SOUTH ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SUNIL SONDHI

ABSTRACT

The poor ability of the western studies in international relations to describe and explain, much less predict, the behavior of states in the global South is recognized as one of their primary shortcomings. This in part accounts for the tepid reception that this body of scholarship has received within countries not counted among the great powers. Both academic and policy-making circles in the developing and less developed world are skeptical about a theoretical tradition whose claims to universalism not only ignore them, but also act to reify a global order within which they are destined to draw the short straw.

The South Asian Region exemplifies this breach between contemporary studies in international relations and the multifarious problems besetting states and societies in the global South. Until very recently, the violence and social conflicts found in nearly every country of South Asia were not even on IR's radar screen. In this article I will discuss what contemporary IR scholarship may or may not offer in its treatment of the South Asian Region, and of the armed conflicts the South Asian Region in particular. My analysis will be limited to three issues familiar to the developing world, as seen through the lens of South Asia's current

crisis: the correlation of state weakness with violence and instability, the post-territorial nature of security threats, and the North-South power disparity.

Introduction

Among the multiple critiques of western studies in international relations, their limited relevance for understanding the Third World's place in global affairs has gained increasing attention during the past decade.1 First, the end of the Cold War revealed a more complex world stage with a plurality of actors, problems and interests that had little to do with traditional interstate power relations. September 11 drove home like a sledgehammer the point that the world is about far more than the high politics of Western nations. Today, the poor ability of western studies in international relations to describe and explain, much less predict, the behavior of states in the global South is recognized as one of their primary shortcomings. This in part accounts for the tepid reception that this body of scholarship has received within countries not counted among the great powers. Both academic and policy-making circles in the developing and less developed world are skeptical about a theoretical tradition whose claims to universalism not only ignore them, but also act to reify a global order within which they are destined to draw the short straw.

The South Asian region exemplifies this breach between contemporary studies in international relations and the multifarious problems besetting peripheral states

and societies. Until very recently, the violence and social conflicts found in nearly every state of the South Asian region were not even on IR's radar screen. The decades old armed conflict Sri Lanka, the violent opposition to monarchy in Nepal, massive social protests in Bangladesh, and Pakistan's persistent political and social instability have all been branded domestic issues, and thus not within the purview of systemic IR thinking. Worldwide transformations that have blurred the internal-external dichotomy, however, have prompted some to recognize what has long been common knowledge in the region: local conflicts and problems are completely enmeshed with complex global economic, social and political processes. Pakistan's conflict is a case in point. Global markets for illicit drugs, links between Pakistan's armed actors and international criminal organizations, regional externalities of Pakistan's violence, the explosion of the global third sector's presence in Pakistan, increasing U.S. military involvement, and growing concerns of the international community about the deteriorating Pakistan situation all illustrate the international face of this crisis.

Studies in international relations are in the business of explaining and predicting violent conflict, as well as the behavior of the world's member states in relation to conflict and stability. Although critical and second-order studies of international relations have fundamentally different concerns, substantive theorizing must address what Michael Mann calls IR's "most important issue of all: the question of war and peace." Indeed, realist and liberal studies within the classical paradigm, which share a similar ontology, assumptions and premises, purport to

do just that. Given that Kal Holsti's latest figures estimate that 97% of the world's armed conflicts between 1945 and 1995 took place in either the traditional or the new Third World, a viable analytical framework of world politics must be able to integrate the global periphery.

In this short article I will discuss what contemporary international relations studies may or may not offer in its treatment of the South Asian region, and of the armed conflicts in the region in particular. My commentary will be limited to three issues familiar to the developing world, as seen through the lens of South Asia's current crises: the correlation of state weakness with violence and instability, the post-territorial nature of security threats, and the North-South power disparity. I will conclude with some observations on what this may tell us about the adequacy of the western studies in international relations themselves.

State Weakness

The sovereign state that lies at the heart of the Westphalian model is the building block of mainstream IR thinking. Most scholarship about international politics characterizes the state in terms of power, understood as the capability of achieving national interests related to external security and welfare. Realist and liberal perspectives, and some versions of constructivism, are all concerned with explaining conflictual and cooperative relations among territorially distinct political units, even while their causal, or constitutive, arguments are quite different.

Although Kenneth Waltz was taken to task for blithely claiming that states under anarchy were always "like units" with similar functions, preferences and behavioral patterns, much of international relations scholarship persists in a top-down, juridical view of statehood largely abstracted from internal features.

But international legal sovereignty may be the most that the advanced industrialized states have in common with states on the global periphery such as in the South Asian region. First of all, South Asian states' priority is internal security, not their power position relative to other states. Threats to the state originate within the territory of South Asian states, not in neighboring countries. In spite of some longstanding border tensions and historical rivalries within the South Asian region, India and its neighbors tend to be more concerned with the strength of domestic social movements and armed actors than they are with the international balance of power. Indeed, even in the absence of a regional balancer, strong democratic institutions, dense economic and political networks, or multilateral governance structures, inter-state wars in the region during the late 20th century have been relatively rare. This no-war zone, or negative peace according to Arie Kacowicz, appears to be best explained by a shared normative commitment to maintaining a society of states and to peaceful conflict resolution, contradicting both material and systemic explanations of interstate behavior.

State strength in much of the developing world is not measured in terms of military capability to defend or project itself externally, but rather according to the

empirical attributes of statehood: the institutional provision of security, justice and basic services; territorial consolidation and control over population groups; sufficient coercive power to impose order and to repel challenges to state authority; and some level of agreement on national identity and social purpose.

States in the South Asian region all receive low marks for the very features that mainstream IR thinking accepts as unproblematic, and immaterial. Although the states in South Asia are in no danger of immediate collapse, most indications point to a state that has become progressively weaker: the basic functions required of states are poorly and sporadically performed, central government control is non-existent in several jurisdictions, social cohesion is poor, and the fundamental rules of social order and authority are violently contested. Most importantly, the South Asian state fails the basic Weberian test of maintaining its monopoly over the legitimate use of force and providing security for its citizens.

Internal state weakness, ranging from impairment to outright collapse, is the common denominator of post-Cold War global violence and insecurity. It is also the permissive condition of South Asia's security problem. Reduced state capacity underlies the more proximate causes of the violent competition with and among contending subnational groups. One of the reasons why terrorist and subversive groups have managed a foot hold in South Asia is that the people are fed up with the inequity, poverty, and extravagant corruption in which the state has been mired. Disgusted with the governments and despairing of the prospect

for peaceful and incremental change within the existing order, the people are looking for an explanation of their personal suffering and societal degradation.

There is little doubt that with force, vigilance and some luck, governments will be able to substantially destroy and disrupt the existing cross-border network of terrorism operating in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and elsewhere. But no amount of military force, territorial vigilance and operational genius can contain a group of suicide attackers that stretches endlessly across borders and over time. South Asian states must ultimately undermine their capacity to recruit and indoctrinate new true believers. That requires getting at the factors that help in spreading terrorism. And one of the principal factors is chronically bad governance.

The plain and even brutal fact is that the political and administrative system in South Asian states has not been a great success. Political parties use any means and break any rules in the quest for power and wealth. Ministers worry first about the money they can collect and only second about whether their decisions have any value for the public. Legislators are known to collect bribes to vote for bills. Even military officers allegedly order weapons on the basis of how large the kickback will be. There are instances where soldiers and policemen extort rather than defend the public. In South Asia, the line between the police and the criminals is a thin one, and at times may not exist at all.

In the domestic context, therefore, it is evident that the South Asian governments are yet to put in place a coherent political strategy of sustaining a sovereign state, internally and externally. Indeed, some institutions of civil governance in the states like Nepal and Sri Lanka have suffered a complete breakdown in the face of the terrorist onslaught.

In fact, in the states of Nepal and Sri Lanka several government institutions are a facade. The police do not enforce the law. Judges do not decide the law. Customs officials do not inspect the goods. Manufacturers do not produce, bankers do not invest, borrowers do not repay, and contracts do not get enforced. Most transactions are twisted to take immediate advantage. Time horizons are extremely short because no one has any confidence in the collectivity and its future. This is pure opportunism: get what you can now. Government does not seem like a public enterprise but a criminal conspiracy, and organized crime heavily penetrates politics and government. In this context, neither democracy nor development can be sustained.

It is, then, no coincidence that ethnic violence, religious bloodletting and civil unrest are tightly entwined with the corruption of cynical leaders. The incapacitated state in South Asia cannot sustain democracy, for sustainable democracy requires constitutionalism and respect for law. Nor can it generate sustainable economic growth, for that requires people with financial capital to invest it in productive activity. In this state of disorder, private companies do not get rich through productive activity and honest enterprise. They get rich by

manipulating power and privilege, by stealing from the state, exploiting the weak and shirking the law. Thus it is no wonder that such a weak, and porous state has not been very successful in combating terrorism or fundamentalism. It remains to be seen whether in the long run South Asia's bloody conflicts become a force for state creation in the Tillian tradition, or on the contrary a structure that has ritualized violent discord as a normal part of social life.

This erosion in capacity and competence has taken its toll on what is perhaps a state's most valuable asset--legitimacy. The South Asian states' mediocre performance and problem-solving record degrades central authority, reducing public compliance and policy options, and leading to a further deterioration in internal order as para-institutional forms of security and justice emerge. This dynamic has been exacerbated by new mechanisms of global governance and the proliferation of global actors within domestic jurisdictions increasingly perceived as legitimate alternatives to sovereign state authority.

What Jessica Matthews describes as a "power shift" away from the state--up, down, and sideways--to suprastate, substate, and nonstate actors as part of the emergent world order may also involve a relocation of authority. This is particularly apparent in the post-colonial and developing world where the state is less equipped to respond to internal challengers, and sovereignty's norm of exclusivity is more readily transgressed. In South Asia, alternative political communities such as transnational NGO's, religious and humanitarian

associations, and global organizations, as well as insurgent and paramilitary groups, are increasingly viewed as functional and normative substitutes for the state.

Global Security Dynamics

At the same time that South Asia's security crisis is in great measure attributable to the empirical weakness of the state, it also highlights another dimension of the emerging global order: the complex interplay between domestic and international security domains. The globalization of security puts into sharp relief the growing discontinuity between fixed, territorial states and the borderless processes that now prevail in world politics. While Realists would point out that current events in North Korea and Iraq are eloquent reminders of the applicability of a traditional national security model in which state-on-state military threats predominate, concerns in South Asia reflect a somewhat different security paradigm.

First of all, insecurity in South Asia is experienced by multiple actors, including the state, the society at large, and particular subnational groups. Security values, in turn, vary according to the referent: national security interests, both military and nonmilitary, exist alongside societal and individual security concerns. Indian society not only seeks security against attacks, massacres, torture, kidnapping, and displacement, but also in the form of institutional guarantees related to democracy and the rule of law, and access to basic services such as education, employment and health care. Many of the internal risks that India and other

South Asian nations confront are also enmeshed with regional, hemispheric and global security dynamics that are dominated by state and non-state actors.

While South Asia is typically viewed as being the in eye of the regional storm, the regional crisis is itself entangled with transregional and global security processes, including drug trafficking, the arms trade, criminal and terrorist networks, and U.S. security policies. The remarkable growth in the strength of South Asia's most destabilizing illegal groups during the 1980s, for instance, is directly attributed to their ability to generate revenue from activities related to the global market for illegal weapons.

These transactions occur within complex transnational criminal associations within and at the edges of the South Asian region, which in turn are involved in global financial, crime, and even terrorist networks. Seen from this perspective, South Asia's conflicts are not so internal after all: they actively involve dense transborder networks composed of an array of global actors. Such a post-sovereign security setting underscores the necessity for mainstream IR thinking to go beyond its state-centered vision of world politics and to develop conceptual tools better equipped to deal with global realities.

Power and Authority on the Periphery

The notion of formal anarchy in international relations studies coexists uneasily with relations of inequality and domination that pervade world order. While most states in the South would tell you that the exclusive authority with which the institution of sovereignty endows them is not quite equal to that of their more powerful northern associates, neorealists and neoliberals insist that the evident discrepancies among states are mere power differentials within a decentralized international system that lacks a central political authority. Thus hegemony and asymmetrical interdependence as such do not contradict the fundamental IR distinction between anarchy and hierarchy.

Some dominant-subordinate structures, such as the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, may indeed be about more than material differences, however. The immense disparity in economic, political and military power has permitted Washington to impose its will in Pakistan on a wide range of issues similar to a coercive hegemonic project. Nevertheless, Pakistan's observance of American preferences in its foreign and internal security policy is not exclusively related to overt threats or quid pro quos. The rules of what Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim call "informal empire" are such that inequality can also be characterized as a de facto authority structure.

Authority implies that the U.S. exercises a form of social control over Pakistan, and that in turn Pakistan's compliance cannot always be explained by fear of retribution or self-interest, but rather suggests some acceptance, no matter how

rudimentary, of the legitimacy of U.S. power. Ongoing practices that become embedded in institutional structures can create shared behavioral expectations and intersubjective understandings reflected in identities and preferences. Pakistan's anti-terrorist posture, for example, that was in great measure shaped by Washington's militarized war on terrorism, has over time become internalized. Pakistan has appropriated the anti-terrorist discourse of the United States, and become an active agent in reproducing its own identity and interests vis-Ã -vis the illegality and danger of terrorism.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to conclude that Pakistan's behavior on its shared agenda with the U.S. is completely consensual: the underlying power configuration is a constant reminder that Washington calls the shots. The U.S. reconstruction of Pakistan's internal conflict into part of its war on global terror, with great uncertainty within the country about its implications for a negotiated settlement, is illustrative. U.S. preponderance can also lead to "increased incentives for unilateralism and bilateral diplomacy," at times directly against Pakistan's interests. Material inequalities can obscure how third-dimensional power also operates in the informal authority relations between the United States and Pakistan.

Conclusion

The South Asian situation suggests various themes which studies of world politics would be well advised to take into consideration. Western scholars have been largely silent on the issues of state-making and state-breaking that reside at the heart of the Third World security problematic. In neglecting domestic contexts more broadly speaking, this body of scholarship is inadequate for explaining the relationship between violent "internal" conflicts and global volatility at the start of the 21st century. These studies also have a blind spot when it comes to non-state actors in world politics. In overemphasizing states, realists in particular are hard pressed to adequately account for the countless sources of vulnerability of states and societies alike. Security threats, from terrorism to drug trafficking to AIDS, defy theoretical assumptions about great power politics and the state's pride of place in world order. Similarly, non-territorial global processes such as South Asian states' security dynamics are not well conceptualized by conventional IR levels of analysis that spatially organize international phenomena according to a hierarchy of locations.

South Asia's experience with sovereignty also calls into question the logic of anarchy in realist and liberal IR thinking and writing. Seen from a peripheral point of view, the notion of formal equality is little more than a rhetorical device that camouflages deep and persistent material and social inequalities in the international system. We thus arrive at the conundrum of a "stable" world order, in IR terms defined by the absence of war among the world's strongest states, wracked by violent conflict and immeasurable human suffering in peripheral

regions. Perhaps most importantly, today's global security landscape should prompt us to rethink theories that by and large bracket the non-Western, developing domains and suppress their narratives.

The heterogeneity of the IR discipline cautions us against jettisoning the entire canon as flawed when it comes to the Third World, however. Constructivists' incorporation of a social dimension into an analysis of state identities and interests is a promising research agenda for analyzing non-material aspects of North-South relations. Institutionalism theory has also contributed to our understanding of the role of global institutions and norms in conflict resolution and cooperation in the Third World, and may offer insight into seemingly intractable conflicts such as in South Asia.

Paradoxically, certain realist precepts also have utility for analyzing the international politics of developing states. The distribution of global economic, political and military power has an enormous impact on center and peripheral states alike. As we have seen, the inequality in U.S.-Pakistan relations poses a serious challenge to multilateralism and mechanisms of global governance. In spite of the ongoing reconfiguration of the state in response to global transformations, the sovereign state has proved to be highly adaptive and resilient.

India's internal weakness, for example, is to be contrasted with the state's increasingly successful political and diplomatic agenda within the international community, even in the face of increasing global constraints. The complexities of India's security dynamics, which vividly illustrate a non-realist security landscape, nevertheless require that public policies prioritize, delineate and specify threats and responses largely in conventional, military terms. And finally, India's efforts to recuperate state strength, or complete its unfinished state-making process, as the case may be, suggest that state power remains pivotal to internal, and thus global, order.

Rather than dismissing western IR studies outright for their shortcomings in explaining the problems of countries such as in South Asia, we may be better advised to look toward peripheral regions for what they can contribute to testing, revising, and advancing studies of international politics. Perhaps the explosion of war-torn societies in the Third World and the implications this has for global order will inspire critical analysis of where the theories fail and what they have that is germane to analysis of international relations in the South. Just as there is no single theoretical orthodoxy in IR, neither is the Third World a like unit. With any luck, the diversity of these experiences will lead to new thinking about world politics.