

Preface

South Asia at a Crossroads

South Asia has reached a pivotal point in time. Comprising the states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and The Maldives, and home to more than one-fifth of the world's population, the region has witnessed tremendous ups and downs in all spheres of state and society. Even a passing view of its current developments shows that the entire subcontinent is in transition and has reached a crossroads. Despite a shared colonial past, the time of the so-called *British Raj*, the South Asian states have progressed along widely diverse paths of statehood. This finds its most visible expression not only in the tremendous variety of types of regimes ranging from democracies to military dictatorships, but also in the Subcontinent's emergence as a hub for international terrorism, religious fundamentalism, large socio-political movements with separatist and anti-systemic or pro-democratic dispositions. On top of this, several states faced the challenge of liberalising their economies in order to address the worrying manifold socio-economic difficulties. Having this in mind, it does not come as a surprise that South Asia is home to persistent encounters between Eastern and Western concepts and notions of institution- and state buildings and normative foundation of nations. The fact that the region is a site of some of the world's most intractable intra- as well as inter-state conflicts has lead critical analysts to identify the Subcontinent as a part of the global 'Arc of Crisis'. Adding credibility to this notion are the geopolitical dynamics within South Asia which hamper regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, it is most important that one takes the current developments in the respective states into account since it seems that several trends occurred which have the potential dynamic to break with entrenched, unfortunate patterns of the past.

To begin with, Pakistan recently witnessed its first orderly transfer of power from one civilian government to another through elections. Most noteworthy in this context is that for the first time in the country's troubled political history the security forces did not intervene unduly in the electoral process. Furthermore, many Pakistanis exercised their right to vote despite facing numerous acts and threats of violence and intimidation. On the other side of the Durand Line, which

marks Pakistan's contested border with Afghanistan, a similar key-defining event will take place in 2014: the presidential elections. These elections will not only decide on who will be the next President but also which political path the country will follow in the immediate future. This political transition is complicated by the impending withdrawal of international combat forces from Afghanistan. Needless to say, whichever the outcome of this process may be, it will define the international perception of South Asia as an area of persistent armed conflict or as a region which still has the potential to develop fruitful cooperation. Along with all the major actors in the region, India is of crucial importance for the success of any kind of regional project. Not only because of the tremendous asymmetries in size and population, which make India the natural centre piece of South Asia, but also because of newly and partly rediscovered interests in the energy resources and trade potential that new routes, allegiances and transport agreements may yield.

It is important to note that the smaller states of South Asia too are not spared by the global dynamics and subsequent regional processes of transition. Each of them has discovered their geopolitical leverage within the emerging regional dynamics. Yet they are still constrained by complex internal politics. Sri Lanka remains in a state of sullen peace after the military defeat of the LTTE, the Maldives remain in a state of confusion following the ousting of then President Mohamed Nasheed in a 'coup-like scenario', Nepal has for a long time been deeply trapped in a constitutional crisis but has apparently re-launched a process of bringing the country back into the fold of electoral democracies, while Bhutan seeks its own way towards 'National Happiness' and democracy as successfully proved by the second round of general elections.

To sum up, the South Asian states continue to struggling with bilateral crises, national disharmonies and economic uncertainties. However, there is a growing conviction among South Asian political decision-makers that the steady process of regional disintegration needs to be reversed. Additionally, suffering from a multitude of socio-economic inequalities but at the same time having the opportunity to evaluate one's own situation in a comparative national as well as international perspective, South Asia's growing civil societies are starting to question the harmful logic of fragmented national interests and conflicts. Consequently, the argument that most of the current problems are rooting in unfavourable colonial legacies is losing its credibility in justifying underdevelopment and political instability. This of course will not force the individual national governments immediately to increase trust and transparency of state behaviour, but it will help to overcome the endemic unwillingness to initiate any cohesive, purposeful action in the direction of ending the traditional political and economic disunity.

Today one can state that there is a greater awareness of the necessity for interstate rapprochement and cooperation to unleash new dynamics in the direction of a more integrated South Asia. This process is undoubtedly enforced through voices from within the region which are increasingly advocating a break with past trajectories in order to achieve security, economic development and public welfare, and the complex identity crises of the South Asian states. But what could the driving forces for regional cooperation be? In tackling this complex puzzle, this

volume will address the issues of how to combat terrorism, fight ethnic and religious intolerance, develop governance for peace, analyse the role of education, shed light on the economic sector and its impact on regional integration with a special focus on trade and the experience of other regional entities, foremost of which is the European Union. Furthermore, the rising importance of food security, climate change and intelligent energy as well as open internet access for an efficient society will be taken in this book.

The aim of this volume is twofold: firstly, to bring together and bridge the gap between leading experts and young professionals in international relations, strategic affairs, environment, politics and economic issues related to regional integration and cooperation in South Asia; and secondly, to bring forward arguments about the positive ramifications of a re-strengthened SAARC for Europe, South Asia and the rest of the world, as well as to outline ways of how this could be brought about. Instead of joining the parade of debates of insurmountable hurdles and challenges which dominates contemporary literature on the region, the editors as well as the contributors of this volume have attempted to identify the merits of regional cooperation in South Asia. Furthermore, it will be stressed that the negative projection of the state of cooperation and integration are only partly reflecting the reality on the ground. In brief, the book will show that South Asia is not a 'failed region' and has tremendous potential to enhance peace, stability and democracy in the region.

The chapters in this volume highlight various cutting-edge topics and approaches to cooperation and integration in the region. Contributions from both South Asian and European scholars carry the distinctive flavour of differing perspectives, in order to identify possible driving factors for regional cooperation. In this context, the book is an introduction to the central themes that have preoccupied the field of regionalization in South Asia over the last few decades and identifies new, emerging areas of research. Furthermore, the book is a combination of interdisciplinary area specialists and practitioners and offers a wide range of views, insights and approaches regarding the chosen themes. As such, the collection represents a uniquely broad survey of scholarship emerging from a range of important academic centres.

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