A brief overview of internal conflicts in South and Southeast Asia[1]

Background

South and Southeast Asia are populated by people of diverse ethnic cultures and religious beliefs. Most of the countries in the region gained independence soon after the end of the Second World War. Since then, they have enjoyed varying degrees of economic development and have been governed under a broad spectrum of political systems. As they struggle with the demands of modernization and democratization, on the one hand, and pressures to retain traditions and identities, on the other, many of these countries have experienced resistance from armed groups within their borders that have challenged the authority, legitimacy, and territorial integrity of the state.

In Southeast Asia, a separatist insurgency has raged in the Southern Philippines, while a longstanding communist rebellion based in the country's northern regions has further strained the Manila government. Until recently, separatist violence had plagued the province of Aceh in Indonesia for several decades. Over the last few years, the Thai government has been embroiled in a renewed armed struggle in its southern Malay-Muslim provinces. Internal conflicts have also plagued almost all countries in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, a separatist conflict has left the country on the brink of a civil war. India has its own share of domestic strife; in particular, the conflicts in Kashmir and the Northeastern states of Assam, Tripura and Nagaland are of increasing concern to the central government. In Nepal, a Maoist insurgency has been exacerbated due to the political turmoil in the country.

The consequences of these conflicts are sobering. They have resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and displaced many more. Many of those affected have been women and children, and the economies of the conflict zones lie in shambles. These internal conflicts also pose a threat to regional stability. The Nepalese Maoists and the Sri Lankan Tamils are known to have used India for planning operations, raising funds and expanding their support base. Pakistan has been used for the same purposes by the Kashmiri rebels. Malaysia has also found itself in a similar situation with the southern Thailand and Acehnese conflicts. These internal conflicts also cause significant refugee problems. The massive displacement of people from the conflict locales have led to a steady stream of refugees into neighboring provinces and countries.

In the face of such rebellions, all the states involved have used various military and non-military measures to quell the violence. In all cases, military measures have only had limited success. In some cases, military excesses have led to (sometimes

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1   This article is based on a paper kindly contributed by Joseph Chinyong Liow and S. P. Harish

considerable) human rights abuses. All governments have also initiated dialogue in some form or other with militants. The peace negotiations have oscillated between periods of fragile peace and renewed violence. The most successful peace process to date has been between the Indonesian government and the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM). At the other end of the spectrum, the peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) has all but collapsed with the recent resumption of violence.

The end of the Cold War did not bring to South and South East Asia the peace dividend that was expected. The persistence of internal conflicts through the 1990s in a number of Asian countries, including Thailand, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Nepal, all but debunked the naïve assumption that the end of the Cold War would bring with it a peace dividend. However, the opposite argument that the Cold War had kept a lid on many internal conflicts and that the end of the Cold War caused the resurgence of these dormant conflicts, as for example in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, also does not apply to Asia. Indeed, many of these conflicts can be traced back to the beginning of the Cold War, in some cases even earlier, and most of them (particularly in Southeast Asia) reached alarming heights during the Cold War years. That said, over the last decade and a half, insurgent groups have exploited new technologies, the ease of travel, and the simplicity of moving funds in order to intensify and internationalize their struggles. As a consequence, many of the ethno-nationalist conflicts have become more violent and intractable.

Finally, since the end of the Cold War, the international community has tended to advocate that democracy leads to the alleviation of domestic insurgencies. However, the conflicts in India, Philippines and Sri Lanka demonstrate that democracy is no panacea and that dialogue mechanisms, additional to the democratic process, may be needed for conflict resolution. Also, evidence suggests that strengthening the institutional capacities of the state to deliver basic social services contributes to the reduction of violence and civil strife. Good governance and economic development, in addition to dialogue efforts, can go a long way in assuaging, if not resolving, many of these discords.

Categorizing internal conflicts

In the nineties, the threat of violence within the nation-state proved to be of greater significance than external threats. Internal conflicts challenged the authority, legitimacy, and territorial integrity of the state across South Asia and Southeast Asia. Moreover, especially after the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, some of these conflicts acquired a religious overlay. Quite surprisingly, several communist insurgencies have been sustained in the post-Cold War period. Many of the region's conflicts have worsened over the last decade and this trend seems to continue in the short-term.

The nature of internal conflicts across Asia can be classified broadly based on the declared goals of the various rebel groups. In Sri Lanka and the Southern

Philippines, the rebels have mostly been fighting to secede and create a new eth-nically-defined country for the Tamils and Moros respectively. Similar ethno-nationalistic fervor can be seen in the conflicts of southern Thailand and Aceh. The conflicts in Kashmir and the southern Philippines have an additional reli-gious dimension to their ethno-nationalist facet. Even though religion cannot be said to be a major cause, militancy in these contexts has in fact acquired a religious flavor and a religious strain that has augmented the conflicts. These conflicts are increasingly framed as between Muslims versus Hindus and Muslims versus Christians respectively. Pakistan's support for the insurgents and poor Indian governance of Kashmir has placed additional obstacles to the process of peace talks between the two countries. In both cases, mujahideen returning from the Soviet-Afghan war accentuated the religious factor.

The communist insurgencies in Nepal and Philippines are different from the ethno-nationalist and religious conflicts: they are not about territory but aim at the overthrow of the central government. In Nepal, the strife is made more challenging because of the rivalry between the King and the political parties. The communist party in the Philippines has opposed almost all government measures and its military arm has stretched the resources of the government. Prospects for peace with communist insurgents in both Nepal and the Philippines depend on the pace of the peace talks that will seriously address the substantive issues of the conflict.

The resilience of the communist insurgencies in Nepal and the Philippines has been of particular concern since they add a unique dimension compared to the rest of the rebellions. Indeed, given the demise of communism across Europe and the transformation of communist regimes in Vietnam and China, the resilience of these Maoist insurgencies takes on even greater salience from an analytical as well as policy perspective.

The conflict in Sri Lanka presents one of the most brutal and protracted dis-cords. Despite numerous ceasefires, peace has been elusive. At the other end of the spectrum, the conflict in Aceh has witnessed relative peace over the last year after the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the rebel group. The conflicts in Northeast India and southern Thailand present a mixed picture. In the northeastern states of India, the conflict has been localized pri-marily because of inter-ethnic rivalries among the various separatist groups. Such intra-ethnic competition is less prominent in the southern provinces of Thailand. Nevertheless, several high profile incidents over the last three years and the incessant insurgent attacks have rendered peace in southern Thailand elusive. Finally, in the Southern Philippines, the current round of peace talks holds some promise but long-term peace is still likewise elusive.

Keeping in mind that most internal conflicts stem from multiple sources and oftentimes have several (sometimes competing) objectives, the broad categoriza-tion of conflicts in the region as Ethno-nationalist, Religious and Maoist can nevertheless provide us with a suitable framework to study the discords. Again,

Conflict Zone	Ethno-Nationalist	Religious	Maoist
Sri Lanka	X		
Nepal			X
India (Kashmir)	X	X	
India (Assam, Nagaland, Tripura)	X		
Thailand (southern provinces)	X		
Philippines			X
Philippines (southern provinces)	X	X	
Indonesia (Aceh)	X		

it is of course possible that some of the conflicts may come under more than one category based on the various facets of that particular strife.

Identifying key trends

From this brief assessment of the most prominent conflicts in South and Southeast Asia, some overarching conflict trends can be identified:

1. Most, if not all, of the conflicts in the region have endured over a long peri-od of time. Moreover, the trend over the last ten years has mostly been renewal or resurgence of longstanding conflicts rather than the emergence of new conflicts;

2. The root causes of almost all conflicts can be traced to the historical record of the legacy of colonialism, where the colonial enterprise of cartography dis-rupted pre-colonial cultural, religious, and political continuities;

3. Most of the conflicts are chiefly ethno-nationalist in nature; but they are also dynamic and evolve according to changes in circumstance and conditions in their environs. In several cases involving Muslim communities, conflicts have gravitated towards religion, where religious symbols and metaphors are mobi-lized to introduce a new layer of meaning for separatist and resistance move-ments;

4. The forces of globalization have rendered "internal" conflict increasingly "international" as external parties are progressively drawn into the conflict for various reasons and to various ends. This would have major ramifications for regional and international stability;

5. Finally, despite the existence of peace and dialogue processes in almost all the conflicts, it is likely that internal conflicts will prove hard to resolve, and prop-er conflict management and containment, involving recognition of rights and

claims of minorities, civil handling of differences between the central state and its peripheries (as opposed to overly militaristic approaches), and a readiness to engage in dialogue for instance, may be more realistic goals over the next decade.

As the above suggest, there are opportunities, but also distinct challenges to conflict resolution in the region. In most cases, the brutal effects of military campaigns against the insurgents tend to backfire against states. Governments will need to recognize that military solutions cannot bring about lasting peace.

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