in great humanitarian crises, which attract the intervention of the international community especially the UN after the Cold war.[2] The numerous demands on the United Nations, as well as its strained capacity in maintaining inter-national peace and security in the post-Cold War era, constitute further reasons to increase the role of regional organisations.[3] It is in this regard that regional and sub-regional organisations need to be considered as useful instruments for conflict management and resolution. In the words of former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali:

   "... In this new era of opportunity, regional arrangements or agencies can render great service ... the Security Council has and will continue to have primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, but regional action as a matter of decentralisation, delegation and cooperation with the United Nations could not only lighten the burden of the Council, but also contribute to a deeper sense of participation, consensus and democratisation in international affairs".[4]

   Regional Organisations developed in Europe after the Second World War and subsequently in other parts of the world, have become major players in international relations. What began as economic integration is now stretching to the concept of pan-Europeanism and the like politically, as in the case of the European Union (EU) while strategic and economic imperatives have shaped the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Regional security organisations that catered to the strategic,

geographical and military concerns like the NATO, SEATO and the Warsaw Pact also existed during the Cold War period.

The world is also seeking new and novel methods of negotiation and resolution of long-standing disputes in different regions and succeeding in quite a few. Of the various methods used for resolution of disputes is the international intervention by the United Nations or other bodies and the mode of bilateral negotiation. In this, regional organisations are also playing an important role. In areas like South Asia there is a growing need to revive, rejuvenate and resurrect, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to resolve the festering Indo Pak dispute.

The term 'regional cooperation' and 'regional organisation' are loosely used to describe some form of inter-state associations without any universally accepted definition. They differ in their founding principles, sizes, geographical composition, values, orientation and historical dynamism, which has made their definition largely imprecise. Yet, with the end of Cold War some of these organisations came to be associated with security issues. This made scholars like Barry Buzan to label them as "Regional Security Complexes", which he defined in terms of 'pattern of amity and enmity that are substantially confined within some geographical area' resting 'for the most part on the interdependence of rivalry rather than the interdependence of shared interests'.[5] This definition is most appropriate because of its applicability to the varying tendencies and dynamism characterising the mode of existence and operation of these organisations. While adopting the above definition the terms regional organisation and cooperation will also be used interchangeably too in this study because of their flexibility and for the fact that they are well known and accepted.

In the absence of a bilateral initiative or failure of bilateral attempts to peace, the use of regional organisations instead of global actors is of paramount importance. Regional Organisations like the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) or Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have successfully mediated between nations and brought out lasting peace. The same method can be followed to search for a settlement to the problem if not actually settling the issue that has dogged the Indian peninsula for more than half a century.

Woes of SAARC

The weakness of the South Asian Association for regional Cooperation (SAARC) is that it has not been used as a forum for discussing political and contentious issues. Even in the areas of economic upliftment and social development SAARC has achieved little tangible results. "The time has come for the SAARC not to shy away from becoming a forum for discussions on political issues which afflict the countries in the region".[6] The fact that the Indo-Pak dispute is continuing for the past 55 years with no permanent solution in sight says a lot about the peace building and confidence making efforts that

have been undertaken. The numerous unilateral efforts at ceasefire or offer of talks have often ended in disappointment followed by a period of intense tension and warlike situation.[7] So, multilateral arrangements might be looked into. Here SAARC suffers immensely. Even under the stipulated clauses of SAARC, the Indo-Pak rivalry and distrust compounded with the fears of strengthening of India's dominance have prevented fuller realisation of organisational benefits.[8] Thus it has even been suggested that the states of the region must look for extra regional arrangements, as the SAARC has been made virtually obsolete by the Indo-Pakistan intransigence.

Other suggestions include the proposal for a South Asian Parliament put forward by a former federal minister of Pakistan, Javed Jabbar. This includes an equitably shared all-party forum that gives proper weightage to demography and difference of opinion and functions as "a permanent and comprehensive framework for a continuous exchange of facts and opinions between the elected and political representatives of the people".[9] Not- withstanding this idea, it is proposed that SAARC could be made a platform for bringing pressure on the member states to put their political relations in order lest the goal of regional economic integration and development, the basic goal of SAARC be fulfilled.

Also by studying similar regional organisations and their approach to peace making and conflict resolution one can obtain a fair idea of a source for a South Asian mechanism for lasting peace. The cases to be taken are ASEAN and its role in resolving the Cambodian issue and ECOWAS and its peace efforts in Liberia. The reasons for choosing these conflicts are two pronged. One, the intensity of violence and the effect on national life has been significant also, the conflicts have their genesis in post-colonial eras. If generalisations can be drawn and factors compared the road map to South Asian peace could be drawn.

Calming Cambodia

Intra-state conflict erupted in Cambodia after the Vietnamese invasion in 1978 to overthrow the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and restore the pro-Vietnam regime of Heng-Samrin, and rename the country People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The main reason for the invasion was geo strategic as the overthrown Khmer Rouge regime was regarded as a surrogate and bridgehead for Chinese influence in the Indo-China area, which was a threat to Vietnam. This culminated into a civil war in Cambodia lasting two decades with the active support and involvement of external actors.[10]

Thailand spearheaded the opposition to Vietnam's invasion and tried to mobilise the ASEAN to sanction Vietnam.[11] It was the Vietnamese attack of the Khmer Seri camp that convinced the ASEAN neighbours of the threat posed by Vietnam. Thailand 's fears and opposition coincided with that of China who was concerned of its ally being

overthrown and Vietnamese increasing power in the region. China henceforth started to provide military support to the Khmer Rouge, which was sent through Thailand.

In 1982 the Khmer Rouge and two other factions namely the united front for Independence, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) led by Prince Sihanouk and Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Hun Seng, agreed to form a coalition government in exile known as Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) to jointly fight the Vietnamese backed regime in Cambodia and secure international recognition. The group was supported by ASEAN, the US and its allies, which enabled the CGDK to retain Cambodia's seat in the   UN.[12]

Several meetings between the parties failed to reach an agreement mainly due to the non-participation of the Vietnamese and the refusal of the other parties to come to the negotiating table without the presence of the Vietnamese. Even talks between Prince Sihanouk and Hun Seng broke on the issue of dismantling the tripartite and forming a four party coalition until the election was organised under international supervision.[13] After these failed attempts the Indonesian government initiated an informal meeting between parties twice in July 1988 and again in 1989. However, these talks too broke down with the parties maintaining their original stance and the PKC government rejecting elections under international supervision and interim government.[14]

At the Paris Conference of August 1989 all the parties directly involved in the conflict and their external supporters met alongside international players and the permanent members of the UNSC. The conference succeeded in identifying clear issues in the conflict. Subsequent series of meetings between 1989-1991 namely the informal meeting on Cambodia (IMC) in February and September 1990 and the Tokyo meting of June 1990 led to the establishment of the Supreme National Council (SNC) as a symbol of Cambodian national sovereignty and unity and included all four parties. Between June and October 1991 the SNC agreed to end the war. The Second Paris Conference and Peace agreement of October 1991 mandated the UNSC to set up the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to implement the peace agreement during the transitional period until after general elections.[15]

Liber(ty)ia?

Liberia in West Africa was the first country to be independent in the African continent in 1947, after being granted independence by USA. After independence the Americo-Liberians (freed slaves brought by America to found the colony) gradually excluded the African nationality groups from political power and suppressed and marginalised them. This created widespread disaffection, which culminated in a military coup organised by non commissioned officers from the indigenous African nationality groups led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe in 1980.

The Doe regime was characterised by monopolisation of political power, corruption, internal dissension and repression of not only his opponents but also people belonging to the nationality groups of his opponents. This drove many into exile where some received training and arms to attempt effecting a regime in Liberia in 1989 through armed invasion that degenerated into war.

Doe's army AFL of Krahn nationality engaged in war with Charles Taylor led NPFL or National Patriotic Front of Liberia with Gio and Mano tribes and from 1990 with Prince Y. Johnson led Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia INPFL. Afterwards, the war became a many sided one with increasing factionalism and formation of groups eager to forcibly control territories.

In May 1991, Doe offered elections in 1991, which he would not contest, amnesty to NPFL members and formation of a broad based government including NPFL members but this was rejected. Following this, the Inter Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) consisting of Muslim and Christian bodies proposed ceasefire, disarmament, establishment of an interim govt and elections in June 1990, which was also rejected by the NPFL.[16]

With a virtual collapse of the state of Liberia atrocities on all sides and refugee crisis in the West African region, the Economic Community of African States (ECOWAS), which had a protocol on mutual assistance in defence matters since 1981, decided to intervene on the invitation of Doe. ECOWAS called for ceasefire, formation of an ECOWAS Monitoring Group ECOMOG, a national conference of all Liberians and elections in 1991. This was rejected first but in August 1990 the ECOWAS successfully conducted the all-Liberian national conference that was boycotted by NPFL. In spite of this the NPFL was offered six cabinet positions in the interim govt of national Unity led by Dr Amos Sawyer.

Shortly before this a 2500 strong force drawn from Gambia, Ghana, guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone was deployed to Monrovia and mandated to maintain, enforce and monitor the ceasefire, protect lives and property, maintain essential services provide security for the interim administration, observe elections and conduct normal policing.[17]

But the NPFL forces confronted ECOMOG who had to fight its way into Liberia to check the excesses of the various factions to allow negotiations. The ECOMOG forced the NPFL to the negotiating table in November 1990 to sign the Bamako accord. ECOWAS was involved in the negotiations till the second Abuja accord on 17 August 1996, which ushered in the elections, won by Charles Taylor and restoration of law and order in 1997.

Case Studies

In order to draw some generalisations the following questions are framed and examined.

Does

1) the existence of a regional mechanism affect or influence the state of conflict,

2) the involvement of external actors assist the success of regional organisations in resolving conflicts,

3) the existence of hegemons or regional powers play a role in the success or otherwise of regional organisations in conflict resolution

4) the formal nature of regional conflict resolution mechanism affect success of conflict resolution process.

Table 1 shows the existence and involvement of a regional mechanism in the form of regional organisations has resulted in either resolving the conflict or lowering the degree of tension.

Even though it may be argued that ASEAN was not the only actor that helped resolve the Cambodian issue, ASEAN initiated the intervention and mediation by securing the involvement of the international community. ASEAN succeeded in using the UN to condemn the Vietnamese violation of international laws. ASEAN's initial aggressive attitude and mobilisation of regional and international community against Vietnam was realised to be a bad strategy. This was later changed and ASEAN adopted the approach of initiating many dialogues involving all parties, though no agreement was reached it succeeded in bringing the parties together, which facilitated mediation and started the conflict resolution process.

ECOWAS in response to request from the Doe regime and instability in the sub region, initiated and wholly funded the management and mediation of the Liberian conflict up till 1993 when the OAU and UN started providing support to augment efforts of ECOWAS. The ECOWAS initiated and was involved in all aspects of peace enforcement, peacekeeping, media-tion, negotiation, disarmament, administration, policing and conduct of elections, which restored peace to Liberia. It can be concluded from table 1 that there exists a correlation between the existence of a regional organisation and the de-escalation of conflicts. However the problem of India-Pakistan remains unresolved and there is no involvement of regional mechanism in the attempts to resolve the conflict.

External actors

The next table shows that external actors were involved in two of the three conflicts that we have examined. Interestingly, by relating tables 1, 2 it can be observed that wherever the external actors work together with regional mechanisms in conflict resolution process it results in lessening of the conflict.

In the case of Cambodia, superpowers can be said to be significant in softening the contextual environment of the conflict by displaying greater flexibility in their own approaches to regional conflict. This is attributed to the rapprochement in US-Soviet and Chinese relations. While the Soviets pressured Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia, China aimed at stopping its military support to Khmer Rouge.

USA on the other hand abandoned non-commie rebel support and announced willingness to negotiate with Vietnam. Other than providing resources to facilitate forums for negotiation the UN also formulated a proposal endorsed by ASEAN for a transitional period in which it played a significant role by establishing the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) that acted as a peace keeping force and organised the election in 1992.[18]

In the case of the Liberian conflict, the OAU and UN pledged moral support thus adding legitimacy to ECOWAS prior to 1994. While lack of such a support earlier prolonged the war, their later involvement augmented ECOWAS' efforts in terms of personnel and material resources. These assisted and hastened the conflict resolution process as it helped to build trust together with providing the necessary instrument of sanction which were employed as well in resolving and ending the conflict.

In Indo-Pak case there has been no initiative from the regional organisation to bring the parties to the negotiating table and the effort of the external actors have not succeeded in pushing the regional organisation to take a bold step. Therefore, it can be concluded that external actors can be facilitators or spoilers in the conflict resolution process.

Regional hegemons in the structure of regional mechanism

It is assumed that powerful states in the structure of regional mechanism or organisations may have an impact on the success of conflict resolution by regional organisations. This is because the powerful states in the region use their power and influence or persuade other minor states in the region to support their policy towards the conflict [19].

Number of Hegemons in the Regional Organisation

In relation to Table 1, Table 3 does not show clearly the involvement of regional hegemons has an impact in conflict resolution of regional organisations. However, it is likely that organisations that have one or more hegemons there might be an impact on the outcome of the conflict resolution process.

In the case of ASEAN despite the involvement of regional hegemons the conflict has only lessened and not resolved. In the case of ECOWAS, Nigeria is the hegemon and its spearheading the resolution of the Liberian crisis affected the effort both positively and negatively. Firstly the rebel group NPFL accused Nigeria of using ECOWAS to prop up Doe's regime and not withhold cooperation but also engage ECOMOG in battles, which disrupted and delayed the peace process. Small states feared Nigeria's intention to be one of domination of the sub region and hence disapproved or were cautious of ECOWAS efforts. These attitudes slowed down and harmed the peace process. Nigeria had to employ diplomacy to change the attitudes and bring these groups into the peace process leading to its resolution. Nigeria also provided the bulk of its military and financial resources for the management and resolution of the conflict. However in the Indo Pak conflict, the presence of two antagonistic hegemons has been largely inimical to the normal functioning of the organisation SAARC.[20] This antagonism is more likely to affect regional conflict resolution mechanism.

Formal Nature of Regional Mechanism and Conflict Resolution

It is often argued that formal nature of a conflict resolution mechanism in regional organisations has considerable impact on outcome of CR process in the region. In contrast informality amongst the organisations we have seen above has had a positive impact on the success of CR process.

However, more studies should be conducted this strong correlation. Swanstorm's study on formality of CR mechanism in regional organisation in the Pacific Rim suggests that such relationships vary in different regions. In his analysis, he found that Asian countries tend to manage better with informality because of the belief that formal arrangement will identify loser.[21] This value tends to influence the decision of conflicting parties' leaders from agreeing with any arrangement that will push them into undesirable corner.

In the Cambodian conflict, this norm is very evident. The Khemr Rouge rejected every proposal that excluded its group from the process, mostly proposed by Vietnam and the Phnom Penh government. The Vietnamese also declined participation in many negotiations due to its understanding that the inclusion of Vietnam equated it with an aggressor.

ECOWAS has no formal conflict management and resolution mechanism apart from the Protocols on non-aggression 1978 and Mutual assistance in defence 1981.[22] ECOWAS intervention was criticised by member states as a violation of sovereignty and illegal and as a result some of the states withheld their support. This forced ECOWAS to seek OAU and UN approval, which was granted retroactively, and the former opposition was neutralised, thereby legitimising ECOWAS operations and assisting the process. In addition, ECOWAS utilised the opportunity of the Liberian conflict and adjoining Sierra Leonian conflict to start the formalisation of its conflict prevention, management and resolution mechanism in 1993 and 1998. The formalisation also helped in the speedy resolution of the conflict. In Indo-Pak case the question of formality or informality does not arise, as there is no effort from the regional organisation at conflict resolution.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that regional organisations are of critical importance to Conflict Resolution and impact greatly on the process. In most cases regional organisations' initiation of conflict management and resolution process assist in the de-escalation of conflict. The comparative study of Cambodia, Liberia and India/Pak conflict studied here before the intervention of external actors. This study confirms Bercovitch and Houston findings that leaders and representative of regional organisation tend to be more successful in mediating the conflict than external actors.[23] This is due to the fact that regional organisations are constituted with common ideals, perspectives and interests. Regional organisations are also expected to be more familiar with their own conflict situation and history. Yet here these do not exist and when members of regional organisation are perceived to be partial or having interest and motives other than those of the organisation, conflict tend to escalate and makes mediation difficult as seen in the cases of Cambodia and Liberia in their initial stages.

The advantage regional organisations tend to have in the successful resolution of conflicts in the region is derived from the nature and character of the regional organisations. Firstly, these are formed by states, which share geographical proximity, which might also share common history and culture. This creates a kind of regional identity in which they come to have common values. This creates understanding and confidence among neighbours. However, this attribute can be distorted by the fact that neighbouring countries are historically hostile.[24] With respect to such a special relationship between regional neighbours, it is also argued that in long-term conflict, prevention and resolution by such regional organisations tend to be more effective in bringing parties together than other forms of international organisation.

For the above reason it can be argued that conflict resolution mechanism is more likely to be successful when created on the basis of regional values and norms. This study also points that issues like formality and informality depend on the region and each have their own way of dealing with situations.

Wallensteen also argues that with regional organisations, small states can assert more influence in the international and regional forums. As a group of nations, a regional organisation will attract more attention politically and economically. In the case of conflict resolution, a group of minor states can act together to resolve regional conflict. ASEAN for instance could mobilise international support for its Vietnam policy resulting in retaining CGDKs seat in the UN and economic sanctions on Vietnam.[25] Likewise did smaller states like Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast exercise influence in ECOWAS forcing Nigeria to employ diplomacy. However this advantage is squandered if the conflicting parties are powerful states in their own right. The example of SAARC where small nations have not been able to exert any influence and their regional organisation is rather being affected by conflict.

Furthermore, external actors also play a significant role either in harming or facilitating resolution of conflict. They can either provide invaluable financial and human resources to the peace process or escalate the conflict and delay the peace process, in the case of a strong interest in the conflict, as seen in Cambodia before the US -Sino-USSR rapprochement when they all supplied military supports to parties of the conflict; or Libya which fuelled the Liberia crisis with arms supply and funding to NPFL which increased its intransigence.

Finally, it can be concluded that regional organisations are very important not only in bringing about cooperation in the region, but also acting as a facilitator in the conflict resolution process. In the case of Indo-Pakistan conflict as bilateral efforts have not yielded dividends so far, regional arrangements like SAARC could take resolution process to new directions. With a common colonial past and cultural ethos, the region is best suited for cooperative efforts. Prominence of smaller states like Sri Lanka or Bangladesh in the regional structure will remove the element of power dictating the resolution process. Dealing with the problem piecemeal by addressing economic and cultural issues might clear the air. The award of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to countries in the region could be a positive sign. Regional conflict mechanism could be the "way out" for South Asia's persisting conflicts provided the existing organisation overcomes its current inertia and dormancy.

Endnotes

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