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REMAKING SOUTH ASIA : MAJOR TRENDS AND IMPERATIVES

South Asia is looked at by the world today for its two conspicuous but contradictory phenomena. First, the World Bank tabulates the region as the most prominent poverty pocket where poverty alleviation projects ably draw the rich donors' attention. Second, South Asia scales the chart of top arms importers in the "Third World" that engages the attention of world military powers toward a region which for their critical strategic purposes had receded to obscurity recently. This irony of South Asia is further exacerbated by the nuclear non-proliferation agenda to which the contending powers of the region have responded diametrically.

National tragedies caused by wars, natural calamities and tyrannical regimes were South Asian history of the past. Unfortunate though even the might of a nation like India fell to pieces when it had to mortgage its massive gold reserve in British Bank to survive. India's military power for which it had spent foreign exchange worth \$ 27 billion in the past decade by importing arms only did not ensure

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its survival. It is still a struggling nation-state after four decades of democracy that has constantly inspired its neighbours to work toward a democratic community in the region. Success that India could claim in the political community is its democratic survival amidst several weaknesses. And in the 1990s, its foremost political preference in the region was achieved: with the exception of Bhutan, all of its South Asian neighbours are democracy today. Implicit in India's political preference was its national security stakes underlined by the assumption that democracy in its neighborhood would certainly relieve these nations from their anti-Indian phoney nationalism and bring about a change in their attitude to consolidate peace in the region. Aligned with this belief system were the cold war proclivities that sustained its maneuverabilities while playing non-bipartisan role despite its avid commitment to nonalignment. Its national security ambitions blossomed; India is credited to be instrumental in changing the face of South Asia in the post-World War II world by "integrating" one nation and creating another one.

But the success by which nation-states today are measured and respected is far from India's reach along with its democratic neighbours. India's economy is at the low ebb and South Asia today is critically vulnerable due to its own internal economic malaise. As a result, South Asia is neither in a position to mount economic bargain to exchange its resources with technology nor is it a region whose merchandise exports thrive in international market place. Hence South Asia today is increasingly being marginalized in a world where products and commodities competitiveness determined the power profile of a nation-state or a region. The grey area with which South Asia should coexist at the moment in the hope of salvaging efforts by any of the power centres or in anticipation of massive assistance from either the west or Japan have been pervasively demonstrated once its lucrative market - particularly that of India's economic ties with the former Soviet Empire and the Middle East crumbled.

FOUR MAJOR TRENDS

Notwithstanding this unimpressive resume South Asia is promising to some extent as a region crucially conferred on it by the four major trends now appearing which could critically influence its stability and progress. First among them is the spread of democracy in the Subcontinent which could positively contribute to intra-regional interactions without any foil or baiting on the regime survivability. The once widespread feeling that the ruling monarchists and the military juntas were tempted to maintain their anti-democratic proclivity, and thus thrived on the adversial relations with India because of the latter's secularism and liberalism which were the twin throats to the formers' domestic survival no longer hold ground, though a vibrant rejuvenation of nationalism could still be difficult proposition to cope with. Given a fundamental institutional change in countries like Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh which form a broken arch in India's periphery, it is both a challenge and opportunity to India to decide to constitute a sort of relationship with these countries (to test its assumption as stated above) by initiating similar or different policy from the past.

Priority-wise, these newly established democracies would be more concerned with the difficult institutionalization processes internally that may require a conducive time-frame for them to acquire a national consensus and cohesion in communities where return to authoritarianism is not unusual. Even India as the world's largest democracy was not immune to this tendency between 1975-1977. However, in the crucible of South Asian history, India is more than equal compared to its neighbours. It can salvage its neighbour's woes without compromising this position; it can facilitate their interests in the region without any daunting effect on its position: it can bargain for minimum without sacrificing its national interests because the paramountcy of India's national interests rests on its ability to make

South Asia itself a cohesive region in the multipolar world. Encouraged by India's sustenance to the democratic process, the neighbouring countries could be tempted to bridge the image gap between India and themselves the implications of which in the past had unfortunately projected even countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as the fierce enemies of India. Though compatibility of the political system (as experiences show) is not sufficient to remove tensions inter-mitently beclouding inter-state relations in South Asia, it could perhaps be a step forward in the process of relieving tensions as democracies broaden the canvass of participation and help remove barriers that restrict politics among nations to the negotiation tables alone.

A second significant development in the region pertains to the economic trends leading to the nightmarish awareness of the South Asian situation in the world. The plight of the South Asian economy is that it is neither internally cohesive nor externally conducive. Understandably, a low level of economic interaction among the South Asian countries with certain exception to Indo-Nepal trade, remains a problem area in the process of economic cooperation. Partly because the economies of the region are mutually competitive rather than complimentary and partly because of the fear of Indian domination and destabilization of their indigenuous economies, cooperation remain a cliché in the region. No country in South Asia would like to lose their economic autonomy in the absence of the rate of returns that the potentiality of cooperation bear and recreate for themselves the fate of landlocked Nepal. Patterns of economic interactions of the past four decades suggest that India's share in South Asian trade fluctuated between 1 to 2 percent of its total trade; its investment revolved around 1 percent and economic assistance remained concentrated in Bhutan compared to its previous favourites Nepal and Bangladesh. Rarely are other South Asian countries trading with each other. The point to remember here is that they are still marginalized countries in South

Asia and are continuing their search for identifying potential areas of cooperation under the SAARC aegis.

Unfortunately, South Asia is also marginalized in international trading regime. South Asia has fallen far behind the rapidly changing economic relations the world over which conclusively became a detriment to its growth. Though India in the region has been able to acquire certain techno-economic clouts through "selective disengagement"¹ policy, it has become a high cost economy in the final analysis losing compatibility and competitiveness in the international market. Economically, a "caged Tiger"² India is a midget in international terms which also suffers from common diseases characteristics of a nation in doom. Its double digit inflation, foreign exchange crunch, budget deficit, balance of payment crisis, along with mounting debt problems have crumbled its assertive self-image as a "near super power" and put it in the category of a nation in hardly better position than its regional neighbours.

A close scrutiny of the economies of South Asia discernibly suggests that the countries in the region are deeply rooted in macroeconomic imbalances and despite certain promising efforts the prospects of growth are still uncertain. Widespread poverty has stole the show in the economic performance of the countries of the region. And even India whose anti-poverty drive was commendable to certain extent stood today in contrast to its promise and claims. The reality becomes more comprehensible when India's international economic standing is measured by its 0.4 percent accounts of the total world trade in 1990.

Common anxieties caused by the economic woes could positively contribute in reacting to this stark failure of governance and stir

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1. Baldev Raj Nayar, *India's Quest for Technological Independence: Policy Foundation and Policy Change* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1983) p. 533.
 2. See, *The Economist*, "India: Small World : A Survey of India" (London), May 4, 1991, p. 5.

regionalism in consonance with the objective of SAARC. Improbable it may look at the moment, a decision in the capitals of all the South Asian countries toward this effort, however, could critically alter the economic interaction process in the region without the realization of which democracy could neither flourish nor flower. Hopefully, a decision toward this end may strengthen the South Asian autonomy, transparently demonstrate its ability to settle manifold misunderstandings by gradually eliminating the sense of distrust - the most gnawing problem of regional discord so far.

The third trend is allied with the second which is crucially reflected in India's power potentialities in managing both of its intra-state and inter-state relations. Despite its high-wire military profile and resources at disposition to face any eventuality, India's ability as a major power is sliding rapidly in the course of managing its security environment. Its military and economic superiority vis-a-vis neighbours bear negligible impact in their respective decision making process and remain mostly in-effective pertaining to issues having cross-border implications. India's military expenditure, though moderate while comparing to its GDP and on per capita basis, has been classified differently while measuring on international terms on similar expenditure. Apart from its indigenous arms producing arsenal (which is the largest in the Third World and comparable to that of Brazil), India is classified as the largest arms importer in the Third World by both SIPRI 1991 and ACDA 1992 reports. The figures of arms imports by India disqualify its own perception and position on Pakistan being a security threat. During 1985-89 along India acquired \$16.1 billions of arms as compared to \$ 2 billion by Pakistan in the same period.⁴ May be an earlier realization of this economically

3. Mathew Thomas, "Rapid Deployment Force for India: A New Concept in First Strike Strategy," *Indian Defence Review*, January 1986, p. 67.

4. ACDA, "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1990", (Washington D.C: U. S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1992); SIPRI, *Yearbook 1991, World Armaments and Disarmament*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

unviable competition in conventional arms race had encouraged the elder Bhutto and the bomb lobby in Pakistan to go nuclear to ensure its deterrence capability which is yet to be tested but has been perceived theoretically to be working arrangement as was in the case of the super-power during the Cold War. This trend is still fraught with danger and averting such a misperception rests with the good offices of India and Pakistan both of which are still wrapped in the womb of mistrust and habitually fear of good neighbourly relations because of past practice of living with mutual hostilities.

So long as Indo-Pak relations fails to improve no amount of efforts could change the South Asian situation as it is today. India's best efforts to become a dynamic regional power in the 1980s pursuant to its long-held objective resulted in disaster as it did not lead to moderation in Indo-Pak relations nor made India more respectable than what it seemingly was after 1971 war. The instrument of power it chose in the 1980s was definitely wrong and coercive negotiation strategies did not make it credible. Its positions were tailored to its interests which fluctuated from one end to another. For example, it was so concerned for regional autonomy for Sri Lankan Tamils but never thought of giving the same autonomy to Kashmiries, Northeast Frontier people and the Punjabis. As a result it took coercive measures both internally and externally which complicated its policy approaches that resulted into tragedies. India made sacrifices of both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi at the alter of its policy failures, which as a consequence gave birth to terrorism. The tragedy of India was more compounded when the IPKF sent to Sri-Lanka as saviours turned out to be savages for the Tamils. Neither had its decision to fence the entire Indo-Bangladesh border contributed to improve their bilateral relations nor relations between Nepal and India became "special" when Kathmandu was squeezed economically.

Against Pakistan and China - two of its enemies - India demonstrated its military might through "Operation Brasstacks" and

"Chequerboard" in 1987 though fortunately conflict was averted in time.⁵ Although these exercises were neatly in the category of the coercive diplomacy or the "use of force without war" strategy advocated by an outfit of the Ministry of Defence, the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, neither helped India to modify the links with its neighbours and control the region to its liking. The problem with which India began breathing life after 1974 is still there despite its acquired status of a nuclear and ballistic missile power. While pursuing its legitimate interests to control the region as the largest nation, India has acquired a capability to defeat Pakistan but Pakistan has also simultaneously enhanced capability vis-a-vis India, making an Indian victory costly as well as more problematic.

The issues that India and Pakistan in particular now face rarely demand military solution. Neither the Siachen impasse nor the Kashmir problem could be resolved with the use of force nor the problem of terrorism and the cross border drug traffickings could be dealt with by fencing the entire Indo-Pak border as decided recently. These are not the issues that simply pit Pakistan against India or vice versa. These issues have transnational ramifications and could be resolved with cooperation not animosity. On the other hand, some important issues now confronting the region are not geostrategic. These are rather ecostrategic on which possibly the destiny of South Asia rests. Even cooperation of Bhutan and Nepal could be catalyst in the realm of water resources management and ecological control which could not be confined to certain political boundaries. The environmental damages caused in Nepal due to excessive deforestation could be one dimension of insecurity and the fallout of this ecological imbalance on India's developmental aspirations in Bihar and the Uttar

5. Ravi Rikhye, *The Militarization of Mother India*, (New Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1990), and *The War That Never Was: The Story of India's Strategic Failures*, (New Delhi: Prism India Paperbacks, 1989).

Pradesh - economically the ever declining states - could be another. Though trade embargoes could be maximally used by India to control Nepal geostrategically, the problems created by the non-military dimension of security could be equally threatening for India if not resolved through cooperation. Evidently, the understanding reached between the Government of Nepal and India on the agenda of joint exploration of water resources during the December 1991 summit was a development toward removing the persistent disagreements encompassing the issue, the question of the equitable distribution of the output is still under a cloud. Tanakpur was an unilateral concession given to a mega-state by a mini-state neighbour but the precedent based on this premises while negotiating on the exploration of other rivers would certainly be retrogressive to cooperation. Hence strategies that hamstrung cooperation should be avoided at the outset and opportunities must be created with the participation of Bangladesh to work on lasting agreement to save the region from ecological degradation and work for prosperous future. It is desirable in this context that India should indulge in reassessing the strategic approaches it had undertaken so far, avoid treating countries like Nepal and Bhutan in terms of "quasi-colonial" states⁶ and offer to and invite for their collaboration to turn their approaches favourably disposed toward the common regional interests.

Finally, the most notable and strategically critical trend that appeared in South Asia in the 1990s is the general decline in the involvement of major powers or the extra-regional powers. None of the extra-regional powers previously contending for influence in the region is now anxious to cater for one regional country against another. Worries of their intervention or involvement in regional disputes or even in the low intensity conflicts like Kashmir are now

6. See for instance, the Report of the Indian Defence Research Team in *Indian Defence Review*, January 1990, p. 12.

things of the past. Perhaps the denouement came after the end of the cold war, but it was also apparent with Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech in 1986 and his China first policy which critically reoriented the Soviet policy in essence from the India bias. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan which was followed by the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in mid-1989⁷ thus released South Asia from three decades of stifle between the nuclear powered Communist giants. Another contending power - the United States - drew satisfaction out of the withdrawal of the Soviet interests in South Asia which was virtually reflected in its policy change as it stopped aiding Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment. Later the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 changed the entire script of the strategic situation around the world including South Asia.

THE CHANGE AND THE INDIAN PRIMACY

Any dispassionate observer of the South Asian scene today would agree with the point that the region has been left for the first time in its history to independently decide on its internal problems and evolve a structure of regional relationship to which external powers may assume a benign response.⁸ Apparently, India's responsibility in this context, if it really desires to be the leader of the region, has increased a lot more than before when it was contending for the role. Unfortunately, what is missing at the moment is the fact that India appears to be still not prepared to undertake this responsibility with appropriate policy decisions.

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7. See the Sino-Soviet Joint Communiqué, June 1989 that invalidates the Soviet obligations to come to India's rescue against China. Both Communist powers had agreed not to use force directly or through the use of territory, territorial waters or air space of any third country adjacent to the other.
 8. For details see, Dhruva Kumar, "Rethinking South Asian Security," (forthcoming), (Program in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security, University of Illinois, Urbana).

The need of the post-cold war period is in fact a policy reconsideration on the basis of which new initiatives could be taken and congenial atmosphere could be created to restructure the relationship between nations. But the foreign policy decisions made in India pertaining to the regional relationships are yet to breakout from the past prejudices. For instance, India still loves to maintain an uncompromising posture on nuclear non-proliferation issue and accuse Pakistan of being a troubleshooter in the region but concedes that it will talk on the agenda with the United States. Second, Indian sensitivities to its neighbours' domestic policies having broader ramification on its national security are yet to recede. Apart from now irrelevant case of the Chinese technicians' presence in Nepal Tarai, India is also feeling insecure in contemplation of certain level of autonomy that its neighbours may provide to some ethnic people of the respective country. This fear was expressed recently when the Sri Lankan government in its talks with the LTTE remotely mentioned this possibility. The knee-jerk reaction to this proposition (which was unlikely) was not only surprising while compared with its past position on the same issue, it also revealed the inner-core that represents the self-image of India in the regional affairs.⁹ These points need no elaboration but these lead to certain other points which require some discussion. First, as Gupta suggests, the Indian mindset is still diseased by the self-righteous hierarchy consciousness that as a consequence has led its policy makers to treat its neighbours as inferior.¹⁰ But this same attitude has also given birth to the "climate of psychological insecurity" the resultant effect of which was the evident conflict interaction in the region. Second, may be this mindset had prominently governed the Indian thinking while rejecting the June

9. For details see, Thomas Abraham, "Indian Commissioner Meets Premadasa," *The Hindu*, March 15, 1992, p. 6.

10. Anirudha Gupta, "A Brahminic Framework of Power in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 7, 1990, pp. 711-714.

1991 proposal of Pakistan for five power conference on making South Asia a nuclear weapons free zone. Even if one were to understand the Indian position and perspectives on the nuclear weapons issue correctly, its desire to open up the issue with the United States not Pakistan gives discernible impression that India really feels uncomfortable while dealing with its regional neighbours even on issue that could be resolved bilaterally.

If the above features were to be taken as guiding post to the future of South Asia under democracy, a liberal democratic perception suitable only to the central authority in the domestic settings of each country of the region would hardly make the present situation any different unless democracy represents autonomous not autocratic zeal in the decision making processes in the region. India as leader in South Asia has a role in breaking out of this autocratic tradition in foreign policy decision making process and leave the habit to ask others to follow suit. This is hegemonic and India will be hardly able to pursue it indefinitely because of its power position in the world today. Although militarily, economically and politically, India is still the most stable society compared to its neighbours and many of them are its cultural and territorial offsprings, its failure to lead belies its propensity to dominate even if certain features favouring Indian hegemonism in the region exist.¹¹ South Asia in the 1990s again does not provide a suitable ground for India to retain such aspirations for various reasons.

Foremost and the most critical reason as to why Indian autocratic imposition of decision on others is unrealistic is due to democratic institutionalization process taking shape in the region. Allied with this is the cases of greater demand for autonomy within the federal

11. For a critical approach to hegemonic theory see, Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organizations*, Autumn 1985.

structure of countries like India and Pakistan. Implicit in these cases is the need to liberalize the control of the central authority and once decentralization in reality occurs, a loose federal system in India and Pakistan may be more congenial for cooperation than at present. This may in the long-run ameliorate the now persistent ethnic conflict and help manage the separatist movements presently plaguing the region.

Alternately, India can act militarily, as its current policy suggests in the internal context and the way it took interventionist measures in managing its external affairs. But, as experiences show, both measures were disastrous. It gave sufficient ground for terrorism to thrive in both the Kashmir and Punjab and India today is considered a terrorist-infested country in the foreign eyes.¹² Intervention in these areas may lead to war between India and Pakistan (which was averted recently in March) which may be discreditable to Indian interests itself. None of the foreign powers is likely to side with India in another Indo-Pak war and this may provide them sufficient cause to go nuclear too and this situation would be harrowing both regionally and internationally. But the inter-state and intra-state ethnic conflicts would remain unchanged unless non-military measures are effectively used in resolving these.

Second, the lessons of the past have evidently determined that a clear and unabashed military superiority hardly helps maintain unquestionable leadership in the region. Arms race is a story that encompasses linkages of different plots with no foreseeable end but the effect could be alike and may resemble the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Militarization of South Asia has wider ramifications and

12. Richard P. Cronin and Barbara L. Lepoer, "India: Regional Dissidence and Human Rights Problems," (Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, August 2, 1991); and "Patterns of Global Terrorism," (Washington D.C. A report compiled and issued by the State Department, May 1992).

the likely fall out could be similar efforts in the Gulf and South East Asian region. Possibly, the recently concluded Indo-US naval exercise may produce different results: for the Islamic countries the Indian intentions are always a suspect. May be Iran and Pakistan could opt for a new alignment and try to ensure both Chinese and Indonesian support to begin a new game plan. Such an arrangement may not help India to establish its preferred regional system in South Asia.

Third, India's techno-economic strength is not in such a state that could confer benefits to its regional neighbours and hence make all subsequently subservient to New Delhi's interests. Hence, it does not possess even an ability to obtain consent from its neighbours to realize its aspired goal. The current state of Indian economy with its growing aid dependence reflects the greivous South Asian situation in which power politics had played predominant role to make nations near-bankrupt.

Whatever the situation, the past could still be the guide if one were to learn from it. First, one must, without any hesitation, accept the fact that the draw down of foreign power entanglement in South Asia is the best chance to reconstruct the strategic context of the region and no country in the region should again try to forge such an alignment, even to a limited extent, if one were to avoid the counter-alignment and the prospect that may encourage the reactment of the past. Second, the feature of the compactness of the region suggests that the notion of the unitary nature of national sovereignty hardly provides any solution to regional problems now ranging from ecological, ethnic, economic as well as political ones giving away to the tendency of fragmentation. This unitary notion which is allied with the concept of a strong central authority could only be managed from now on at the enormous cost of violence and civilian massacre. Retrospectively, the operationalization of this concept in South Asia had engulfed the neighbours in four major wars and unaccountable amount of economic losses and deaths.

Wars were caused by the notion of insecurity to national security (sovereignty). Wars were less damaging when national security was put at stake compared with the civilian violence that occurred in South Asia when power of the central authority to govern was questioned. According to one conservative estimate, out of 2.4 million dead from four wars and several sporadic violences in South Asia in the past, only 0.54 million were war deads and the rest 1.86 million were massacred during the ethno-political violences between 1947-1989.¹³

The time today has warranted a rethinking on thinking. The concept of national sovereignty on unitary line has failed to serve the purpose of either national security or sovereignty itself. As mentioned above one nation has disappeared by a majority decision and another was created on the ethnic line. Further autonomy to the national minorities would not resolve but compound the problem as such autonomy could not be given and confined to a nation-state alone (the case of Indo-Sri Lankan relations amply demonstrates this point).

Unless a consensus is reached in all the nations of South Asia the present scene will remain intact. The consensus could be reached first on the foreign policy matters without any inhibition to consolidate the regional stability. Although, a similar foreign policy stand could foster India's ambition of becoming a great regional power, this status would be a consequence of regional cooperation and its relative importance in the region would be a measure for conflict resolution not escalation as is commonly viewed.¹⁴ Following this, there should be an agreement on regional support for any neighbour in trouble because any problem a neighbour faces has a broader ramification as in the case of ethnic, ecological, and economic problems. A regional consensus also should emerge that the territorial integrity of all the member states must be

13. Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1991*, (Washington D.C. World Priorities, 1991) p. 24.

14. Dhruva Kumar, "Rethinking South Asian Security," *op. cit.*, p. 26.

preserved and not violated. On the basis of this South Asia should try to develop a loose confederation system modelled on the EC if possible wherein the inter and intra-state autonomy will enmesh with the consolidation of South Asian solidarity.

SUMMING UP

The new wave of South Asian democracy will hardly make any sense if democracy in the region is to rest with the power of majority over minority and regulate a system of governance with routine elections, only when the people irrespective of their caste and creed are remembered by the political elites. The need of South Asia today is a responsible polity that democracy ensures and an economic system, not military power, where people does not starve. Perhaps a better prospect for South Asia awaits if the countries in the region will be able to manage to feed their people and stop further decline if not succeed in attaining a reasonable rate of growth of the economy during the last decade of the Twentieth Century.