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SINO-SOVIET RAPPROCHEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIA

Introduction

The world is gradually but steadily undergoing a process of radical change covering almost all spheres of international relations—politico-strategic, socio-economic and even cultural. The demise of Second Cold War and the beginning of a new period of super power *detente* are progressively influencing the overall political climate in the rest of the world. Conflicts everywhere in the world are giving way to the emerging trend of cooperation. One of the most important developments in international relations since the emergence of Gorbachev phenomenon is the Sino-Soviet Summit held in Beijing last May. Its outcomes are of historic significance. The Summit marked the full normalization of relations between the communist giants.

Sino-Soviet rift which initially began as an ideological debate between the two fraternal Communist Parties gradually transformed the two communist giants into worst enemies. Their relations during the last three decades have been characterized by fierce rivalry and acrimony in ideological, political, economic and military-strategic fields. In fact, Sino-Soviet confrontation figured second only to the East-West confrontation in global politics. By virtue of their economic and military strength, and politico-ideological influence, they exerted immense influence in international politics with regard to both conflict and cooperation. As a matter of fact, Sino-Soviet

rivalry has been one of the determinants of international politics during the last three decades. Therefore, any qualitative change in their relations is of great academic as well as practical interest. In particular, the nature and the extent of Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* and its broader implications for the emerging pattern of international relations have drawn the attention of researchers and policy makers all over the world.

However, for South Asia most important question is how Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* would influence the inter-state relations in the region with regard to both conflict and cooperation. While endemic conflicts and the emerging trend of cooperation are rooted in the region itself, involvement of extra-regional great powers have significantly influenced the developments in South Asia. Due to inherent vulnerabilities, the region has always remained prone to great power manipulation. In this regard, Sino-Soviet rivalry from its very beginning exerted tremendous influence on the pattern of regional politics. Since the very inception of cold war, the Soviet Union cautiously cultivated friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation with India. Soviet economic, scientific-technological and military assistance coupled with politico-diplomatic support rendered to India have been of paramount importance in the emergence of the latter as a regional power. On the other hand, for almost three decades, China pursued a policy towards the region that was aimed at undermining India's position. It has encouraged and rendered economic and military assistance as well as moral and political support to most other South Asian countries, particularly India's arch-rival Pakistan in facing Indian challenge. As a matter of fact, along with the US, the Soviet Union and China constituted the most important external factors in shaping the regional power balance in South Asia.

Therefore, the implications of the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations on South Asia became a question of paramount interest to the policy makers as well as academicians in the region. In this

regard, most curious question is how and to what extent these two great powers are going to modify their policy towards South Asia ? Would they transform their competitive involvement in the region to a cooperative one? How they are going to interact with the regional actors as well as the US ? How the regional states are going to adjust their policy in the light of recent changes in Sino-Soviet relations? Finally, how would the Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* influence the inter-state relations in the region in the context of its endemic conflicts and the emerging pattern of regional cooperation?

While the present paper is an attempt to answer these and related questions, it is aimed more at initiating some fresh discussions on the subject. Part I would analyse the nature and extent of Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* in the broader context of contemporary international relations. Part II is designed to examine its implications for inter-state relations in South Asia.

I. Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations

The Deng-Gorbachev Summit represented the culmination of a gradual process of normalisation that began 7 years ago. Moscow's pullout of troops from Afghanistan, the lowering of troops level on the Sino-Soviet border and its pressuring of Vietnam to similarly withdraw from Kampuchea have met Beijing's main conditions for the normalisation of relations. The dramatic changes that have taken place in Sino-Soviet relations must not be seen in isolation from the new trends and processes that have formed in international relations. It is also part of the new Asia-Pacific diplomacy of normalising relations between and among nations of the vast region.

In all likelihood, Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev have not emerged from a summit ideologically re-unified or recommitted to joint support for the revolutionary changes in the non-communist world. Both the countries are too preoccupied with their domestic

affairs for such a reversal to be realistic. Neither side view the recent improvement in their bilateral relations as directed against any third country. Instead, the Soviets view its *rapprochement* with China as a supplement to its *detente* with the West and also as a prelude to the improvement of its relations with Japan. More important, it would be a tremendous positive factor for Gorbachev's efforts to integrate the Soviet Union to the ongoing process of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region in economic, political and socio-cultural fields. For China, the normalization of its relations with the Soviet Union means the removal of the most worrisome threat to its security and more independence in pursuing foreign policy objectives in the region and beyond it. Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* coupled with the achieved level of US-Chinese cooperation would give China greater leverage to deal independently with Japan, Western Europe, East and Southeast Asia and also the increasingly autonomous countries of Eastern Europe. Thus, the thaw is not likely to produce any seismic realignment in Asia. Rather the 1990s will see the maturing of a triangular strategic relationship in which Beijing occupies a position of equidistance between the two super powers—enjoying basically friendly relations with both but aligned with neither. As the weakest side of the triangle, both economically and militarily, China seeks to concentrate its energies on economic development and to minimize the likelihood of military tension with either the US or the Soviet Union, while having the advantage of being wooed by both the super powers. For the United States, the Asian scene became more complex. It can no longer simply concentrate on containing the Soviet Union. The US is yet to readjust its policies in the light of recent changes in the region, the normalization of relations between the Soviet Union and China in particular. Much of its energies are likely to be spent on managing alliance relationship, notably, recurrent economic frictions with Japan and others. Being aware of the emergence of other centres of power, Henry Kissinger suggested that "The American interest requires careful orchestration of an emerging three-cornered diplo-

macy that will involve China, Japan, and the U.S.S.R."¹ Being aware of relative US weaknesses, he also suggested that the US policy "must now become more flexible and more sensitive to shifts in the political and economic balance in Asia."²

Enhanced stability is likely to be the most important result of the Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* and that will benefit all of the Pacific nations—including the US. Gorbachev and Deng have the ability to reduce tension significantly in Asia. Kampuchea is the most critical area in which they could make a contribution to peace. During the Summit, Kampuchea issue was discussed between Deng Xiaoping and Gorbachev apparently without any visible success over critical issues. However, Gorbachev displayed optimism with regard to the prospects for a political settlement to the problem.³ If progress on that front continues, it could lead to a number of other encouraging developments in Asia. Among them would be a reconciliation between Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbours. Another possibility is the establishment of relations between the US and Vietnam in the form of economic cooperation. Another result of Sino-Soviet amity might be a reduction in military spending in the region. Reduced tension between the two powers eventually diminishes the risk of regional conflicts of Afghanistan and Kampuchea type. China and the Soviet Union also strongly feel that they need to reduce tension and cut military spending in order to concentrate on economic reform and the political problems that come with it.

Finally, the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations coupled with the super power *detente* dramatically changed the situation in the Asia-Pacific region with regard to both conflict and cooperation. In the past, tense environment in this triangular relationship significantly

1. Henry A. Kissinger, "Seeking a New Balance in Asia", *Newsweek*, (May 22, 1989), p. 19.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Visit of Mikhail Gorbachev to China, May 15-18, 1989, : Documents and Materials*, (Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1989), see pp. 24, 48-49.

contributed to the emergence and the sustenance of numerous hotbeds of tension in the region which deprived the countries of the region of any common forum for conflict management and resolution as well as economic cooperation. Certain degree of cooperation among them is likely to be the part of new realities in the Asia-Pacific region. In the changed circumstances, it would be possible to discuss the problems of an orderly structure of inter-state relations and common forum for mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

However, better prospects for peace and cooperation in the Third World generated by the recent positive changes in great power relations would not automatically transform into reality. Competitive involvement of super and great powers in Third World conflicts has imposed varied degree of restrictions on the freedom of action of the regional countries. Withdrawal of their involvement from the conflicts would not only increase regional countries' freedom of action, but also their responsibility. However, the Third World countries are not only far from having an orderly structure of inter-state relations but also a viable mechanism of conflict management and resolution. The tasks of the regional countries would be further complicated if the aspirants for regional power status tend to take the advantage of the situation to fulfill their own designs.

II. Implication for Inter-State Relations in South Asia

While Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* is bound to have some impact on South Asia, the way it would influence the regional developments would depend on a number of other factors and actors both regional as well as extra-regional. In a recent article, Stephen Cohen referred to a *pentagon of power*—China, the Soviet Union, the US, India and Pakistan—as the determinant of regional politics in South Asia. However, he has only tangentially referred to smaller South Asian states who are fiercely struggling for foreign policy independence and

also actively pursuing outside contacts with the super powers and China.⁴ In practice, the smaller states have already come to the forefront of regional politics. As a matter of fact, two smaller states Sri Lanka and Nepal along with India constitute the central figures in the conflict scenario in South Asia. Willingly or unwillingly, smaller states are destined to play a much more meaningful role in the regional politics than it is considered by many analysts. Therefore, it would be more reasonable to expect that the peace, stability and security of South Asia would depend not only on the so-called *pentagon of power* but also on the smaller states of the region.

Super power *detente* and Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* coupled with the relaxed atmosphere in international arena have significantly changed the approach of these powers toward South Asia. They no more need and do not demand firm commitment of political support on international issues while developing mutually beneficial cooperation with the regional countries. Similarly, they have significantly reduced and even minimized their competitive involvement in South Asia and have shown a distinct unwillingness to be involved in disputes and conflicts in the region. More important, all the three external powers – China, the Soviet Union and the US – have shown a varied degree of interest in supporting the regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC.

However, neither the disengagement of extra-regional great powers from South Asian conflicts nor the current global trend of settling regional conflicts through negotiations could have any positive effect on the situation in the region. It is mainly due to the fact that conflicts in the region are primarily rooted in the historical, socio-economic and political developments, particularly, the current dynamics of inter-state relations in the region itself. Disengagement of extra-regional powers has only removed the external inputs to the conflicts which have never been determining factor in their outbreak

4. Stephen Philip Cohen, "Security, Peace, and Stability in South Asia: An American Perspective", *Asian Affairs*, (Spring 1988), pp. 39-41.

or sustenance or the outcome. In the changed political matrix, though in low intensity, the area of conflicts has expanded. During the 1980s—as in any early period—India remained central to the conflict scenario in South Asia. However, this time, not Pakistan, but Sri Lanka became the other dominant actor. Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) stationed in Sri Lanka under a highly controversial treaty is desperately fighting the Tamil insurgents with no end in sight. A significant phenomenon of recent conflicts in South Asia is that intra-state violence over ethnic, linguistic or religious issues often assume inter-state character with cross-border implications. In addition to Tamil issue, such was the case with Panjab problem in India, ethnic unrest in Pakistan and Chittagong Hill Tracts problem in Bangladesh and a number of others.

Parallel to recurrent wars, endemic conflicts and deep-rooted mistrust, South Asia is also undergoing a process of regional cooperation within the framework of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Past few years have shown how swiftly politics in South Asia can oscillate between conflict and cooperation, between combativeness and constructive diplomacy. Despite mounting problems in inter-state relations of the member countries, SAARC has held four meetings at the summit level. During these diplomatic interactions, along with the issue of multilateral cooperation, the head of states also, at least privately, discussed the issues of mutual discords. However, the progress of the organization has been very slow. Reasons are mainly the same which we have indicated above—deep-rooted mistrust and recurrent conflicts. Despite mounting problems, SAARC however, survived. It did not suffer any fatal blow as it was feared. The countries of the region, both India and its neighbours appear to have a consensus that while the progress of SAARC is too slow, the organization still has the potential to respond to their aspirations for a better future. To sum up, the politics of conflict is still dominant in the region, but the mere fact that the politics of cooperation has made a beginning in the strife-torn environment generated certain degree of optimism.

The inescapable conclusion which follows is that South Asia's numerous conflicts and its emerging process of cooperation are left primarily to the regional actors. Extra-regional actors, while unwilling to involve themselves in the conflicts, would possibly like to see the emerging process of regional cooperation in South Asia work. Therefore, while assessing the impact of Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* on South Asia, more fruitful exercise would be to look at how the regional actors are taking the advantage of the development. To the Soviet Union, India has been and still remains the most important ally not only in South Asia but also in the Third World at large. Since the outbreak of Sino-Soviet conflict, their friendship was directed against China. Prior to Afghan crisis, the Soviet Union never intended its friendship to be directed against any of the regional countries. Nonetheless, whenever India was involved in a conflict with any of its neighbours, the Soviet Union overtly or covertly supported India and remained conspicuously insensitive to the interest of the smaller South Asian countries. For about three decades, Chinese South Asia policy was single-mindedly directed against India. In this regard, China has encouraged and rendered varied degree of assistance to a number of smaller countries of the region in facing Indian challenge. In this backdrop, our attention would be focused on the changes which are taking place in Sino-Indian relations on the one hand and the relations between the Soviet Union and India's smaller neighbours on the other.

Sino-Indian Relations

India, since its emergence as an independent state never faced an enemy as frightening as China. In 1962, it suffered a humiliating military defeat and lost ninety thousand sq. km. of its territory to China. In addition to a fierce propaganda campaign directed against India, China has also instigated and rendered support to ultra-left terrorism in India. Nonetheless, India's policy toward China has always been realistic and much more cautious. Its long-term objectives have been rather conservative. Despite its military preparation

and the cultivation of cooperation with the Soviet Union on anti-Chinese ground, India never sought a military victory over China. Instead, its efforts were directed at neutralizing Chinese hostilities toward her and Chinese support to smaller South Asian countries *vis-a-vis* her. Finally, India sought to settle its problems with China on honourable terms and to establish normal or if possible, friendly state-to-state relations between the two countries. However, cultural revolution and subsequent political turmoil in China, its export of revolution, xenophobia and isolationism made any Sino-Indian dialogue virtually impossible for decades to come.

Emergence of a pragmatist leadership under Deng Xiaoping in post-Mao China and its radical changes in domestic and foreign policy, particularly its opening to the outside world have been viewed in India as a significant positive development. India showed a distinct willingness in increasing contacts with China. When post-Mao and post-Brezhnev leadership were inching toward a *rapprochement*, India was the first country in South Asia to be concerned with. Changing attitude of Chinese leadership toward the outside world and the prospects for Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* represented both an opportunity as well as a challenge to Indian diplomacy. India viewed the moment as opportune for a fresh initiative aimed at normalizing Sino-Indian relations. At the same time, it was also concerned that it may not have the extent of Soviet support *vis-a-vis* China as enjoyed during the past two-plus decades. These are the most important reasons why India herself set off in quest of *rapprochement* with China.

International relations in South Asia would be influenced by both Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian *rapprochement*. Impact of neither one on the region could be measured isolating it from the other. If Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* is not followed by Sino-Indian *rapprochement* or at least visible improvement in their bilateral relations, Indian diplomacy would face some adverse situation. It would make India uncertain about Soviet commitments to her *vis-a-vis* China. Its smaller neighbours would have more manoeuvrability in regional as well as

international affairs *vis-a-vis* her. It would also increase India's compulsion to improve relations with the West which is also in good terms with China. However, such a scenario is highly unlikely.

In recent years, both the countries have demonstrated political will and preparedness to compromise with a view to ending the *impasse* in their bilateral relations. They have resumed negotiations on border dispute which are being conducted in the atmosphere of mutual understanding. Rajiv Gandhi met Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese high officials during his well publicized visit to China in March this year. The visit was followed by significant increase in contacts between the two countries and visible improvement in their bilateral relations. One Chinese analyst even referred to the visit as marking the beginning of a new chapter in the relations between the two countries.⁵

In the circumstances, if Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* is followed by Sino-Indian *rapprochement*, it would further strengthen India's position in South Asia and much beyond it at the expense of its smaller neighbours. For almost three decades, China pursued a policy towards the region that was aimed at undermining India's position. It has encouraged and rendered moral and political support and economic and military assistance to a number of South Asian countries, particularly India's arch-rival Pakistan in facing Indian challenge. Sino-Indian *rapprochement* would deprive these countries of such support.

A shift in Chinese policy towards the region with regard to India's endemic conflicts with its neighbours is already visible. Despite the fact that the deadlock in Indo-Nepalese relations was caused by—among others—Nepalese acquisition of Chinese arms, China cautiously refrained from assuming an anti-Indian posture in the conflict.

5. Such an assessment was made by Chinese South Asia specialist, Wang Hongui during a Talk delivered at BISS on May 22, 1989.

While China seems to have reservation about India's new role in South Asia, it has carefully avoided expressing this reservation in an unequivocal language. Moreover, China is gradually but steadily distancing itself from intra-regional feuds in South Asia. It has even privately advised its friends in the region, Pakistan in particular, to resolve their disputes with India through negotiations. A careful observer of Sino-Indian relations can not but be impressed with the degree of success that India achieved in its relations with China. It has skillfully neutralised Chinese support toward smaller countries of the region *vis-a-vis* her.

Smaller States' Relations with the Soviet Union

Following the demise of the Second Cold War and the Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* none of the other South Asian countries—who by and large identified themselves with the West and China—could break any new ground in their relations with the Soviet Union or any of its allies. Bitter relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan caused by their competitive involvement in Afghan imbroglio persist with no change for the better in sight. With Sri Lanka's predicament, it appears to lack a political will to increase interactions with the Soviet Union. Bangladesh has no visible compulsion that could refrain her from further developing mutually beneficial cooperation with the Soviet Union or its allies on non-ideological basis. Nonetheless, there has not been any substantial improvement in relations between Moscow and Dhaka. Only exception appears to be Nepal, which despite its political deadlock with India and a virtual economic blockade imposed on it by the latter could convince the Soviets to reach an agreement that envisages the supply of Soviet oil to Kathmundu. Does the Soviet-Nepalese agreement under discussion constitute a signal on the part of the Soviet Union to the smaller South Asian countries that its policy towards the region is not a captive of Indo-Soviet friendship? It would be too naive to reach such a conclusion so quickly. However, it would also be imprudent to ignore the development totally.

Apart from this development, relations between the Soviet Union and its allies on the one hand, and the smaller South Asian countries on the other, remained stagnant with no breakthrough in sight. Now, the question is why? The reasons are mainly subjective.

Approach of these countries towards India and Indo-Soviet relations as well as the recent changes in international relations in general suffers from certain degree of parochialism. They still view the world through the prism of Cold War that had been abandoned by its initiators. Since the great powers have reached an understanding among themselves on the cardinal issues of contemporary international politics and substantially reduced their competitive involvement in the Third World, they no more need the type of firm support from the smaller countries as needed during the hey days of the Cold War. It has also enabled them to lessen their commitment to the Third World countries. On the positive side, it became possible for the smaller countries to develop friendly relations with one power bloc without antagonizing or even keeping friendly relations with the other intact. Smaller South Asian countries however, are taking too much time to come to terms with the current realities of international politics.

Another, even more disprofiting parochial approach is that the Soviet Union is seen by them more as an ally of India than as a super power with its independent interests in the region. Recent Soviet moves to diversify its external ties in all possible directions went unnoticed. It is not being realized that while the Soviet Union values its relations with India, it also would like to have direct channel of communication and a certain degree of cooperation with other South Asian countries. For a super power, it can not be prudent to put all its eggs just in one basket. There are obvious reasons for Moscow to be cautious. Over the recent years, India has significantly improved its relations with the West, including the US. In addition to political understanding and economic cooperation, it has also developed wide-ranging military cooperation with the West which

helped diversification of defence procurement.⁶ In this regard, recent improvement of Indo-US relations seems to have far reaching implications. US approval of India's intervention in the Maldives to suppress an attempted *coup* is a likely indication that both the countries are moving toward an understanding on the role of India in South Asia.⁷ In that event, New Delhi's need for Moscow would substantially decrease. Another important factor, India and the US are developing certain degree of military cooperation.⁸ All these can not go unnoticed in Moscow.

Concluding Remarks

The world is undergoing a process of departure from the cold war to *detente*. The changes in super power and East-West relations are progressively influencing the over-all political climate in the rest of the world. Conflicts everywhere in the world are giving way to the emerging trend of cooperation. Deng-Gorbachev Summit and the *rapprochement* between the two communist giants further strengthened the on-going process of departure from conflict to cooperation in global scale.

However, the impact of all these developments, Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* in particular, on South Asia has been somehow distorted. In contrast to the global trend, the area of conflicts in South Asia has expanded. There are also fertile ground for the emergence of new conflicts. Deep-rooted mistrust, historical antagonism, bilateral disputes, transformation of intra-state conflicts into inter-state one, all have been compounded by India's ambitious bid for regional power status and the failure of smaller South Asian countries

6. SIPRI Yearbook 1988, *World Armament and Disarmament*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 180: and also, *Strategic Survey, 1986-1987* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1987), p. 144.

7. See, *Time*, (April 3, 1989), p. 7.

8. Dilip Mukerjee, "U.S. Weaponry for India", *Asian Survey*, (Vol. XXII, No. 6, June 1987), pp. 595-614.

either to challenge India effectively or reach a deal with the latter concerning her role in the region.

Benefits drawn from Sino-Soviet *rapprochement* by the South Asian countries have been rather uneven. Only India could take the full advantage of the situation. While maintaining friendly relations with the Soviet Union, it has significantly improved its relations with China as well. Most important outcome of recent developments in Sino-Indian relations is that India has successfully neutralised Chinese support to smaller countries of the region *vis-a-vis* her. All available indications suggest that the two countries are gradually but steadily moving towards a *rapprochement*. This coupled with the US acquiescence to India's dominant role in South Asia have enabled the latter to emerge as a gendarme in the region with a high degree of impunity. On the other hand, smaller countries of the region who in the recent past by and large identified themselves with China and the US *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union could not make any meaningful breakthrough in their relations with the latter. Their approach toward the Soviet Union suffers from certain degree of parochialism which is depriving them from keeping pace with the changing pattern of relations.

The most striking feature of contemporary inter-state relations in South Asia is that numerous conflicts—at least for the time being—overshadowed the emerging process of regional cooperation. Enthusiasm generated by the emergence of SAARC is in the wane. While the region badly needs an orderly structure of inter-state relations and a viable mechanism for conflict management and resolution the issues remain conspicuously absent from the agenda of regional politics.

However, it can not go indefinitely. Barring drought-suffering black Africa, there is not a single geographical region in the world that is as impoverished as South Asia. All the countries of the region either belong to or are very close to the group of countries listed by the World Bank as least developed. The region is depen-

dent on the external world for its mere survival. Such a region can hardly afford to insulate itself from the radical changes in the international arena. The difficulties suffered by it and the tasks ahead would continue to create tremendous pressure on South Asia for evolving an enlightened structure of mutual relations based on shared interests and mutual consensus.