GLOBALISATION AND LOW INTENSITY SECURITY ISSUES IN SOUTH ASIA

By Omprakash Mishra

Globalisation has promoted macro integration at the global level. It has also reinforced disintegretive tendencies and fragmentation within the existing nation-states. Forces unleashed by globalisation have not led people so much to converge around the same values as it has infused in them a greater ability to articulate their values. Over the last two decades students of international relations have been trying to come to grips with the myriad international economic and political changes which characterise globalisation. A fundamental transformation has begun in the way we perceive the world. The Westphalian or realist understanding of international relations is in serious crisis. The concept of globalisation has been the chief contender for the honour of offering an alternative ‘paradigm’. Both globalisation and fragmentation as processes are not simply international but occur at multiple levels and affect internationalism, regionalism and even the cohesiveness of the states themselves.

The two processes – globalisation and fragmentation – have affected and impacted upon the nature of conflict and the notion of security in the contemporary world. The end of the cold war was a major boost for forces of globalisation. It terminated the east-west rivalry for world supremacy, contributed to settlement of regional conflicts and strengthened the international machinery to address threats to international peace and security. At the same time, new and persistent pattern of international conflict in the 1990s has made light of hopeful declarations of ushering in a ‘new world order’ after the end of the cold war. From the ‘stark simplicities and comforting symmetries of the bipolar global confrontation’, the world has entered into a period of uncertainty and unpredictability. There has been violent breakdown of civil society in dozens of countries throughout the world. The profusion of ethnic, tribal, religious and national conflicts have made the world more turbulent. The very nature of conflict has been transformed – from conventional war between nation-states to inter-communal conflict within states. A very high percentage of military action is taking place within the states. A wide variety of non-state actors, rebel movements, armed political militias, ethnic and religious groups and mercenaries are involved in such strife and military action. Common characteristic of such intra-state conflict have included multiple warring parties, blurred lines of control and greater involvement of civilians.

With the expansion of the learning capacity and skills of the individual, the macro level has become insufficient to explain world politics. More attention, therefore, has to be paid to the micro level for a better understanding and explanation of disintegrative tendencies and fragmentation of international and national societies. Certain parameters that normally sustain the global system are simultaneously increasing in complexities and dynamism and creating turbulence in world politics. This phenomenon is best illustrated by the increase in the dimension, spread and severity of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) within the borders of the nation-states as well as across them.

The concept of LIC developed during the early 1970s in an attempt to define a wide range of politico-military activities, which were less intense than modern conventional limited war. The preference for the new term indicated that the concepts of ‘revolutionary insurgent warfare’ and ‘counter-insurgency’, which were used in the 1960s, had become dated and unsatisfactory. These terms were value laden. LIC, in contrast, seem to be value-free, indicating only the (low) degree of conflict and not whether the parties are good or bad. Essentially, LIC is armed conflict for political purposes, short of direct combat between regular armed forces. Such conflicts are asymmetrical, ambiguous, unconventional and very often develop into wars of attrition. LIC subsumes guerrilla wars, civil wars, insurgency, separatist movements, communal violence, insurrection, terrorism, coup d’etat etc. LIC is largely a Third World phenomenon and poses a serious and long term threat to nation building exercises and regional peace and security. There is little evidence of this type of conflict declining. On the contrary, LIC is on the rise because it appears more cost effective, especially in the short term than conventional war and because it carries less risk of escalation. During the cold war, LIC was seen as a secondary issue. Cold war had a restraining influence on the eruption and spread of LIC. Its subsidence has seen increasing instances of use of LIC in various forms by diverse parties. LIC seems to offer a more realistic and cost-effective solution to many groups pursuing different politico-social, territorial or ideological goals. Heightened aspiration of people, improved means of communication, availability of light weight sophisticated weapons have ensured that various ethnic, racial and religious issues turn into uncompromising demands for self-determination and sovereign independence. All these factors combine to make LIC both desirable and possible.
The changed notion of security and aspiration of peoples and groups to enhance their sense of security have necessitated employment of low intensity conflict strategy by many of them. Again, states wary of fighting a conventional war but persistent in the pursuit of their political, economic, territorial and ideological goals have increasingly resorted to LIC strategy vis-à-vis their adversaries, in most cases neighbouring states. Moreover, states in their goal of preseieving and protecting their frontiers have used LIC in anti-insurgency or anti-guerrilla operations.

In today’s world concept of security has travelled far and wide, from the earlier notion of physical preservation of a state to a multi-dimensional concern involving military, economic, environmental, ethnic and political aspects of a nation-state’s life. Moreover, growing attention is now being paid to human dimensions of security, such as problems of gainful employment, food, health, environment, personal safety and human rights etc. At the global and regional level insecurity created by population explosion, forced displacement, migratory pressures, drug trafficking, international terrorism have also drawn the attention of scholars and policy makers. Many of these concerns can be termed as low intensity security issues in as much as they do not directly and immediately threaten the territorial integrity of the nation-states. But what may be a low intensity issue for the developed countries may be a high priority issue, the question of survival for the developing world. The distinction between ‘low’ politics and ‘high’ politics has always been considered problematic and in the last two decades we are witnesses to the breakdown of this distinction in a number of instances. While conventional threats to insecurity have not diminished for a large number of countries, newer threats to security have emerged. The adverse implications of global milieu such as great power rivalry, conflicts and interventions, economic pressures and technological barriers remain in place for the South Asian countries. But it is the unfavourable regional strategic environment characterised by inter-state conflicts and wars on account of boundary disputes, clashes of economic interest and ideological incompatibilities which have been the major source of threat to the security for the South Asian states. South Asia has inherited a volatile mix that generates a powerful cross-current of tensions, both inter-state and intra-state. However, the most serious threat to the South Asian States emanate from internal turmoil and disruption arising from struggle for national liberation, underdevelopment, ethnic, religious and social conflicts, wars of political secession, and struggle for rights and shares in power. The domestic threat may be linked with external adversaries and fuelled by them.

A contrast may be drawn between the traditional security issues in South Asia and the low intensity security issues in the region. Changed nature of conflict, its locale and parties and the myriad goals of the adversaries in these conflicts distinguish the 1990s from earlier decade. However, changes in this direction were noticeable from the 1980s. The present concentration of conflict within the borders of the nation states is a continuation of the process, which was evident in the 1960s. Many of these conflicts, mostly in Third World regions, never received international attention during the cold war period. The major difference is that during the cold war these issues were in the background, with cold war exercising a restraining influence on them. Therefore, the issue of low intensity security threats is not new, only that it has become more visible, more intense and more complex. Moreover, the geographical region affected by the LIC has also widened.

So far as South Asian region is concerned the traditional threats to the nation-states continue to remain in place. Despite the changes in the global security environment, regional security concerns of South Asian states have not been affected. The centrality of adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan has not changed despite fundamental transformation taking place in the world. Secondly, most of the challenges facing the state and nation-building exercises in the South Asian countries are still in place.

Due to the relative ‘autonomy’ of the inter-state disputes and conflicts in South Asia, the end of the cold war had no positive effect on the region. At the same time, LICs have increased in their dimension, spread and severity. It is from this perspective that we can better analyse and understand the various insurgencies and separatist movements, terrorism and proxy war, ethnic and communal conflict as well as instances of forced displacement in the region.

[The author teaches International Relations at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India]