Conflict in South Asia's peripheries - Daily Times

The ongoing political crisis in Balochistan is one of the multiple conflicts in South Asia's peripheries. A cursory look at them across different states in the region will highlight a geographic reality — they are concentrated more on the border regions/provinces and peripheries. Balochistan, FATA, J&K, Northeast, Terai and North-east Sri Lanka — all conflicts share a common geographic trait.

Does South Asia have a 'periphery problem' in a geographic sense? Why are they concentrated in the border? What makes the South Asian peripheries conflict-prone?

First, indeed, there is a problem of the colonial legacy. Except for the Madhesi conflict in Nepal, all other conflicts in South Asia's periphery could be linked to colonial legacy. The British made new political structures and demolished a few existing ones in Balochistan, Afghanistan, J&K, Ahom, Burma and Sri Lanka to accentuate their colonial rule.

However, seven decades after the British left the subcontinent, should one continue find an excuse in the colonial rule for our inability to resolve these conflicts? The South Asian States witnessed numerous forms of governance — democratic, undemocratic and a mix of both since the British exit in the late 1940s. Is the problem of non-resolution of these conflicts today — more to do with post-1947 governance problems within and across South Asia, than the former?

Second, South Asia's conflict periphery could be pursued in two inter-related issues — 'problem in the periphery' and 'problem of the periphery'. Both relate to the process of nation-building within and the process of region building externally.

From Balochistan to Rakhine and from the Terai to North-eastern Sri Lanka, the issues in conflict are related to the nation-building process or its failure. While the national capital makes an absolute claim over the periphery territorially, the same passion is absent in ensuring governance process in these regions is given the same importance of the heartland.

Statistics in the periphery — from governance to human development will tell a different and harsh story at the ground level. From the number of four-lane roads to primary health centres, there is a huge problem within.

Added to the above 'problem in the periphery' is the 'problem of the periphery'; while the national capital and rest of the nation are jingoistic about the territory, there is little understanding of the latter and its history. These 'border' regions historically and ethnically were 'bridges' to the neighbouring countries/regions.

Unfortunately, South Asia has a problem with its neighbours, which spill over the peripheries. As a result,

the national capital pursues an inward-looking strategy towards the peripheries and prefer to 'secure' from the latter's historical linkages, and even physically fence it. The peripheries get discussed in the national parliament mostly from what is happening outside the country.

In other words, for rest of the nation, 'problem of the periphery' is important than the 'problem in the periphery'. The latter could be ignored, or even subjugated to the former, in the name of 'national interests'.

The third major problem in the geographic periphery is the national approach or the lack of it, and which ministry gets main priority in dealing with the former. Unfortunately, South Asia manages its periphery through its Home and Defence ministries. Instead of national and state/provincial capitals engage in a dialogue in addressing the problems, the Parliament seems to have outsourced the conflict management to military, police and intelligence agencies.

There is a 'deep state' present in every conflict in South Asia. Both the national and regional elites make use of the deep state to suit their own political interests. In return, the latter gets entrenched in the system.

Fourth, the so-called heartland is ignorant when it comes to its periphery. While the rest of India would want its Northeast to be a part of it, not many, even educated with a graduate degree may fail to mention all the seven states. While Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad may have newspapers in print, Quetta is still struggling to have its own. How many in Biratnagar in Nepal read the Kathmandu Post? While Jammu region and Kashmir Valley have numerous print editions, there are hardly any from Ladakh and the two Kashmiri political entities across the Line of Control (LoC).

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The space that the geographic periphery gets in the national dailies is limited to a small strip in the third page unless there are major militant attacks or accidents have a more significant casualty.

Fifth, the politics in conflict peripheries tend to look inwards. While criticising the role and attitudes of the rest, the nation towards its peripheries, equally important is the latter's approach towards the former, that could be defined as one of the most important problems in the periphery.

Most of the peripheries tend to look inward — politically and culturally. Not many in the Kashmir Valley would have crossed the Jawahar Tunnel. Each conflict periphery has a point/line/La similar to it. Like the Hobbits in the Shire of the Lord of the Rings, many in the periphery consider their region as one of 'idyllic happiness' and the rest of the world from a Hobessian view of nasty, brutish and short.

The regional societies also tend to insulate themselves; nationalist discourse is perceived as a first step towards losing their unique position. From tourism to language, regular developments and discourses get

interpreted as 'imposition' leading towards 'integration' of the periphery into the mainland.

Outside the societal outlook, the politics in peripheries also tend to be inward looking. Regional political parties lead the political environment; 'national' parties have been losing their base in the peripheries. Worse, the 'national' parties tend to engage in political engineering, sometimes aided by the deep state. As a result, the 'national' parties are viewed with suspicion.

Besides, the peripheries have small provincial assemblies and a smaller representation in the national parliament. As a result, the provinces lack a strong voice in the parliament. From Balochistan to Manipur, one could see the above trend across the peripheries. This disconnect accentuates the conflicts further.

Finally, the global attention or the lack of it also plays a role in the conflict simmering politically, but within a geographic boundary. Most of the conflicts in South Asia's periphery, perhaps except the Pashtun and Kashmiri, lack international attention. Even the above two have attracted global attention thanks to Osama bin Laden in the case of former, or the nuclear weapons and the fear of a regional flashpoint in case of the latter.

Conflicts in Northeast, Terai and Balochistan have usually been restricted to few reports by leading think tanks and human rights organisations such as the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Crisis Group. Outside these occasional reports, the international community has little to no interest in ensuring that the conflicts in these peripheries are politically attended by respective States in South Asia. As a result, the State in South Asia has monopoly over the debate and decisions in the periphery.

To conclude, with no voice of their own, and with rest of the mainland pursue them as a territory, the peripheries in South Asia will remain conflict-prone.

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