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## REGIONAL APPROACH TO SECURITY OF NON-ALIGNED STATES: THE CASE OF SOUTH ASIA\*

Non-alignment emerged primarily as a response to the problems having roots in the enormous distortions in the world order in general. Initially through the platform of the movement, the non-aligned states articulated their collective position on the global issues of security, peace and development, identified themselves with the ideals and emerging forces of cooperation and coexistence, and worked for the evolution of an equitable world order. Things have however changed over the years. In its third decade of existence, the non-aligned movement is not only plagued by problems of East-West polarisation and the actual or potential use of force against non-aligned states (by one or other of the superpowers)—it is also faced with a number of serious conflicts between its own members.

The naive assumptions of security which non-alignment started with, were invalidated by the developments in the international security situation during the 1960s and 1970s. Realising this, the Lusaka summit observed:

The immediate danger of a conflict between the superpowers has lessened because their tendency to negotiate in their mutual relations is strengthening. However, it has not yet

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contributed to the security of the small, medium sized and developing countries, nor prevented the danger of local wars.<sup>1</sup>

This has been reiterated and reinforced by the subsequent non-aligned declarations, with emphasis on various dimensions of threat and pressures, including interference in internal affairs. However, non-alignment did not provide anything concretely to deal with these threats. Under the thrust of the new developments in the international security situation, the non-aligned consensus about avoiding intimate military relations with the superpowers started to erode. Many a non-aligned country facing a direct threat to its security was constrained to seek military help from one superpower or the other, even when it effectively meant a considerable dilution in its non-aligned status.<sup>2</sup> Although such military ties have not come in the way of formally maintaining a non-aligned status these strategic relationships are essentially of the superior - subordinate pattern, under which the non-aligned foreign policy outlook of the subordinate power has been vitiated.<sup>3</sup> This clearly testifies that there is no reliable definition of the degree and extent of military relations between a superpower and the countries of the third world which may be regarded as incompatible with the framework of non-alignment.

The shift, within non-aligned movement, from global to regional concerns has been clearly discernible since the Lusaka Summit in 1970. The most significant aspect of this shift is the linkage of the great powers with the intra non-aligned conflicts. The great powers are almost invariably behind the conflicting Third World states. Such great power involvement in many cases goes beyond the interstate level of conflict and penetrates deep into the individual non-aligned

1. Para 5 of the *Declaration on Peace, Independence, Development, Cooperation and Democratization of International Relations*, Lusaka, 1970.
2. S. D. Muni, "Nonalignment in Asia : Recent Trends and Future Prospects", *IDSA Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 1, July-September 1982, p. 8.
3. *Ibid*, p. 5

societies, thereby creating domestic inequalities and injustices. These linkages between the great powers, the interstate conflicts and the intra-social divisions have posed enormous security problems, challenging the very existence of the non-aligned movement. South Asia is one such region which is bedevilled by such challenges. In spite of the fact that all the South Asian states have non-aligned foreign policy orientations, the interplay of the above three factors vitiates the true meaning of South Asian non-alignment.

The countries of the region have been beset with morbid interstate relations and complex regional and geopolitical environment. The consequence had been the transformation of South Asia into a 'region of mistrust' where mutual tension, misperception and occasional hostilities have taken precedence over the possibilities of meaningful positive interaction and cooperation. Under these circumstances, the regional policy behaviour of states tend to be determined by parochial interests and their actions and postures are often directed against each other. Worst of all, economic, political and military ties with and support from external powers are considered most important and in many cases such external linkages serve as the vital element in consolidation of the political power of the elite and its support base.

The dynamics that produce alignment with external powers result both from the pull of the local states and the push of the great powers.<sup>4</sup> The local states are usually motivated by their rivalries with each other. The great powers use the local cleavage to facilitate their entry into the region. These alignments help sustain the bipolar power structure in South Asia. The continuity of that structure ensures that the region remains continuously open to external rivalries.<sup>5</sup> Now, the question arises: Are these states essentially locked into patterns of relationship over which they have

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4. Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi, "The Future of the South Asian Security Complex" in Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi (ed) *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers*, Macmillan Press Ltd. 1986, p. 250

5. *Ibid*, p. 251

little control, or do they have choice of their own to make, perhaps, a regional approach to peace and security? To find an answer, one needs to delve into the internal dynamics of the regional configuration in South Asia, the factors that shape the interstate relations, the role of the extra-regional powers and the options available to the South Asian states. The paper is an attempt in that direction.

### SOUTH ASIA : REGIONAL CONFIGURATION

The South Asian regional sub-system consists of seven states--Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The subcontinent of India is a distinct geographical entity and consists of most of the South Asian states. Though Sri Lanka and Maldives are separated from the subcontinent by not too distant stretches of sea, they are tied to the South Asian system on other grounds : a common civilizational heritage, religious and linguistic affinities. Past dominance by the British, either direct or indirect, provided yet another common experience. Conflict and tensions arose in South Asia ever since the British departed, leaving many complicated and potentially explosive issues unresolved. The situation was further complicated when the apprehensions generated not only exacerbated the existing sense of insecurity but also induced the leading states of the region to opt for divergent paths.

Generally, at the macro level, the South Asian countries approach the global issues of economic and military nature on the basis of non-aligned and 'independent' policies. Although Pakistan was an exception from 1954 to 1979, she is now a member of the non-aligned movement. The South Asian countries had in the past and still has a more or less non-aligned and independent approach to Superpower rivalry and conflicts, the nuclear and conventional arms race between the great powers, the implications of North-South conflict, etc. But at the micro level regional discords and narrow national susceptibilities nourish divergences among the regional states. This suggests

that global threat perceptions are subordinate to the intra-regional and national concerns in the South Asian region.

Three major sources of tension have considerably influenced the interstate relations in South Asia, which despite the existence of strong commonalities, have continued to keep the regional nations apart:

- a) Tensions generated by the emergence of asymmetrical power balance after the British departure;
- b) Tensions caused by regional conflicts; and
- c) Tensions produced by linkage between the the insiders with the interested outsiders.<sup>6</sup>

### Asymmetrical Power Balance

An imbalanced and asymmetric power structure emerged in South Asia after partition. Among the seven states of the region, India is the largest and the most powerful state. Next to India in terms of resources and military strength is Pakistan. The three other continental states of Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan and the two island states of Sri Lanka and the Maldives are quite small compared to the larger states of the region.<sup>7</sup> The towering Indian position in the region coupled with India's assertion to secure recognition and respect for what it believed to be a natural hierarchy within the region generated apprehensions among its regional neighbours. Nehruvian vision of India was a closer union, a confederation of independent states with common defence and economic possibility.<sup>8</sup> Post-independence Indian political leaders

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6. Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Threat Perceptions in South Asia and Their Impact on Regional Cooperation" in Bhabani Sen Gupta (ed), *Regional Cooperation and Development in South Asia*, Vol. 1, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1986, p. 105

7. *Ibid*, p. 106

8 Quoted in S. D. Muni "South Asia" in Mohammed Ayoob (ed), *Conflict and Intervention in the Third World*, Croom, Helm, London, 1980, p. 48

and thinkers have carefully nurtured the concept over the years. A unity of South Asian defence and strategic entity as perceived in New Delhi in one or other modification over the years, tends to render the smaller states of the region into a virtual buffer status.<sup>9</sup> In this light, India's assertions in many ways appeared as coercive actions to its neighbours, which in turn, gave birth to many misgivings.

In fact, India's foreign policy since independence had to deal with a paradoxical situation—on the one hand India tried to consolidate its hold on the region in which its influence was to be predominant, and on the other, it had to defend non-alignment as a foreign policy strategy as India was one of the proponents of the movement. As a result India's strategy for regional security has been based on two basic principles :

- (i) It depended on the support of extra-regional powers to augment power position within South Asia.
- (ii) It tried to establish its hold in the region by trying to limit the role of the extra-regional powers in their dealings with smaller nations.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome was that India acquired the capacity to destabilise the neighbouring states, but neither to protect them nor to keep the extra-regional powers out of the region. So the unfolding Indian policies generated fears rather than invoking genuine respect. Scared and subdued neighbours were left with not many options but to evolve policies that would prevent them getting too close to India. A perception of threat from India is currently common to all its neighbours and it is one of the dilemmas of South Asian politics that

9. Iftekharuzzaman, "The SAARC in progress : A Hesitant Course of South Asian Transition", *BISS, Papers*, No. 7, January 1987, p. 9

10. See, Sridhar K. Khatri, "Foreign Policy and Security Perceptions of South Asian Nations" in Sridhar K. Khatri (ed), *Regional Security in South Asia*, Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu 1987, p. 213

while India perceives neighbours as being integral to its own security, the neighbours perceive India as the threat against which security is necessary.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, the asymmetry between India on the one hand and all her neighbours on the other, is the reason for this polarisation. The asymmetry is a fact about which neither India nor its neighbours can do much about but accept. But the worst part of all the implications of this asymmetry is a distorted pattern of security perception of the South Asian states. The result is a continued intensification of the fog of mistrust and mutual suspicion in the region.

### b) Interstate Tensions

Second major source of tension has been the regional conflicts. Security divergences in South Asia emanate from the perceptions of threats from each other among the countries of the region. This has existed generally between India on the one hand and its smaller neighbours on the other. A host of outstanding bilateral issues of both retrospective and prospective nature continues to bedevil interstate relations in South Asia. Particular mention must be made of the irritants in Indo-Pakistan, Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Sri Lankan relations.

Indo-Pakistan relations continue to pose the gravest threat to peace and stability in South Asia. The major issues that led to the three armed conflicts between the two, still remain unresolved with the Kashmir problem as a dormant volcano in their mutual relations. Other irritants include the issue of US arms supply to Pakistan and the latter's alleged involvement in the Punjab crisis. The nuclear issue has already assumed an alarming dimension and despite distinct efforts on both sides for *modus vivendi*, the two remain as apprehensive and suspicious to each other as ever.<sup>12</sup>

11. Shelton U. Kodikara, "Asymmetry and Commonality", in Pran Chopra, (ed) *Future of South Asia*, UPL, Dhaka, 1986, p. 131.

12. Iftikharuzzaman, Abdus Sabur, Nilufar Choudhury, "Future of SAARC and South Asia", Seminar paper, BIISS, Dhaka, 28 August, 1986, p. 13.

Comparatively minor but persistently irritating discords on account of boundary, sharing of common resources, apprehension over political hegemony and economic domination and the like have continued to exist between India on the one hand and its smaller neighbours on the other. In this context, the continuing impasse between India and Bangladesh concerning sharing of common rivers including Ganga and border fence may be noted. India and Nepal continue to have their ethnic problems between them. Bhutan's relation with India has also been for sometime threatened by the cross-country implications of the conditions of Bhutias living in Sikkim and parts of Northern Bengal.<sup>13</sup> The recent developments in Indo-Sri Lankan relations over the cross-border implications of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka have been viewed as an extremely disconcerting outcome of ethno-religious violence. A qualitative change in interstate relations is thought to be emerging with India now having established itself as an 'interventionist regional power' determined to protect the 'India Doctrine'—something that has led to a new wave of mistrust about India's intentions in the region in general and vis a vis its smaller neighbours in particular. There are thus evident reasons for concern over the critical and fragile balance on which Indo-centric interstate relations in South Asia rest.<sup>14</sup>

### c) Extra-regional Linkages

In the frame of the things discussed above, it is clear that the threat perception in the South Asian region is in many ways India-oriented. Admittedly, some of the regional states have sought assistance from the outsiders in order to cope with the perceived threat emanating from a source located inside the region. The

13. Bhabani Sen Gupta, *et. al.*, "Changing Patterns of Regional Conflicts in South Asia," in Bhabani Sen Gupta (ed), *Regional Cooperation and Development: Political, Social, Technological and Resource Aspects*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1986.

14. Iftekhharuzzaman, *op. cit.*, p. 15



common dilemma of having to deal with the perceived threat from a more preponderant neighbour has led to the emergence of a somewhat common policy of the regional countries towards India. This policy has manifested itself in three ways :

- i) through efforts to broaden the base of interaction with foreign powers at both the bilateral and multilateral levels ;
- ii) by development of relations with strong powers which can act as a counterweight to the influence of the regional dominant power at particularly propitious circumstances ; and
- iii) through efforts to internationalize issues which would help reduce the chances of the dominating power to exercise its authority arbitrarily.

While the first and the last points have exemplified the range of maneuverability available to the smaller powers, the use of extra-regional powers as a counter-weight to the Indian influence in their respective countries has been of major importance among all the options available to these powers.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, India's search for the support of extra-regional powers arose as a consequence of two factors : firstly, because of its inability to prevent them from interacting with its smaller neighbours ; and secondly, because it also required the extra leverage of outside support to strengthen its position *vis a vis* other contending powers in the region.<sup>16</sup>

Divergent threat perceptions of the South Asian states dictate contradictory security considerations. Moreover in the absence of any conflict control mechanism within the region, there developed a reliance on external actors to try and keep the conflict manageable. For Pakistan, true security could be achieved only through attaining parity with India. For India, parity with Pakistan meant

15. For details see, Sridhar K. Khatri, "Foreign Policy and Security Perceptions of South Asian Nations" in Sridhar K. Khatri, (ed) *Regional Security in South Asia*, *op. cit.*, p. 200-201.

16. *Ibid*, p. 215

abdication of a manifest destiny. Since parity could not be achieved in terms of geographic size or through industrial and technological development, Pakistan sought it through military linkages with the United States, which heightened India's sense of insecurity. Thus, on predictable action-reaction grounds, the two neighbours built their external security linkages. The Pakistan-US military alliance created an artificial balance in the subcontinent, which encouraged Pakistan to try and seek a military solution to its disputes with India. India responded with strengthening its ties with Moscow and went for a Peace and Friendship Treaty with the USSR with an explicit security content.<sup>17</sup>

Although Pakistan initially relied on the United States to serve as a balance to their perceived threat from India, its experience with the US at the most has been frustrating. Even though Pakistan was tied by alliance networks with the United States, the slow "deviation" in the American policy starting with the Democratic administration of John F. Kennedy, trying to "win" over Non-aligned India marked a "watershed in Pakistan-US security relations"<sup>18</sup> America in a bid to shore up India, began a rapid transfer of limited quantities of arms and equipment to it.<sup>19</sup> This, Pakistan felt, was a severe blow to its special relationship with the US. To secure itself, therefore, Pakistan began to consolidate an already firm relationship with China. By 1980, China had become the principal arms supplier to Pakistan, transferring some \$ 600 million worth of arms from 1966-1980, which constituted more than one-third of the overall value of arms transferred to Pakistan during that period.<sup>20</sup>

17. Bhabani Sen Gupta, Amit Gupta, "Changing Patterns of Regional Conflicts in South Asia" in Bhabani Sen Gupta (ed), *Regional Cooperation and Development in South Asia, op. cit.*, p 248.

18. Noor Hussain, "Pakistan-US Security Relations," *Strategic Studies*, Vol. VIII. No. 3, Spring 1985, p. 20

19. Bhabani Sen Gupta, Amit Gupta, "Changing Patterns of Regional Conflicts in South Asia," *op.cit.*, p. 255.

20. Yaacov Vertzberger, "The Enduring Entente: Sino-Pakistani Relations 1960-1980," *The Washington Papers* : 95, New York; Praeger, 1983, p.84.

When the Soviets intervened in Afghanistan with a military force in the last days of 1979, the US promptly lifted its human rights and anti-proliferation barriers to the military regime in Pakistan and placed it almost without any previous consultation, in the "fortnline" of resistance to Soviet expansionism in South West and South Asia. Once again the US started transferring sophisticated weapons to Pakistan and once again India perceived a threat building up against its western frontiers, and once again India reinforced its military transfer relationship with the USSR.<sup>21</sup>

As for the smaller states of the region they have over the years sought to maximize advantages for themselves, from their diplomatic maneuvers with the foreign powers. These nations relied on the outside powers for financial assistance and particularly on the interntional forums to build their status and obtain some semblance of security and stability. These states with varying degrees of success have managed to draw bigger powers into South Asia and have thereby successfully checked what they have perceived to be India's hegemonic pretensions. Like Pakistan, but on a more modest scale, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal have all sought foreign assistance to offset India's influence.<sup>22</sup> Alliance with foreign powers has given the smaller states a counterpoise to reduce Indian domination but the price of foreign assistance has not been cheap.

## OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Although South Asia with its well defined external boundaries, constitute a coherent region, there is very little linkage (in all respects) among the states—a legacy of colonial rule. After the British withdrawal some of the states developed close links with

21. Bhabani Sen Gupta, Amit Gupta, "Changing Patterns of Regional Conflicts in South Asia", *op. cit.*, p. 258

22. Gowher Rizvi, "The Role of the Smaller States in the South Asian Complex" in Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi (ed) *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers*, *op. cit.*, p. 153

external powers rather than among themselves. The absence of mutual trust has been perceptible since then. In addition, the asymmetrical power balance that characterised the South Asian subsystem not only created problems of power hierarchy and resource distribution, it generated multifarious interstate tensions. These in turn led to extra-regional involvements in South Asia.

An atmosphere of mutual trust is the crux of regional security problems. It is imperative to realise that internal problems and intraregional rivalries are more dangerous than the interventionist role of extraregional powers, because the latter is not possible without the presence of the former. It is extremely difficult for any outsider to gain foothold in any region without the active collaboration of an insider. In South Asia, due to mutual threat perception, the regional states have invited the external powers to play a major security role. Fear of India made Pakistan give a security role to the US. Fear of US, China and Pakistan acting together against India made India yield a security role to the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> It cannot be denied that the ruling elites of most of the South Asian states turn to the US and other western powers to seek strength and power.<sup>24</sup>

But the point is, have these linkages made the situation in the region conducive for peace or have they contributed to enhance the security threats in the region? It must be stated that these external alignments work powerfully to sustain the very conditions that define the insecurity of regional states. They may make available the power resources to the regional states but are unable to control or mitigate the sources of tensions that make the state insecure. This is mainly because it is not derived from the internal dynamics of a particular region but is only an attempt externally.

23. See comments of Bhabani Sen Gupta on S. U. Kodikara, "Role of Extra-Regional Powers and South Asian Security", in Sridhar K. Khatri (ed) *Regional Security in South Asia*, *op. cit.* p. 61.

24. *Ibid.*

In this blurred security scenario, two options appear available by which the regional states can enhance their security. One is through non-alignment and the other through regional cooperation. These two options are however complementary to each other.

The non-aligned character of the region is a cohesive factor and hence can be an effective instrument to achieve political and strategic autonomy for the region, provided they have demonstrated trust in its efficacy. Non-alignment, which means non-attachment to any bloc, implies that it is not against the great powers but their ideological orientation and approaches to political, economic and military issues which have a direct bearing on political autonomy and economic sovereignty.<sup>25</sup> In order to deal with superpower dominance, non-aligned nations will have to evolve collective response to the common problems stemming from superpower action. A common security approach can be envisaged so that interest of dominant as well as comparatively smaller nations of the region are protected and promoted. Such a doctrine has a strong basis in non-aligned ideology as a mechanism through which the level of external influence could be minimized if not altogether perverted.

To elaborate, South Asian nations can bring about regional order through non-alignment in the following manner:

1. The states of South Asia may adopt a transitional strategy of reducing their aid dependence on, and other linkages with, extra-regional powers, which will gradually minimise the latter's interventionist role. The chronic dependence has in fact enabled the external powers to gain a foothold in the region.
2. In a highly competitive global economy, South Asian nations cannot afford to continue with their traditional metropolis-oriented strategies of growth. Hence they should endeavour to utilize their

25. B. M. Jain, *South Asian Security : Problems and Prospects*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1985, p. 158.

own resources through a collective and self-reliant approach with particular emphasis on cooperation within the framework of ECDC and TCDC.

3. External intervention in the national politics and economy of South Asian nations is facilitated by their increasing dependence on and penchant for military aid and technology of extra-regional powers. If the frequency of local conflicts, insurgencies and aggression is to be considerably minimised, the states of the region should strictly abide by the principles of nonalignment in their dealings with great powers, especially on military and strategic affairs. Once the process of military cooperation with the superpowers is reversed the latter would have neither political leverage nor moral influence to secure base facilities for themselves. And without the assistance of local powers, the superpowers will find it most difficult to entrench themselves in the region.<sup>26</sup>

The other option is regional cooperation. The birth of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is viewed as an opening of a new chapter in South Asian history. The SAARC no doubt has considerable potential for evolving the ground for a common approach to security problems in the region. It has opened up opportunities for its members, big and small, strong and weak, to achieve what they so far could not, "to promote and strengthen collective self reliance and to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems."<sup>27</sup> SAARC has generated certain hopes for the future of South Asian security.

Non-alignment and regional cooperation appear to be integrally linked to each other in the South Asian context. Non-alignment has remained the basic principle of the foreign policy of these countries. In that light security alliance with extraregional powers is contrary to the principles of their foreign policy. Regional security on the other hand can be achieved only when each nation

26. *Ibid.*, p. 158-159

27. Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, p. 3.

in the region and most of the people within each nation, feel a stake in sharing and maintaining regional peace and harmony. The present divergence on the security perceptions of the countries of South Asia is likely to dominate for some time. However, the SAARC experiment is likely to have positive impact to bridge this gulf and subsequently to narrow down the strategic divergences.

The need for a shift in favour of a regional solution to the security threats and tensions in South Asia is self-evident particularly in view of the basically regional roots of the problems. The obvious modicum is an institutional mechanism for cooperation and interaction among the states. The fact on the other hand that South Asia has had the dubious distinction of remaining until recently the only region in the world without any regional cooperation arrangement is also understandable because of the mistrust syndrome as discussed earlier. The emergence of SAARC in this context has been viewed with a mix of some optimism and lot of scepticism. Optimism, because for the first time here is a forum wherein the states have the opportunity for closer interaction, albeit in limited fields. Scepticism, because in the backdrop of the distorted inter-state relations very few observers tend to see much prospects of positive outcome of SAARC. Scepticism also emerges from the fact that SAARC has for the present adopted what has been referred to as a functional approach whereby the association has confined its agenda to some specific socio-economic and rather non-controversial areas. The reason for adopting such an approach has also been explained in terms of the limitations to what can be expected of regional cooperation in the backdrop of the deep-seated problems in inter-state relations.

Whatever may be the ultimate shape of the SAARC and the pattern of its cooperative programmes, the fact remains that potential for regional cooperation in South Asia is enormous. It is also obvious that the prospects of its success would continue to be

debated in the time to come. In the meantime, it is possible to perceive this new forum as an avenue for greater interaction of the states at the official and peoples' level whereby a psycho-social environment may be created leading to greater cooperation in the future and ultimately to a peaceful and stable regional environment. Given the political will and commitment to pursue the process of cooperation tenaciously, the SAARC process may in the future, although indirectly, turn out be a useful mechanism for tension-diffusing and mutual confidence-building, whereby the needs and imperatives for extra-regional linkage would gradually erode. Needless to stress, such eventuality would be conducive to the promotion of the principles of non-alignment.