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DOMESTIC FACTORS AND REGIONAL STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

An impressive array of geo-political factors interact to create an apparent image of homogeneity in South Asia. Firstly, the countries of the region belong to a geographically contiguous distinct Sub-Continent. Secondly, they form the littoral territories of the Indian Ocean.¹ Thirdly, they have a shared historical heritage, commonalities in ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious sphere lending them a special Indo-centric character. Fourthly, these countries share more or less a common level of past dominance by the British Raj.² Fifthly, in the view of some observers, members of the region project a "notional regional identity" with manifestation of loose regional co-operation during exigencies.³ There are other considerations for such impression. Two of the world's four most populous Muslim states are located in South Asia. And most prominently, the region may be considered as the centre of the Non-aligned bloc with all the seven countries⁴ belonging to the movement and India being one of its founder members. Add to it the concept of strategic unity borrowed from the then British strategic thinking of India's defence in terms

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1. To be precise, Nepal and Bhutan, two land-locked Himalayan States are not littorals of the Indian Ocean, while Sri Lanka and Maldives are island states in the Indian Ocean.
 2. Even peripheral land-locked states like Nepal and Bhutan, while enjoyed a certain amount of political autonomy, had to depend on the British imperial power for their economic survival.
 3. See Sivananda Patnaik, "Sri Lanka and the South Asian Sub-system : A study of Sub-macro International Politics", *India Quarterly*, vol. XXXVI (April-June 1980), No. 2.
 4. Pakistan, formerly member of the Western alliance systems like the CENTO, SEATO, entered the movement in 1979.

of the security of the whole of the Sub-Continent of South Asia and its environs.⁵

But such homogeneous forces never worked to produce an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence and stability so badly needed for development of these newly emergent countries. The region has been the scene of near endemic instability since the day the British left the Sub-Continent. Ethnic and communal disharmony, even violent conflicts, territorial disputes arising out of the technicalities of the decolonisation process and irredentist tendencies have been the characteristic of this region. Over a period of 35 years, the region has witnessed five wars—four between countries of the region itself. Quest for security and balance of power in the face of perceived imbalance in inter-state relations and quest for allies in the region in pursuit of global politics by major powers did not also allow stability to be restored in South Asia, as also the case in other regions of the Third World.

In economic sphere, growing bitterness and mistrust among nations led them to plan their production and trade in isolation of one another. As a result, external economic relations of the regional states became more or less competitive at global level and quite negligible at the regional level. A recent study on the prospects of a South Asian Customs Union showed that the intra-regional trade accounted for less than 5 per cent of the total volume trade by South Asian countries with the rest of the World.⁶

On the other hand, all of these countries, disparate though, belong to the developing Third World with *per capita* GNP ranging

5. See Shelton Kodikara, *Strategic Factor in Inter-state Relations in South Asia* (Canberra : Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1979), P. 1. Also see Ferenc A. Vali, *Politics of the Indian Ocean Region : the Balance of Power* (New York : The Free Press, 1976), P. 31 and Sivananda Patnaik, *op cit*.

6. See M. Akhlakur Rahman, Ayubur Rahman Bhuya and Sadrel Reza, *A Customs Union in South Asia : Prospects and Problem* (Dhaka : External Resources Division, Ministry of Finance, 1980).

from \$ 80 to \$ 300,⁷ life expectancy from 44 to 66 years⁸ and literacy from 5 to an exceptional 85 per cent.⁹ Nearly one fifth of humanity live in this region on less than 2 per cent of land area of the planet.¹⁰ Except India, all these countries have a narrow industrial base and the primary sectors of agriculture and fishing are stagnant, still heavily burdened. A sizable portion of their populace languish in below-poverty-level-equilibrium trap. Economic and physical infrastructural base is as much lacking as are political institutions. Thus, economic frustrations become highly linked to domestic political instability, which, thanks to the geographical contiguity and disequilibrating linkages across the border, tend to create instability situation in the region.

This is an area that demands greater attention from strategists and policy makers on several grounds. First, forces of instability work at different levels—regional, extra-regional and domestic—in a highly interacting manner. For an objective appreciation, it is desired that the domestic forces be analytically disentangled. But the considerable body of literature that has grown on the geo-politics, security and other related issues of South Asia display a tendency to concentrate on state-to-state bilateral and multilateral issues, extra-regional issues, sometimes at the cost of the domestic factors. Secondly, identification of the domestic factors effecting regional stability may contribute to a regional approach to the political economy of underdevelopment which, in turn may contribute to the cause of regional co-operation a recently mooted idea in South Asia.

The present paper is a humble attempt at identifying the relationship between domestic factors and regional stability in South Asia.

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7. See World Bank, *World Development Report 1982* (Washington : World Bank, Aug. 1981).
 8. ———— *World Development Report 1981* (Washington : World Bank, 1981).
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. See M. Akhlakur Rahman, Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan and Sadrel Reza, *op. cit.*

The area lends itself to mathematical exercise of establishing relationship between the two sets of variables. But the present paper is qualitative in nature linking certain domestic events with the stability situation in the region. The domestic forces have been categorised into three types—political, economic and socio-cultural which includes cultural, religious and ethnic issues. In what follows these categories of domestic factors are taken up in order.

I

Public postures of political leadership, governmental and political system and domestic political stability situation affected greatly the post-Partition regional stability in South Asia. The fact that India found the Partition and for that matter, two wings of Muslim state on both sides unacceptable was expressed publicly by her leadership on many occasions. Nehru is said to have maintained, as late as 1963, that Pakistan was "an area which should be reincorporated into an Indian dominated confederation."¹¹ Such irredentist aspirations were also expressed toward Sri Lanka.¹² Naturally, such announcements and postures were not liked by these small neighbours and created adverse impact on their psyche. In particular, Pakistan became suspicious of every subsequent Indian move even if it was a friendly gesture. The question is what guided the Indian leadership to make such statements. The reason could be traced to domestic factors to a great extent. Many of these statements were meant for domestic consumption. The government was then under severe pressure from the press and the public to defend its defence and foreign policy.

The Kashmir issue was another case in point. In retrospect, it seems that mutual accommodation on the Kashmir issue could have been attained before attitude hardened on both sides and things got

11. G. W. Chowdhury, *Pakistan's Relations with India 1974-66* (London, 1968), cited in Shelton Kodikara, *op. cit.*

12. See Sivananda Patnaik, *op. cit.*

complicated. Both India and Pakistan had a number of domestic factors that contributed to this complication. Strategic and security factors apart, Muslim-majority Kashmir fitted well in the secular democratic experiment of India. Letting Kashmir go to Pakistan would be tantamount to another compromise on this count. Secondly, India was passing through the delicate phase of stability and national integration with so many ethnic diversities and centrifugal tendencies. Hence concession in one front, namely, Kashmir, might set in a chain reaction for other political forces and constituent states who might attempt at weakening the Union. For Pakistan, domestic considerations were no less weighty. It may be remembered that Pakistan got bogged down in political crisis and instability immediately after independence. In particular, the 50s witnessed numerous political charges only to worsen the situation. As such, threat perception from India and the Kashmir dispute provided the God-gifted excuse of keeping domestic stability and maintaining national unity. Of course, other factors like geographical contiguity, cultural and ethnic affinity, natural communication, road and rail links contributed to the Pakistani perception that "Pakistan is incomplete without Jammu and Kashmir both territorially and ideologically. Recovering them, she would recover her head and be made whole, stronger, and more viable."¹³ Thus attempt at reconciliation got relegated owing to these emotive domestic factors and pent-up sentiments got outlet in 1947 and twice in 1965 on this issue in the form of wars.

Then comes the question of domestic political stability. The examples of Nepal and Sri Lanka should specifically be mentioned because of their strategic locations in two absolutely diverse geographical environments. For India, stability of Nepal and Sri Lanka are of vital importance and both countries have maintained domestic stability barring occasional ups and downs. India had been sympathetic to populist movement against the autocratic rule by a class of hereditary Prime Ministers spearheaded by the Nepalese Congress. India gave

13. Quoted in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *The Myth of Independence* (London, 1969), cited in Shelton Kodikara, *op. cit.*

tacit support to politicians and parties who were oriented to India in their outlook. But still, the monarchy and the partyless Panchayat survived as a symbol of stability and India had to follow a non-irritant path in her bilateral relations with Nepal. To a great extent, stable political system in Nepal did not provide any excuse to external powers to destabilise the system. Similarly, Sri Lanka was able to evolve a stable democratic structure that gave external powers little chance to intervene. Even crisis periods like the 1971 Trotskyist insurgency in which the Chinese hand was implicated were successfully handled to contain the crisis within national boundaries. This is where question of political leadership comes in. Both Sri Lanka and Nepalese leadership played a balancing game *vis-a-vis* India. Sri Lanka maintained good relations with China and Pakistan — both India's neighbours. But such relations were nurtured in such a fashion as not to antagonise India. Sri Lanka's connection with China goes back to 1952 when the island's economic compulsions led the government to negotiate a rice-rubber agreement with China on favourable terms to Sri Lanka. The agreement, originally tenable for five years, has been regularly renewed, whether it is United National Party(UNP) or Sri Lanka Freedom Party(SLFP) that held power. In the sixties, China remained the major aid donor of Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, Sri Lanka's economic interaction with Pakistan was significant. Both became important trading partners to each other. Sri Lanka in recent years has also improved her political and economic relations with other countries of South Asia, namely, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Nepal's China policy was also rooted in the politics of balance. King Mahendra undertook diversification of Nepal's relations following certain domestic events. Dissident Nepalese Congress politicians were given sanctuary in India and they were soon joined by the Nepali Congress leader B. P. Koirala in 1968.¹⁴ These dissidents reportedly organized anti-royal campaigns based in India. In 1961, Mahendra attended the Belgrade Non-aligned summit in person, visited Pakistan

14. Shelton Kodikara, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

enroute back to Nepal and then undertook a seventeen-day visit to China. The visit to China was followed by Chinese aid in building a 100-km highway linking Kathmandu with Kodari, near the Tibetan border. But Mahendra did not play the China card too far as India still mattered critically for her survival: a second Chinese offer to build yet another east-west road in the Terai region in Nepal was turned down.

Consideration of domestic political factors in regional stability would remain incomplete if the class characteristics of the ruling elites of these countries are not depicted. Going back to the Pakistan movement, it was led to primarily by wealthy Muslim businessmen and land owners in Hindu-majority areas and by Persian immigrants. After Partition million of Muslim *muhajirs* migrated to Pakistan and joined the centre of the new power structure established by the Muslim League in close alliance with the Punjabi elite who gained prominence and control over the armed forces and the bureaucratic apparatus. This Punjabi elite-*Muhajir* allies installed military regimes which ruled Pakistan for a decade since 1958. These military regimes led by Ayub Khan favoured the US offer of military assistance. Such assistance led the Punjabi leaders to be more repressive in dealing with economic unrest and ethnic protest movement in Bengal and other parts of Pakistan. Eventually, Pakistan attempted to divert attention from mounting domestic difficulties by embarking on a disastrous military adventure in Kashmir in 1965. The Punjabi rulers did not stop there. Embittered by the defeat and US embargo on arms supply in the post-1965 period, they redoubled their efforts to repress uprising in the then East Pakistan. When the Pakistan troops went on a rampage against the Banglee demonstration, the crisis led to a full-fledged war of independence of Bangladesh changing the geo-strategic configuration in the region.

Finally, change of regimes also affect stability situation in the region, through changing the context of bilateral relations. As an example, the direct political connection of the Tamils with Nehru upto 1964 may be cited as a factor that inhibited the process of

normalisation of relation on the issue of stateless Tamils in Sri Lanka. After Nehru, Shastri started with clean slate, the irritant was removed paving way for the 1964 Sriman-Shastri Pact which still provides the framework for solving the issue of the stateless persons.

The point may be further elaborated by some recent events. The period of 1975-77 has been one of tension in the region. The process of normalisation of relations between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh became smoother following the change of leadership in these countries in 1977. Morarji Desai of Janata Party was elected Prime Minister in March 1977, General Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh assumed Presidency in April 1977 and General Ziaul Haq took power in early July 1977. Following favourable and good neighbourly statements and postures by Morarji Desai, the political climate in the region was rendered much congenial. The Indo-Bangladesh water dispute was temporarily solved through 1977 Ganges Water Agreement, India and Pakistan solved the dispute of Chenab river hydro-electricity dam through mutual accommodation.¹⁵ Such overtures were not lost sight of on other neighbours as well, like Nepal and Bhutan. As another example, closer ties did not develop between Bangladesh and Pakistan because leadership in both countries were soon embroiled in political turmoil. It was towards the end of 1977 that the domestic political situation permitted the regimes to resume active contacts. And both parties made statements to the effect that their meeting involving nothing that would disturb India.¹⁶

II

The pattern of domestic economic development did have tremendous impact on the stability of South Asia. The classic case again is the pattern of development in Pakistan. Desequalibrating

15. See Mohammad Ahsan Chowdhury, "Pakistan and Regional Security : A Pakistani View," *India Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVI (April-June 1980), No. 2, pp. 179-91.
16. Lawrence Ziring (ed.), *The Sub-Continent World Politics* (New York : Praeger, 1978),

tendencies were latent in imbalances between cross sections of the populace and more pronouncedly, between regions of Pakistan. The Ayub regime (1958-68) attempted nation building activities mainly through economic growth and building of their own version of political institutions. The strategy was growth-based on the assumption that benefits of development would "trickle down" to all other regions and socio-economic groups. The measures fell into three categories : redistribution of resources between the centre and the provinces, regional economic planning and rural development through works programme. But disparity widened on all these counts despite public commitment to remove economic disparity. The then East Pakistan's low share in the country's economic growth led the Bangalees to discredit the regime. The Bangalees vehemently resented the outcomes of so many ambitious plans. The conviction got crystallised among the Bangalees that the poor performance of the five-year plan with respect to East Pakistan was due to, not only inadequacy and lapses but also to wilful attempt to exploit the then East Pakistan.¹⁷ Such sentiment naturally was given shape of a political programme in the "two economy thesis and the East Pakistan autonomy", epitomised in the six-point programme by the Awami League.¹⁸ The six-point programme was perceived as a threat to the integrity of Pakistan. The crisis snowballed into a war between a well-equipped army and the unarmed Bangalees demanding economic justice. Later on, external involvement was inevitable and the whole region got caught up in a serious conflict. To quote Prof. Maniruzzaman :

Pakistan under Ayub Khan was regarded by some respectable economists of the West as a 'model' for economic develop-

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17. For details of how the disparity got started and sharpened, see Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan : Failure in national integration* (Dhaka : Oxford University Press, 1973).
18. *Ibid.*, For details see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Amader Banchar Dabi : Chaya Dafa Karmasuchi* (Six points : Our Demand for Survival) (Dhaka : General Secretary, East Pakistan Awami League, 1966)

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ment in the developing world, but soon after the collapse of the Ayub regime this 'model' state produced the first successful secessionist movement in the third World.¹⁹

The above incident shows how a purely domestic economic issue, albeit serious, may cause domestic instability to such an extent that shakes up the region as a whole. The crisis could have been kept within manageable limits through economic measures. The problem of ethnic dissent and insurgency to which we are turning in the next section, has much of its roots in the economic domain. A typical ethnic groups are off the national mainstream not only culturally, socially and politically but also economically. Some times, national development programmes destabilise their traditional economic base without giving a viable alternative. The result is unrest and separatist tendencies that affect not one state but more than one.

III

We now turn to ethnic and religious factors. Here we have to refer back to the delimitation of boundaries in 1947 that cut across ethnic and religious groups. This left a permanent irritant in inter-state relations in the region. Thus ethnic problem afflict Indo-Sri Lanka relations, Indo-Bangladesh relations, Indo-Nepalese relations and even Ino-Pakistan relations though the latter countries do not have any common ethnic group as an irritant. The Tamils have long been the cause of a threat to internal stability of Sri Lanka and for that matter, relations with India. The ethnic issue becomes the root of domestic instability in a number of ways. First, they draw sympathy for the co-ethnic group across the borber creating misgivings between the respective governments. Secondly, the ethnic groups themselves either join politics or become subject of domestic politics as has been the case with Sri Lanka. So far so good. But when the ethnic groups or areas become a breeding ground for in-

19. See Talukder Maniruzzaman, *Group Interest and Political Changes: Studies of Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi : South Asian Publishers, 1981), p. vi.

surgency the issue crosses border, creates tension sometimes leading to a crisis point.

The ethnic issue may threat regional stability even if it appears to be a purely domestic issue of a country. The Baluch issue of Pakistan and NEFA problem are cases in point. The Baluch insurgency originally started on regional autonomy within a radically restructured, confederated Pakistan.²⁰ But use of repressive forces have turned this into a nationalist movement. Baluchistan is strategically located, stretching across Western Pakistan, Eastern Iran, and Southern Afganistan. The Baluch homeland commands more than 900 miles of the Arabian sea, including the northern shores of the strait of Hormuz.²¹ Some observers suggest that the steady growth of discontent in Pakistan might tempt Soviet Union to manipulate Baluch nationalism so long as Pakistan, in Moscow's eye, remains the sanctuary of Afgan rebels and continuous to the recipient of US arms.²²

A related issue is the problem of immigration of people from one place to another during British period. These immigrants in most cases have permanently settled in these place of immigration acquired property and have got vested interest. But following partition, these immigrant became stateless persons causing a point of discord between the countries involved.

The relevance of religion may be seen in three aspects: religion as a great ideal, religion as a national identity and religion as a communal irritant.²³ In this region, religion has been taken as second and third aspects and this is how communal dispute and crisis took place historically in the Sub-Continent.²⁴ Religion has been primarily des-

20. See Selig Harrison, "Fanning Flames in South Asia. *Foreign Policy* No. 45 (Winter 1981-82), pp. 84-102.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. See Pramod Kumar Mishra, "Determinants of Intra-regional Relations in South Asia, *Indian Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1. (January-March 1980), p. 71.

24. For details see Mohammad Ghulam Kabir, *Minority Politics in Bangladesh* (New Delhi : Vikash Publishing House, Pvt Ltd, 1980).

tructive instead of unifying people of the region, it had taken them apart by creating hatred and antagonism. This is due to politicisation and narrow interpretation of religion by leaders of the region.

The point that may be made from the above discussion is that ethnicity and religion etc. are emotive and sensitive issues that needs to be played with great coolness and rationality. Any development in one corner of one country is enough to create tension of regional dimension.

IV

In a sub-system where the nations are geographically contiguous and also otherwise linked, domestic stability is the root of regional stability as has been attempted to show above. Domestic stability, in turn, depends on growth of political institutions, political leadership and most importantly, a sound economic base. Steady growth of political institutions, however nascent they may be, provide an in-built mechanism for crisis management both national as well as those having extra-territorial implications. A stable political system is desired by the immediate neighbour, even if she is not friendly with the regime in power. Equally decisive in the political leadership—its charisma idiosyncracies and perception. Last but not the least is a sound economic structure that favours balanced and equitable growth. A developing but sound economic base may absorb many a shock that may otherwise create instability only to invite extra-territorial attention and posture. Many political issue, domestic dissent and ethnic unrest centre on economic issues. What may sometimes prove difficult for leadership to accommodate politically at a later stage may be neutralised or met to a great extent through economic measures at an early stage. This gives an altogether different perspective of domestic economic development and for that matter, a *prima facie* case for regional co-operation, a theme that is being so ardently persued by the seven nations in South Asia. Viewed from this perspective, political institution, political leadership and balanced economic development may be considered as a set of primary variables in any regional stability model.