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EMERGING STRATEGIC TRENDS IN SOUTH ASIA*

I. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented structural changes in contemporary international relations accompanying the end of the Cold War period have shaken the strategic equations in various parts of the world. The basic foundations of the post-World War II global order, particularly the bipolar confrontation between the East and West, have been shattered. As the international situation continues to be fluid, the features of the 'new world order' remain far from fully comprehensible. Among the least debatable is the indication that from the debris of the Cold War, the United States has forced itself on top of a pyramidal global politico-strategic power structure.

The withdrawal of Moscow's involvement, influence and interest in various Third World regions preceded the demise and disintegration of Soviet Union as a superpower. The United States proceeded promptly not only to assume the role of the undisputed superpower worldwide, but also to establish its monopoly as the sole intervening

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factor in Third World conflicts and issues. Soviet Union's demise was taken by some of the Third World hegemon-aspirants as the opening of an era of opportunity for reassertion of their regional power and ambition. The experience of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait brought frustration to such ambitions while the Gulf War itself provided added incentive to the US to assert its own perceived position as the 'international policemen'. Washington appears now to be keen to retain the authority to define the parameters of the 'autonomy' of the regional powers in keeping with its own strategic objectives. To the extent this would be acceptable to such powers the new world order may feature a new version of the 'proxy-power policy' of the lone superpower, with variations depending on specific regional conditions.

The objective of this paper is to examine the emerging strategic trends in South Asia. It begins with a review of the South Asian strategic matrix, particularly highlighting the regional factors which have historically been more predominant than extra-regional ones. It then moves on to survey the recent strategic developments and changes in the region. The main trends are summarized in the last part.

II. SOUTH ASIAN STRATEGIC MATRIX REVISITED

South Asia is a vast region covering over four million square kilometers where over a fifth of the world's population live. The region of South Asia (comprising seven member-states of SAARC) has right from the days of British withdrawal witnessed tense relations within the component states. The geo-political realities inherited as colonial legacies provided the roots of such relations. The regional political geography of the region, for one, is hardly demarcated on any clear-cut definitions. Political boundaries of the states are "neither the product of history nor geography, but determined artificially on lines of religion and ethnicity ... Naturally enough, the boundaries between

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are drawn along religious lines and are most contentious ones."¹ The complex ethno-religious dispersion defying geographical boundaries has resulted in in-built tensions and conflicts in inter-state relations in the region. Ethnic, religious and cultural affinities — which could otherwise have been the basis of strength and unity — have ironically become the source of divisiveness and instability. Most of the South Asian inter-state conflicts — a great majority of them with India involved as a party — have ethnic, religious or cultural overtones.

Like most other developing societies, the South Asian countries are also 'nations in hope'. Problems common to such nations, like those of identity, integration, legitimacy, participation, institution-building, leadership and accountability are more or less prevalent in most of them. The South Asian states generally represent low and divergent levels and patterns of political development. The divergences are the outcome of the varying degrees of socio-economic development and political turmoils that have been experienced. Most of the states emerged with shared colonial past, similar political experiences and common social values. Divergences, nevertheless are significant. In terms of type of government, India and Sri Lanka are recognized as functioning democracies with varying degree of success. The Indian experience of democracy has had severe tests in recent years beginning since the emergency period of 1975-77, while Sri Lanka had to compromise democratic norms more recently as a result of ethnic crisis. The two are nevertheless considered relatively success stories among Third World democracies. Pakistan and Bangladesh, particularly the latter, have in the beginning of the 1990s witnessed sweeping democratic transition. But in a longer term perspective, both these countries have yet to institutionalize democracy

1. Gowher Rizvi, "The Role of Smaller States in South Asian Complex", in Bary Buzan, Gowher Rizvi, *et. al.*, *South Asian Insecurity and Great Powers*, Macmillan, London, 1986, p. 128.

and to confirm the capability of political system to keep military out of its tendency to intervene in politics. Nepal's transition to democracy is also yet to be firmly rooted. Bhutan retains the authority of monarchy as the dominant institution while Maldives has been practicing one-party rule.

Divergences are manifest in values and principles followed in governance and statecraft. The Indian political system is professedly a blend of democracy, federalism, socialism (not any more ever since the collapse of the ideology) and secularism, though these lofty ideals have remained far from fully translated into reality. Bangladesh started off with more or less same principles as the fundamentals in statecraft, but later changed the course towards increasing influence of religion, though more as an instrument of political profiteering than as the trend reflecting national consensus. Pakistan has Islam as the basis of its political system while Maldives is an Islamic society with relatively lesser influence of religion in politics. Nepal remains under Hindu influence whilst Bhutan and Sri Lanka are Buddhist societies.

The ethno-religious dispersion in South Asia, a creation of history and geo-politics, has been contributing towards tensions in intra and inter-state political dynamics. Ethno-religious violence, in many cases with cross-border ramifications particularly with an India factor in almost all cases has rendered South Asia a proverbial 'ethnic cauldron'.² The maltreatment of religious and ethnic minorities has always been a constant issue between neighbours. Alleged involvement of Pakistan in the Sikh problem in India and of India in the ethno-regional problems in Pakistan and tribal issue in Bangladesh are examples of influence of ethno-religious dispersion in the embittered matrix of inter-state relations. The autonomy demands of the Nepalis of Indian origin in Southern Nepal and correspondingly

2. Bhabani Sengupta, "The Ethnic Cauldron", *India Today*, 31 August 1983.

alleged political activism of ethnic Nepals in Sikkim, Darjeeling and other adjoining areas had made Indo-Nepalese relations abrasive.³ Indo-Bhutanese relations have also been for a time troubled by cross-country implications of the conditions of Bhutias living in Sikkim and other parts of Northern Bengal.⁴ Relation between Bhutan and Nepal has also been strained by problems associated with the condition and role of the Nepalese in the Bhutanese economy and polity. The cross-border implications of the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka have been an extremely disconcerting outcome of ethno-religious violence. All these, coupled with the whole range of outstanding political and economic issues in bilateral relations of the states have rendered the region one of the most unstable and volatile even by Third World standard.

In the frame of regional configuration portrayed above, there has been a persistent urge for the use of force and violence at both intra and inter-state levels, resulting in growing arms spending. Besides the need of defending national frontiers from perceived or real external threats, armed forces have been employed for the purpose of maintaining regime security. In either case, growing arms spending has been related to tensions and turmoils at both domestic and regional levels. Ethnic and communal violences in India since early 1980s has been at the highest level since its independence. Estimates show that about 10,000 people were killed in various separatist, ethnic and religious violences in India during 1983-86,⁵ and the casualties have been on the increase. Pakistan continues to be suffered by forces of

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3. Leo E. Rose and Satish Kumar, "South Asia", in Warner G. Feld and Gavin Boyd, *Comparative Regional Systems*, (Pergamon, USA, 1980); also see, Sengupta, *op. cit.*
 4. See for details, Bhabani Sengupta and Amit Gupta, "Changing Patterns of Conflicts in South Asia", in Bhabani Sengupta (ed.), *Regional Cooperation and Development in South Asia*, (New Delhi, 1986), pp. 247-69.
 5. *SIPRI Yearbook 1987*, Oxford, 1987, p. 312.

disintegration and according to reliable estimates about 9000 lives have been lost in related violences in about five years since 1972.⁶ Similar types of problems also continue to bedevil the domestic political scene in Bangladesh where armed forces are involved in containing a small but potentially grave ethnic minority rebel group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Sri Lanka is the most striking example where government policy of military response to domestic violence led to disproportionate rise in military expenditure.⁷

Divergent security perceptions

South Asian regional problems and conflicts have their own dynamics and most, if not all, of these are created within the region, by its history, its geo-politics, its economics and ecology. The troubles of the region of South Asia, its endemic tensions, mutual mistrusts and occasional hostilities are essentially the products of the contradiction of India's security perception with that of the rest of the countries of the region. India's neighbours tend to perceive threats to their security coming primarily from India which for its part considers its neighbours as an integral part of its own security system.

To be sure, an unusually disparate pre-eminence rendered to India in the South Asian regional configuration by facts of geography, demography, economics and ecology is something about which neither India nor its neighbours can do much but accept.⁸ The Indian pre-eminence in South Asia is hardly a problem for its neighbours; problem arises when pre-eminence is viewed as the justification for

6. *Ibid.*

7. See for details, *ibid.*

8. The disparate power configuration is discussed in further detail in Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine : Relevance for Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir and Shawkat Hassan, *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, (Dhaka, BSIS, 1989).

predominance. Recent years saw intensified Indian quest for regional predominance. Indian military build-up in various phases in the past four decades has essentially been a function of the perceived dictates of the need for regional supremacy. India of course partly justifies its arms build up by its perceived compulsions out of Pakistan's growing military build-up and acquisition of advanced weapons.

With or without the bogey of a threat from Pakistan — which but for its potential nuclear card constitutes hardly any match — Indian military build up in the Indian Ocean region has been monstrous. One notable dimension of the Indian quest for regional military predominance in recent times has been its two pronged approach to Washington and Moscow. On the one hand New Delhi's collaboration with the former Soviet Union in the field of production of weapons was significantly strengthened, on the other hand, India went for considerable degree of fresh openings with the West. Thus while India continued expanding its import of Western technology, Moscow's role as India's pre-eminent partner in defense build-up has been carefully preserved. The exercise has, therefore, been essentially to chart ways of balancing both, which India has been doing most successfully to attain the military superiority over its counterparts.

The Indian thrust for regional dominance is clearly drawn from New Delhi's defense and security perception, inherited essentially from that of British India, a continental security strategy. Contrary to the realities of post-colonial period, this old conception of Indian defense and security strategy has been regarded in India as a pride heritage of the Indian colonial past.⁹ The Nehruvian vision of India was a 'closer union', a confederation of independent states with common defense and economic possibility.¹⁰ A unity of South Asian

9. See for example, K. M. Pannikar, *Problems of Indian Defence*, Bombay, 1960, p. 23.

10. Quoted in S. D. Muni, "South Asia", in Mohammad Ayoob (ed.), *Conflict and Intervention in South Asia*, (London, 1980), p. 48.

defense and strategic frame as has been traditionally perceived in India or as still perceived in some modified form¹¹, has rendered the smaller states of the region into virtually buffer status.

The regional image of India is that of a nation which should receive habitual obedience from its neighbours. The stated strategic doctrine of India conceives the country's defence perimeter not at the boundaries of India but at the outer boundaries of its regional neighbours¹², and this has come to be known as the Indian version of the Monroe Doctrine. The essential theme of the doctrine is that South Asia is to be regarded as an Indian backyard. The critical factor is a combination of the comprehensive power potential of the country with a great-power-psyche nourished by the Indian political elites and politico-strategic thinkers. The reference point for India in relation to its international posture is clearly the type of role assumed by great powers. India under such perception is to be viewed as a dominant country in the region just as the US, Soviet Union and China in their respective areas.¹³

It is more than coincidental that the doctrine appeared in renewed prominence in Indian writings at the height of Indian involvement in the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. The doctrine, it is claimed, is a product of a series of conversations between the incumbent and opposition political forces so that it reflects an Indian national consensus.¹⁴ Operationally the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987 accompanying the controversial Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) operations in

11. Pran Chopra, for example, builds his concept of "SAARC Route to Security" on the same premise, see his "From Mistrust to Cooperation", in Pran Chopra, *et. al. Future of South Asia*, (Macmillan, Dhaka) 1986, pp. 13-17.

12. Partha S. Ghosh, *Conflict and Cooperation in South Asia*, UPL, Dhaka, 1989, p. 221.

13. See for example, K. Subrahmanyam, "Regional Stability and Security in South Asia", *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi, May 1984), p. 101.

14. Bhabani Sengupta, "The India Doctrine", *India Today*, 31 August 1983.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives operation of November 1988 have been viewed to be real life test cases for the India Doctrine.¹⁵ Indeed, the doctrine provided the conceptual *raison d'etre* for Indian military moves in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Because of its role in these two neighboring states India emerged as an interventionist regional power. New Delhi confidently manifested that it would not have any hesitation in physically intervening in internal developments of a South Asian state if such intervention was regarded as within India's means and promoting Indian national interests.¹⁶

India, to be sure, perceives itself as a power whose influence transcends the regional perimeters. The Indian ruling elite has always nourished a concept that India was destined to play a major role in global affairs — a role that was commensurate with its size, geopolitical location, historical experience and power potential.¹⁷ While the smaller neighbours of India could do little but be in discomfort, Pakistan has always been striving for a parity. The two-nation theory as the ideological basis for the creation of Pakistan and India was viewed to imply that after independence, the two states would not only have juridical equality, but also equality in terms of power.¹⁸ Thus, the Indian ambition for a major power role and Pakistan's search for parity with India contributed not merely to the involvement of extra-regional powers in South Asia, but also fueled the continued arms race

15. For details on the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and the Maldives intervention see, Iftekharuzzaman and Humayun Kabir, "The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord: An Assessment", *Biiss Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4, October 1987, and Iftekharuzzaman, "Maldives: Small, Beautiful and Vulnerable," *Dhaka Courier*, 11-17 November, 1988.

16. Bhabani Sengupta, "Maldives Confirms India's Lead Role in South Asia", *Dhaka Courier*, 18-23 November 1988.

17. See for detailed discussion, S. D. Muni, *op. cit.*, K. Subrahmanyam, "Indian's Pre-eminence", *World Focus*, no 71-72, November-December 1985; and Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine: Relevance for Bangladesh", *op. cit.*

18. S. D. Muni, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

including procurement of all sorts of sophisticated weaponry by the two powers along with their nuclear aspirations.

Both India and Pakistan are categorized as "de facto nuclear weapons states" with both either possessing nuclear weapons or believed to be able to produce them.¹⁹ Both also belong to the category of countries reported by Western governments as seeking chemical weapons capability or suspected of possessing such weapons, although governments of both have denied the intention to acquire these weapons.²⁰ Both are believed to be in possession of ballistic missiles while India with its "Prithi" and "Agni" is believed to have near-term plans to enter into the production stage.²¹ India is the largest producer of major weapons among the developing countries. Between 1954 and 1984 it accounted for 31 percent of total production of major weapons by developing countries ahead of Israel and South Africa which produced 23 and 9 percent respectively. By contrast, all ASEAN countries taken together produced only 2 percent.²² All these are indicative not only of the complexities in the South Asian strategic scene, but also of the drainage of resources in which all countries are in endemic shortage.

More Confrontation, than cooperation

New Delhi's policy of striving for influence by pressure rather than gaining friendship through cooperation and understanding has

19. Robert S. McNamara, "The Post-Cold War World : Implications for Military Expenditure in the Developing Countries", in World Bank, *Proceedings of the World Bank Annual Conference on Development Economics 1991*, World Bank, 1992, pp. 114-5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

21. Aaron Karp, "Ballistic Missile Proliferation", quoted in, McNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

22. Michael Brzoska and Thomas Ohlson, (eds.), *Arms Production in the Third World*, quoted in, McNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

contributed to continued estrangement in South Asian inter-state relations. Progress in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was frozen since the postponement of its fifth summit largely due to controversies over Indian policies and actions to throw its weights around. The fifth summit was eventually held in Male, but it was essentially for the same reason that the sixth summit was also first postponed and then held in Colombo in December 1991 more as a cosmetic device to keep the process alive than as any manifestation of real cooperation.

Problems in inter-state relations that have so far jeopardized the process of regional cooperation in South Asia, as already indicated, have their own dynamics. Moreover, in respective national agenda the countries have always had priorities of more pressing and immediate nature. The fifth summit was held at a time when the minority coalition government in India was faced with mounting domestic political challenges. An ever-increasing upsurge of communalism combined with regional tensions and other centrifugal pressures not only polarized the otherwise disunited government but also led to a bedeviled trend in inter-regional relations within the country, posing genuine threats to stability of the Indian political system. Pakistan came to the summit not really knowing what was the prospect of fledgling democracy in the country. Both had one commonality — each blaming the other for not only continuing arms race between them but also for each other's domestic problems. Endemic problems of economic vulnerability and political instability compounded by the growing setbacks inflicted by the Gulf crisis remained high on Bangladesh's agenda. So also for Sri Lanka, preoccupied as ever with ethnic problems. Nepal, for its part was yet to be able to define its emerging political structure following the sweeping changes that it had undergone. The summit did revive hopes of cooperative ventures in the region with the leaders issuing statements re-affirming their commitment towards SAARC.

The SAARC suffered a further set-back with the postponement of the sixth summit meeting scheduled to be held in Colombo. Most people argued that in the ultimate analysis India was to be blamed. Many Indians, particularly the overwhelming majority of the Indian press, agreeably the most resonant media outside the developed world, also believed so.²³

In any event, the fact that SAARC has not achieved any spectacular success would surprise or frustrate only those who would expect too much too soon from it. SAARC cannot be viewed as the panacea to all the problems that South Asian states have accumulated for themselves over the years. Whatever may be the degree of cooperation and level of expectation, respective national interests, motivations and priorities define the way a particular member state would behave in SAARC and thus limit the prospect of growth of regionalism in South Asia.

III. WINDS OF STRATEGIC CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA

Internal changes

Before examining the impact of extra-regional changes on the South Asian strategic scene, it would be worthwhile to review the internal changes that the region has by a historical coincidence witnessed parallel with the international change. The process of these internal changes in some cases may have been accelerated by the events worldwide, but the greater part has been the outcome of the internal dynamics within the respective states.

Amidst endemic political turmoils and instabilities and mounting problems of underdevelopment the South Asian political scene at the

23. For a more detailed analysis of the postponement of the sixth SAARC summit see, Iftekharuzzaman, "SAARC: Fissures on the Surface", *Dhaka Courier*, 7-13 December 1991.

beginning of the 1990s was marked by positive notes. New democratically elected governments emerged in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. Bangladesh is known for its chronic political crisis and instability. The new decade of 1990s began with happy notes and high expectations about the political future of Bangladesh. The exit of long years of autocracy in the face of massive popular uprising towards the end of 1990 and subsequently a nationally and internationally acclaimed free and fair election led to the formation of a government that today faces the challenges of sustaining the process of democratic transition in the country. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of former military ruler turned President Ziaur Rahman formed the new government while the Awami League, led by Begum Hasina Wazed, daughter of the assassinated leader of the country's liberation struggle and first President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the largest and a formidable opposition party. The installation of the new democratically elected government is, however, one of the many more milestones that lie ahead before the real transition to democracy in this country.

Democracy is of course never achieved overnight, it is a continuing process, and it builds, corrects and strengthens itself in an apparently endless process. Striking about this process in Bangladesh is that in the long years of its experimentation, despite very rich tradition of trading blood for democracy, its values, norms and institutions have been severely damaged. The political system suffered repeated set-backs under long years of autocratic rule during which the parliament was robbed of its sovereignty, office of the president or chief executive was made omnipotent, effectiveness of the judiciary curtailed, and above all, accountability of the government totally lost.

Some major political reforms and constitutional amendments have been introduced by the new government aimed at the establishment of an accountable government. The parliamentary form of government

has been re-introduced under these changes. Subsequent developments have, however, confirmed that the issue is not merely the nature of government. Democracy can function under both parliamentary and presidential form of government. Neither a presidential form *per se* is associated with lack of accountability, nor a parliamentary form as such can ensure accountability of the government. What is critical is the constitutional guarantee of the limited and accountable nature of the executive, an opening for which is on the cards at present in Bangladesh. On the economic front in keeping with the global trend the new government has also undertaken major reforms to further strengthen the free enterprise economic system in operation since the fall of the Mujib government in 1975.

The Indian political scene where government changed four times in as many years more or less stabilized by the close of 1991. The bloodiest and most violent of elections of Indian history that brought the minority government of Narasimha Rao to power cost India the life of Rajiv Gandhi. In terms of violence and loss of life, elections in India have always been expensive, but never before in the past the life of an Indian Prime Minister was lost in electoral campaign. As India mourned the killing of Rajiv by a suspected member of LTTE of Sri Lanka, very few political pundits had forecast a politically stable India without a member of the Nehru family in the steering. But India has once again proved that it always had a vibrant and resilient democratic system founded firmly on well-placed political institutions. The performance of the Rao Government has been able to dispel doubts about its capability to master the necessary cohesion to face the challenges faced by the country at the critical juncture. Rao's 'consensus approach' has revamped the political atmosphere both within the Congress party and in the overall Indian political scene. Concentration of power and sycophancy which characterized intra-Congress politics during the Indira-Rajiv era have been rejected. The consensus approach also explains why the radical reforms the new

government has adopted in economic and foreign trade and investment sectors have not generated any major tension capable of threatening the survival of the minority government.

In the meantime, the most striking among developments in the Indian political scene is the emergence of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the largest and most formidable opposition party and force in the country. What has to be reckoned with is that in spite of the sympathy votes in favour of Congress in the wake of the Rajiv tragedy, Congress had lost over two percent of nation-wide popular votes compared to BJP's phenomenal gain of nearly 14 percent. The BJP received nearly 26% of such votes compared to last time's 11.9 percent. The comparable figure for Congress dropped to about 34 percent leaving the gap at an alarmingly narrow level. In terms of number of seats, BJP's gain was even more spectacular—from 2 Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to 85 in 1989 and then to 120 in 1991. The BJP has also emerged now as the first all-India non-Congress political party to challenge Congress on the platform of communal extremism. The BJP has indeed outperformed nearly all its fundamentalist counterparts in India's South Asian neighbours not merely as the architect of communal violence but also in terms of electoral gains. And by all reasonable counts the trend — BJP's gain at the expense of non-BJP parties including Congress — is likely to continue.

The rise of BJP is indeed symptomatic of the centrality of communal and related issues in Indian politics. The crises and violence in Kashmir, Assam and Punjab are the flames of one and the same fire originated in the ethno-communal cauldron which have given Indian democracy a "culture of violence and lawlessness".²⁴ All these have obvious cross-border repercussions with deleterious impact on the

24. Asiawatch (USA), *Punjab in Crisis: Human Rights in India*, An Asiawatch Report, 1991.

pattern of interstate relations in the region. The fact, however remains that India itself continues to survive with its sharpening paradox: puzzling contradiction between its high level of political violence - conflicts among linguistic, caste and religious communities - and its success at sustaining a democratic political system.²⁵

The other notable dimension of recent internal change in India is related more with the global transformations. India embarked promptly and in a big way on the process of privatisation and promotion of free enterprise economic system to keep pace with the winds of change worldwide. The opening of the Indian economy to foreign investment and aid has been rather phenomenal judged by the past four decades of Indian experience. Modernization of the Indian economy through massive injection of foreign aid, investment and technology has now become a major foreign policy concern of India. The transition process will be full of tensions, and it will be particularly useful to follow the long term impact of India's entry into the ledgers of World Bank and IMF.

Nepal, for its part, has registered an unprecedented restructuring in its political stage within a short time immediately before the onset of the decade of nineties. In the wake of deep political crisis sparked off by massive anti-monarchy movement a new democratic constitution was adopted in the Kingdom which abolished the Panchayet system, branded as an autocratic regime with the King enjoying all pervasive powers. The new constitution introduced a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government featuring direct universal franchise.²⁶ Nepal continues to be a Hindu state but the new constitu-

25. See, Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*, (Sage, New Delhi, 1989).

26. Shelton U. Kodikara, "Security of South Asia in the 1990s: International Change and Domestic Dimension", *Biiss Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, April, 1992, pp. 158-61.

tion contains provisions eliminating discriminations on grounds of religion, race, sex, caste or ideology or any of them. In the wake of the national elections, the first democratic one after 32 years, held after the transitions, Nepal has obtained a multi-party parliamentary form of government with Nepali Congress party of B. P. Koirala as the new Prime Minister while Nepali Communist Party and United People's Front of Nepal emerged as the two leading opposition groups.

The institutionalization of democracy in Nepal, as in case of Bangladesh will not be easy. Debate over the role of the King in the affairs of the government appears unresolved as yet. The perception and role of civil-military oligarchy as well as other pro-palace coteries of vested interest will be critical.

The civil-military oligarchy in Pakistan, on the other hand, continues to hold the key to a fragile alliance between the President and Prime Minister in the Islamic Republic's experimentation with democracy which has been working more or less successfully since the death of the military strongman Zia-ul-Huq. In the election held in 1990 after the controversial dismissal of the Benazir government the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) formed a minority government in coalition with other smaller parties. Mrs. Bhutto's People's Party provides a formidable opposition in and outside the parliament. And despite troubles in the violent-torn provinces along ethno-religious, linguistic and tribal lines and continued crisis of national integration, particularly involving the Pathans and the Baluchis, the Sharif government appears to be maintaining a shaky power balance.

Sri Lanka, on the other hand, whether it was the Westminster model or the presidential system, could always boast of an advanced political system, with the participatory level of politics in the island higher than anywhere else in the region.²⁷ The island nation continues

27. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

to suffer from its unresolved problem of national integration which in the form of civil war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil rebels has already cost tens of thousands of lives. Nevertheless, the government of Ranasinghe Premadasa who was elected in December 1988 despite an impeachment motion from a group of powerful members of his own United National Party, presides over a tenuous peace. Although through highly controversial measures, his government has contained the violence. For the first time since 1983 when civil war broke out there is certain degree of stability permitting economic recovery. The stock market has been on the rise, tourists are crowding the hotels and resorts and business is picking up. Agreeably, all these have been too expensive in terms of alleged human rights abuses and extra-judicial killings. Sri Lanka's enviable record of democratic achievement has been tainted by excesses under his predecessor too. But as distinct from the previous regime, the Premadasa government has been able to put the Tamil Tigers on the defensive although part of the credit for it goes to the erosion of sympathy for the rebels in India after the Rajiv killing. This in combination with the growing pressure on Colombo to correct its human rights record may provide an occasion for all the parties to acknowledge the futility of armed struggle, and hence to realize that it is across the negotiating table that resolution of the crisis should be sought.

Impact of the international restructuring

Winds of change can, therefore, be said to be having some refreshing impact on the domestic political scene within South Asian states which could have significant bearing on the emerging strategic landscape in the region. Evidences at hand, however, provide only very limited support to this effect. By the time the internal changes could be consolidated, the restructuring of the international order came as a *fait accompli* for the region. The new global realities in the wake

of the Gulf War and disintegration of the Soviet Union brought new strategic implications for South Asia which by all means appear to offer the regional superpower India a renewed opportunity to assert its regional supremacy. To be sure, at the initial stage, the Gulf War and demise of Soviet Union left India groping for appropriate responses.²⁸ India's response to the war was dithering, half-hearted, ambiguous and even apologetic.²⁹ Unlike Bangladesh and Pakistan, India refrained from sending troops to join the multi-national forces, but in an ambivalent move to show support to the US-led operation allowed American military planes refueling rights at its Bombay airport. Although in the face of strong domestic criticism the government later on suspended these rights, this half-hearted gesture marked the beginning of what subsequently proved to be an unprecedented diplomatic and strategic breakthrough in Indo-US relations.

The interest of the US in drafting India as its ally in South Asia is indeed nothing new although never before the ties became so close as after the fall of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, over the period of the cold war, there were phases of collusion between Washington and Moscow over this region's strategic alignment. To begin with, in the fifties the main concern of the US was to draft Pakistan to contain communism in and around South Asia. This was primarily an anti-Soviet move and as such invoked appropriate Soviet response which obtained Indian support and cooperation. In the early sixties, there was a 'collusion' between Moscow and Washington to support India against China. In the late sixties the Soviets attempted to draft both India and Pakistan into a collective security system directed mainly against China. In the early seventies there was once again a 'collusion',

28. IISS, *Strategic Survey, 1991-92*, London, 1992, p. 162.

29. See for details, Maqsoodul Hasan Nuri, "India and the Gulf Crisis", *Biiss Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-50.

this time between US and China to maintain the balance in favour of Pakistan.³⁰ By the late eighties Washington joined Moscow in a 'collusion' in favour of India as demonstrated during their concerted endorsement of India's military intervention in Sri Lanka and Maldives.³¹

The present breakthrough was signaled in 1989 during the Indian Defense Minister K. C. Pant's visit to the US when the two sides talked defense cooperation on transfer of submarine technology systems which would enable India to indigenously produce a submarine fleet. Talks covered a wide range of warfare technology including such sensitive items as sea-launched missiles, deep-sea sensors, and co-production of advanced fighter jet engines.³² Then a clear tilt was heralded in a series of exchange of visits by high level defense officials which took place in quick succession in each other's capital in December 1990, August 1991, October 1991 and January 1992.³³ The 'Kickleighter Proposals' formed the basis of discussion on defense cooperation during these visits. The proposals providing for defense consultations and eventually joint military exercises, were first made in April 1991 by former US Army Commander in the Pacific, Lt-Gen Claude Kickleighter.³⁴

New Delhi's long term interest in defense cooperation with the US was rendered more transparent during Indian Defense Minister Sarad Pawar's visit to Washington in April 1992. In a comment on the visit The Times of India wrote in its editorial: "In the area of defense ...

30. Shelton U. Kodikara, *Strategic Factors in Inter-state Relations in South Asia*, (Heritage, New Delhi, 1984), pp. 66-7.

31. See for details, Iftexharuzzaman, "India Doctrine ...", *op. cit.*, pp. 24-5.

32. Chintamani Mahapatra, "Looking at Indo-US Relations in a Changing World", *Strategic Analysis*, (IDSA, New Delhi, vol. XIV, no. 4, 1991), p. 388.

33. See for details, IISS, *op. cit.*

34. *Ibid.*

India has made it clear through talks between military leaders as well as between diplomats that it has now no inhibitions about evolving a cooperative relationship based on an understanding of each other's security concerns. Mechanisms are being put in place for interaction between the services which are expected to result in *larger US contribution to the shaping of doctrines, tactical concepts and training.*"³⁵ (italics added) The editorial also added that transfer of military relevant technologies has been taking place since 1984 under a memorandum of understanding signed in that year, and this can be expected to continue for agreed projects such as light aircraft and at about the same level.

India's new strategic "tilt" towards the US is also reflected in a number of recent foreign policy moves taken by New Delhi. These include: India's support to the US on a vote repealing the UN resolution equating Zionism with racialism (which India significantly enough backed in 1975); India's voting along with the West on a UN Resolution blaming Libya for its alleged involvement in blowing up a Pan American aircraft over Lockerby, Scotland; and upgrading of India's ties with Israel to full diplomatic status followed by indications of defense cooperation between the two. India has reportedly been negotiating for Israeli technology on advanced weapons systems as well as collaboration in the fields of combat aircraft and missiles. Israel has also reportedly offered help to speed up fencing along the India-Pakistan border.³⁶ Indo-Israel cooperation, in addition to its catalytic effect on winning over the US, has also at least two other political motivations from India's perspective: to be able to join the Middle East peace process and to prevent being upstaged by China which incidentally obtained Israeli appreciation by offering diplomatic recognition to Tel Aviv just 24 hours before India did.

35. *The Times of India*, *op. cit.*

36. *The Daily Star*, (Dhaka, 2 June, 1992).

In the meantime, Sino-Indian relations also continued to improve. As a sign of progress in their bilateral relations the two agreed to open their borders at four new places on the eve of Indian President R. Venkataraman's visit to Beijing in May 1992, the first ever by an Indian President. All these routes remained closed after the Sino-India war of 1962, and a development of this type was unthinkable for most people a year ago. Improvement in Sino-Indian relations again is an outcome of a process that started in 1973 with the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between the two. Twelve years later, during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China the two sides agreed that the border disputes should not prove an obstacle in the way to establish good neighborly relations between them, a commitment re-affirmed during Chinese Premier Li Peng's visit to New Delhi in December 1991. As a result, age-old tension between the two was removed permitting withdrawal of troops from each other's border. The Indian President said during the mentioned visit that he hoped his visit will provide a strong and durable basis for unshakable friendship between the two countries in the future.³⁷ His Chinese counterpart said that the slogan "Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai" was rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people. The two sides emphasized that cooperation between them was necessary for the stability in Asia and also agreed that this will not pose any threat to a third country.

Whether or not such assurances are enough for the rest of the South Asian countries remains to be seen. In the meantime, the multi-dimensional improvement in Indo-US relations took place in the backdrop of sharply deteriorated US-Pakistan relationship following the US aid cut-off in October 1990 on the question of Pakistan's nuclear programme. Islamabad's troubles in its ties with Washington are hardly anything new. Pakistan's nuclear programme initiated by former President Z. A. Bhutto branded as the "Islamic Bomb" caused

37. *The Muslim*, (Islamabad, 20 May 1992).

dissatisfaction in the U.S. President Carter cut off all US aid to Pakistan because of its alleged nuclear weapons programme. American economic and military assistance to Pakistan was restored by President Reagan in the early 1980s in the wake of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which enhanced Pakistan's strategic significance and soon Pakistan regained its position as a leading recipient of US aid. The American concern over Pakistan's nuclear programme, however, continued, which was behind the oft-quoted Pressler Amendment that requires that the American President make an annual statement before the Congress to the effect that Pakistan "did not possess a nuclear explosive device" and that continued US aid would reduce significantly the risk of Islamabad developing such weapons. But since the Afghan war was on, despite the fact that it was clear to western experts by the late 1980s that Pakistan had acquired the capability of producing a nuclear bomb (an allegation denied by Pakistan), Islamabad had enjoyed the benefit of doubt and continued to receive US assistance. But the situation changed with the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the immediate effect of which was the suspension of US military and economic aid to Pakistan as President Bush refrained from certifying that Pakistan did not have a nuclear programme. Pakistan viewed this as an unfair pressure on Islamabad on the part of Washington which has been rather indulgent towards India's nuclear capabilities. The President of Pakistan described the "new world order" as a "new kind of imperialism with new hegemonic roles and international regional bullies".³⁹

Islamabad moved quickly to compensate by trying to establish "strategic depth" with allies in the north and west, which for its largely Islamic overtone is likely to re-inforce Indo-US-Israel axis. Pakistan's

38. *Ibid.*

39. *The Muslim*, 26 April 1992.

proposal for a five-nation regional talks between US, Russia, India, Pakistan and China to establish a nuclear free zone in South Asia was the other instrument for Pakistan to get round the new-found strategic disadvantage. All but India has endorsed the proposal. India's position on the nuclear proliferation has not changed and with its new strategic advantages it has no particular reason to do so. It continues to reject the signing of the NPT on the ground that it is discriminatory and to New Delhi it is not only a question of South Asia being non-nuclear but also of "thousands of weapons already made, stockpiled by other countries and the danger of finding their way elsewhere".⁴⁰ India considers that only a global approach will solve this while no piecemeal approach will ever have an impact on the whole situation.

Meanwhile, India's new assertiveness as a major power is finding expressions in terms of its possible defence role beyond South Asia, particularly in South-east Asian and the Pacific region. It has reportedly become a possibility that India may forge defense cooperation with countries like Malaysia and Indonesia which according to an Indian columnist may set the pace for cooperation with others in the ASEAN region and this may have a demonstration effect among the littoral states of the Persian Gulf.⁴¹ Australian concern over Indian naval expansion has reportedly been contained by propositions of joint Indo-Australian naval exercises.

IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The picture that emerges from the above discussion is that recent strategic developments in South Asia project two opposing trends.

40. The Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, quoted in *The Daily Star*, 9 June, 1992.

41. Subhash Chakravarty, "Linking with ASEAN: New Opportunity in Sight", *The Times of India*, 13 May 1992.

Firstly, there is a considerable degree of uncertainty and instability concerning the new strategic alignment of the regional superpower, India, with the lone superpower, United States. India seems to be moving rather fast to try what may be described as a *Pax Indo-Americana* in South Asia. The implications of, and the price to be paid for such an arrangement will be clear in years to come. For the moment India may take the pride of its capability to resist such US pressures as it considers "undue" the way it rather successfully did during the recent Russian rocket deal controversy. Consider also that India test-fired its Agni missiles for the second time to the chargin of Washington at a time to coincide with the joint naval exercises with the US. But, for a country that is falling into the lap of US-dominated IMF-World Bank duo so instantly the limit to such resilience may not be too far.

Meanwhile, in keeping with the past trends, while the smaller neighbours of India do not have much option but to be uncomfortable, for Pakistan the new situation appears far from acceptable. There has been recently sharp deterioration in New Delhi-Islamabad ties. On the two main irritants in Indo-Pak relations, Kashmir and nuclear programme, the two sides remain poles apart. Although the threat of yet another war over Kashmir between the two cannot be totally ruled out, fully aware of the tremendous amount of risks including the nuclear shadow, neither of the two would be keen to wage a full-scale attack on each other. Reduced to essentials, Kashmir is a territorial dispute on which by all indications both Islamabad and New Delhi appear to prefer the status quo rather than any major change. The Sino-Indian formula under which both have agreed to improve their relation despite territorial dispute may be workable here too.

On the nuclear issue, there is hardly any denying that both India and Pakistan have by now proceeded quite ahead from ambiguity to a stage of transparency in terms of production of nuclear weapons or

capability thereof. Both have in recent times assumed a more or less overt nuclear-weapons status. The nuclear debate in the region should, therefore, concentrate on how to achieve *weapons control* in the region rather than how to make it *weapons-free*. One key element in such debate is, of course, the China factor. It is well-known that India's nuclear drive was as much a response to the Chinese nuclearization as Pakistan's programme was prompted by India's. India and Pakistan as well as India and China should, therefore, work out some arrangements to remove the aura of mistrust and suspicion and develop some mutual confidence on the basis of nuclear transparency. India and Pakistan have in fact taken some tentative steps towards this direction. The 1990 agreement between the two on not to attack each other's nuclear installations was followed up in 1991 by exchange of information on respective nuclear facilities. The two countries had also agreed recently to talk on an agreement not to produce chemical weapons. There is no valid reason why extra-regional factors should prevent further development along these lines.

The second trend appears to be more positive. In the backdrop of recent political developments within the countries concerned, South Asia has a reason to look forward to better times. The kind of political institutions which obtain, and the political processes which operate in South Asia, are no doubt significant for any assessment of the security situation in the region.⁴² There are some indications of realization among the states of the region that cooperation rather than confrontation is the best option for peace and stability in South Asia.

Bangladesh for one, appears to have acknowledged this quite clearly. The government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia which came to power largely by successfully capitalizing on the projection of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League as the pro-Indian party allegedly bent upon selling out to India did not take long to realize the cost of lack of

42. Shelton U. Kodikara, "The Security of ...", p. 168.

progress in Dhaka's relation with New Delhi. During her recent visit to India she not only demonstrated her government's preparedness to accommodate with India, but also made several important concessions on such long-standing disputes as water sharing and illegal immigration across each other's border. The two sides agreed that existing cooperation in the fields of culture, education, information and defense could also be expanded. Bangladesh also appears to have de facto endorsed during the visit India's bid to become a member of the UN Security Council.⁴³ To what extent this will be followed up by concrete measures to resolve some of the outstanding issues between the two neighbours remains to be seen.

Cordial ties between Nepal and India have been restored following the conclusion of favourable trade and transit agreement which also fostered the withdrawal of the ban on the Nepali Congress party and its eventual success in the national elections. Earlier, a crisis over the extension of the treaties in 1990 threatened to jeopardize the 'special relations' between the two. By the time the crisis was over Nepal appeared to have been conveyed the message that it had hardly any room to survive by antagonizing India. Nepal also learnt that India was uncomfortable with Kathmandu's so-called equi-distance policy between its two big neighbours, India and China.⁴⁴ The case of Sri Lanka was also not very dissimilar although the price India had to pay in the island nation has been much higher than New Delhi could imagine. The military intervention proved to be too expensive, economically as well as politically and above all, in terms of loss of lives including that of Rajiv Gandhi. As for India and Pakistan,

43. See for details, Indo-Bangladesh Joint Communique, issued at the end of the Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia's visit to India, 28 May 1992.

44. See for details, Iftekhharuzzaman, "Changing Global Scenario: Implications for Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan. (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 243-51.

despite their keenly fought war on words both eventually agreed to resume talks on the improvement of bilateral relations.

Whether for positive or for negative reasons, therefore, the trend is towards a tacit recognition in South Asia that confrontation with each other would benefit none. For India there are several reasons, not least the mounting domestic economic challenges as well as the bitter experience in Sri Lanka, to reassess the virtues of throwing weights around in attaining its strategic goals. Prime Minister Rao's consensus policy which has been reportedly working well in the Indian domestic politics may be indicative of the way New Delhi may adopt more positive approaches in achieving its objectives. There is no denying that India has greater room for maneuverability than any of its neighbours and that one step toward accommodation and understanding on the part of India is bound to be followed by several on the part of others. The other positive trend is a growing, though hesitant, recognition of SAARC as a catalyst to regional understanding and confidence build-up. This new regional organization has already survived more severe setbacks than many other such organizations in comparable conditions. Greater appreciation of shared stakes in the success of cooperation within SAARC will contribute to the promotion of regional stability.