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Book Review: Understanding Security Practices in South Asia

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BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Security Practices in South Asia

Reviewed by Zulfiqar Ali

Understanding Security Practices in South Asia: Securitization Theory and the Role of Non-State Actors. By Monika Barthwal-Datta 2012 London: Routledge

This book seeks to explore the ways and means through which non-state actors (NSAs) in South Asia are engaged in securitizing non-traditional security challenges, especially at the sub-state level. The writer discusses the research gap in this specific subject area, explaining that although South Asia is the epicenter of important international security challenges, the intricacies and complexities of the region's security dynamics remain insufficiently researched. The vast potential for theoretical and empirical investigations remains unexploited by scholars within and outside the region due to the historic dominance of realist thinking and the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan. While traditional security issues such as inter-state war, border disputes and the threat of nuclear devastation remain high on the agendas of policy makers and academics, both within and outside this region, non-traditional security challenges merit greater attention and receive it in this book.

Monika Barthwal-Datta, in *Understanding Security Practices in South Asia,* observes that security in the region remains, in the eyes of

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many, mainly about military-political challenges. However, for the common people living in South Asia, life is riddled with insecurities emerging from several issues which are separate from the security concerns of the state. For instance, high levels of deprivation have led to the perpetuation of a vicious cycle of conflict and made South Asia the battleground for some of the world's long standing religious, ethnic and caste conflicts. Yet, rather than viewing these challenges from the perspectives of those who are most affected by them, states in the region have mainly chosen to focus on protecting the interests of the state rather than those of the people.

Barthwal-Datta further discusses securitization theory, as proposed by the Copenhagen School, which continues to focus on the state level in identifying security responses. Thus, the state continues to be the preferred security actor, and there is lack of clarity about the role of the securitizing actor and the securitizing agent. South Asia has vast and active networks of NSAs operating in many non-traditional issue areas. The work being done by these NSAs potentially provide states and governments in South Asia with solid and durable foundations upon which co-operative approaches to security may be further developed at the inter-state and regional levels.

The book utilizes case studies to demonstrate and assess how various NSAs are influencing and shaping security discourses in the region, and the author offers recommendations on how to tackle and resolve prominent security challenges at the sub-state level. Moreover, it offers a critique of securitization theory and attempts to suggest a theoretical approach which considers NSAs to be legitimate security actors in order to resolve the security dilemma and the related challenges in the present South Asian context.

The study has challenged the basic rationale for continuing to follow realist thinking in dealing with security issues in South Asia. It has pointed towards enhancing the role of NSAs with active support at the state level and channeling their efforts to meet the non-traditional security challenges in the region. The research strives to re-invent the concept of security practices in the South Asian context while dealing with non-traditional security threats that are crucial today. It places the security concerns of common people, who are struggling to survive in different countries of South Asia, at the heart of all security policies and practices, which has thus far been lacking.

A tangible example of an NSA dealing with a non-traditional threat successfully is the book's case study on human trafficking in Nepal, which is a source of insecurity for women and children in particular. In February 1996, Indian law enforcement agencies in Maharashatra rescued 500 women and children, including approximately 200 Nepalese nationals, from Mumbai brothels. The Nepalese government refused to repatriate them given that they could not provide their proof of citizenship. As a result, these trafficking survivors suffered in public sector rehabilitation centres in India for five months. At that time, a group of Kathmandu-based NGOs resolved and chalked out a plan to repatriate and rehabilitate the Nepalese victims. They appealed to the Maharashatra High Court for their release, and, subsequently, 124 of the victims were returned to Kathmandu in July 1996, where NGOs helped them move into seven different rehabilitation centres. In this instance, NSAs achieved what the state failed to do. They acknowledged and gave expression to the state of insecurity in which the rescued group of Nepalese women and children were suffering. Moreover, they subsequently worked to provide them with essential rehabilitative measures in order to help facilitate their reintegration into society. Thus, it could be argued that these NGOs effectively performed the role of security actors in the absence of political will and action by the Nepalese state.

To further strengthen the work, the author may have also considered the efforts of NGOs like Eidhi Trust, pioneered by Pakistani philanthropist Maulana Abdul Sattar Eidhi, which is handling non-traditional security threats in multiple sectors to communities in South Asia. There are many such examples of NGOs/NSAs contributing to security in South Asia today. These include organisations such as the Ansar Burni Trust, which is securing the release of innocent prisoners in Indian and Pakistani jails who have been accidentally or mistakenly imprisoned as a result of continuing India-Pakistan hostilities. Here too, there are a host of such NSAs offering their meritorious services in managing non-traditional security threats in the different countries of this region. Of course, it would not have been possible for the author to capture every one of the positive examples available throughout the region, and the book currently fills a crucial gap very well.

Finally, the study could have given more space to issues such as food security, which poses a major threat to international security as well as to the poor in South Asia. Taking up the banner of human security could open new avenues for research into non-traditional security risks and the myriad ways in which NSAs address them. There is clearly much room to build upon this excellent study of security practices in South Asia and the role of NSAs. S