Bangladesh and SAARC: Security, Environment and Related Issues

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Bangladesh as a state is very lucky to have come alive and kicking at cross-roads of history, when neo-realism has been able to promote the primacy of the state as the unit of progress, power and socio-economic interactions, irrespective of size, situation and level of development. A tiny nation-state, as much as a sprawling multi-national state, is very much on the cards. The Earth Summit this year declared that (Principle 2): "States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other states or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. "The spirit of global partnership" enjoined in the Summit further stipulated (Principle 9): "States should cooperate to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, and by enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of technologies, including new and innovative technologies."

The neo-realist does not pretend however that such declarations of intent, or for that matter the end of Cold War, do much to enhance the sense of security of smaller states. On the it seems business as usual. Policy-makers of influence in various capitals continue to believe that international life is essentially conflictual, and international politico-economic transactions a zero-sum game in which states that maintain a favorable balance of power prosper. They seek maximisation of national
The importance of national security remains at the top of the agenda, although the concept of security has broadened remarkably to include economic resilience, industrial and mercantile capability, resources, technology and strategic options other than military preparedness. Military preparedness, however, continues to be the crucial factor, as spheres of influence and hegemonies compete to maintain power balance to ensure stability.

Smaller nations have little to do with such order of things as it is, and can do little to alter it either. They have to tread in and out of its beaten tracks and loopholes with their own defensive devices, until such time when the compelling dynamics of human development may render conflicts between powers, classes or creeds superfluous. Meanwhile security considerations, including considerations of military adequacy, shall continue to trouble the thinking of nation-states, big or small.

Let us now examine some pressing concerns of Bangladesh that need future security bracing. We assume for the time being that a complex situation of status quo exists otherwise to contain threats to our security. First and foremost, our demographic pressure. We shall need land-space and we shall need population outlets, however best we manage our numbers and our habitat. The Earth Summit stipulates (Principle 1): "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."

The Rio Declaration further promises that (Principle 5): "All States and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world." And to stress the growing realisation that ultimate security of the humankind anywhere on the globe may only be maintained by consensus, the Declaration adds (Principle 12): "States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation ......... Environmental measures addressing transboundary or
global environmental problems should, as far as possible, be based on an international consensus."

Yet, all these are better said than done. Incredible dynamics of our demographic pressure is more likely to find international or regional consensus unprepared for adequate or appropriate response. As a nation-state, we shall need contingent plans to be able to defend our nationals. We shall need to continue building our defensive capability and maneuverability, inclusive of the military, in conventional and nonconventional terms. In particular, our off-shore land formation is a preserve that we shall have to defend and hold for future settlements. We simply do not have any room for compromise on our maritime limits of sovereignty. Our security measures shall have to seek and maintain a favourable balance on that score.

The second option is our mercantile maneuverability. Historically, whenever invasionary or hegemonistic pressures from the north-west had eased, our people tended to seek trade links and opportunities further east and south-east along the sea lanes of Bay of Bengal, strait of Malacca and South China Sea to China, and north and north-east through Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam to Tibet. Sea trade with Arabia expanded under Fakhruddin Mobarak Shah, based at Sonargaon, his domain extending upto Chittagong. Giasuddin Azam Shah established formal links with Arabia and China. Saifuddin Hamza Shah and Jalaluddin Mahmud Shah maintained those formal links with Arabia and China, the latter extending links to Egypt and Damascus. Eight thousand Abyssinian slaves were procured from Africa by Rukunuddin Barbank Shah. Trade links with Myanmar expanded remarkably at the time of Alauddin Hossain Shah starting from the time of Jalaluddin Mahmud Shah. Portuguese and Armenian became significant influences in Bengal from the time of Giasuddin Mahmud Shah, reviving trade links with Malaysia and Indonesia. Agricultural and industrial production as well as maritime trade expanded tremendously during the Mughal period. European mercantile competition, Arakanese coastal seafaring, Gulf-trade through Surat merchants, and Central Asian trade through Kabul thrived from our parts. Devastation followed when British East India Company managed to wrest power from the Nawabs of Murshidabad. Native technology and indigenous industry were
wrecked by colonial malpractices, and in 1769, just one year before the Great Famine, Reza Khan, the Dewan or Chancellor appointed by the British under the puppet Nawab wrote that external trade in silk and clothings alone, not accounting for the usual quota reserved by the company, had declined to one-tenth of what it was 12 years back. In 50 years thereafter, textile exports of Bengal were altogether abandoned. In 150 years, the land system had been so much encumbered by colonial enactments that even today we have not been able to recourse from its mismanagement.

To talk about the future now, all projections into the twenty-first century point to new centres of economic growth and an Asia-Pacific boom. The disarray of Eastern European collapse may adversely affect European growth for quite some time to come. For Asia-Pacific, the break-up of the Soviet Union may offer enhanced opportunities. A Hong Kong institute forecasts as many as five sub-zones of Asia-Pacific growth over-lapping state boundaries (Professor Edward Chen, Centre of Asia Studies, Hong Kong University). Each of these sub-zones may grow endogenously with self-sustaining exchanges of technology, marketing services, capital flow and labour supply, dynamic enough to sustain possible future insulation of European integration or North American Free Trade Area. One such subzone of high potential, centred on Thailand and including the Yunnan province of China, the three Indo-China countries and Myanmar, may prove to be our most natural opening for entering the Asia-Pacific century. Geographical contiguity and historical concerns compel us to lean that way. Bangladesh has also been invited to join ECO, the free trade agreement under process between Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and some states of erstwhile Soviet Central Asia. There too we have historical links, although geography is unhelpful. Our future security demands, as we shall discuss further hereafter, that we tilt the balance to explore and develop both of those possibilities, at the same time as we try expanding and developing economic relations within SAARC.

Third, our surface water balance. This is directly related to our sub-regional eco-system and to land-formation potential in our active delta. Both are matters of paramount importance for our future. For our food security, we need to develop
biotechnology on the strength of our own bio-diversity. Much more intensely than at present, bio-technology is likely to become our major instrument for higher agricultural yields. Soon enough, we shall also need to resort to geo-technology in our deltaic parts and selected coastal shelf to accelerate land-formation to make room, as prescribed by Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, "to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of our eco-system," under a global partnership. In other words, for living space of our flora, fauna and humankind, we shall have to expand our land sea-wards and protect it. For that we shall need the unimpaired flow of our river-system that carries a heavy annual load of silt of roughly 2 billion tons. We also need to keep salinity at bay by maintaining an unimpaired level of fresh water discharge in the estuaries. In addition, we need to maintain a surface water balance to fight off a desertification tendency peculiar to our lands and the tropic of cancer belt. We also need to extend the mix of saline and fresh water that sustain Sunderbans, our shrinking mangrove forests that we must rejuvenate to conserve the wealth of bio-diversity therein.

Our grave concern about continuity of surface flows of water is directly tied to SAARC. For our environmental balance we remain very much an integral part of sub-Himalayan South Asian's basin of eastern rivers. Ninety three percent of our annual surface flow comes from a catchment area outside of our borders covering 5 countries, namely, Nepal, India, China, Bhutan, and a little bit from Arakan-Yoma of Myanmar. We are dependent overwhelmingly on the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna complex. All excepting one of the 55 branches and tributaries of these three rivers enter Bangladesh from India. Most of the silt is carried by the Ganges from the slippage in erodible Himalays caused by continuing tectonic movement of the Indian plate meeting under the Tibetan plate. The Brahmaputra in China on the other side of the Himalays is naturally free from such erosion contents, but as it makes the U-turn to enter India on this side of the Himalayas, it has the chance of scooping out some silt from Assam earthquake deposits. Meghna flows come entirely from eastern India.

Our tragedy is that a unilateral plan of massive intervention in and diversion of common rivers upstream has been and
continues to be executed by India causing enormous damage to our habitat. Our bilateral efforts to resolve the issue has so far met with little progress. In the Earth Summit, the Indian delegation indulged in all sorts of subterfuge to delete any specific injunction demanding riparian cooperation for environmental protection and fairplay. Bangladesh delegation finally managed to get included a desirability clause for "transboundary riparian agreements or arrangements" in Agenda 21 (vide chapter 18, clause 4). Indian thinking on water management appears to constitute a direct threat to our ecological balance, affecting the security of both food and shelter. Hopefully, with a future shift in Indian policy towards a more environment friendly programme of exploitation of its huge ground-water resources presumably recharged perennially in Artesian, wells connected from the Bhabar zone and capable, from deep aquiters under the Gangetic Plain alone, of irrigating "70 million acre cropland are of the Plain for 100 years" (vide P.H. Jones, Hydrogeology Inc., 1987), we may in due course be spared the or deal. Even without tapping the deep aquiters, with the changing parameters of time, as B.G. Verghese suggests, "the basis will have been laid for augmentation of the lean season flows of the Ganga in a variety of way. India's Ganga-Brahmaputra System Study, conducted by the Central Water Commission and completed a few years ago, is believed to have indicated that water resource development programmes projected into the 21st century largely on the basis of storages and ground water will not diminish the lean season flows of the Ganga at Farakka." (vide Waters of Hope, 1990, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi). In bilateral dealings, however, a policy of delay amounting to denial is still being pursued by the Indian Government. Patiently awaiting the changing parameters meanwhile seek security options in permutations and combinations of diplomatic and other preparations within and without SAARC designed to protect our surface water flow. Natural flow of surface water constitutes one of our main assets in sustainable development. International experts have predicted that water will be a critical resource of mankind by the turn of the century, and if riparian states fail to resolve issues between them, there could be wars over water. We simply cannot afford to ignore
that warning.

For the sake of brevity I propose to limit discussion for the time being to these three major national concerns only. Let us now look at some of our disciplines, strengths and weaknesses on which we shall have to build up our security network. First of all, our inherited state institutions continuing from colonial times. Of course, we have been and we shall continue to restructure, reform, improve, test and strengthen them to serve national interest. Neo-realism emphasizes the importance of institutional and structural aspects of polity to underpin national capability and increase self-reliance. Bangladesh is set on its course by an on-going process of political and economic reforms awaiting further grass-root strength from local government expansion and human resource development. The military, civil, judicial, monetary, economic, educational, scientific, technological, medical, social and cultural institutions also await strengthening and reorientation as pillars of national will and sentinels of national interest within the orbits of their respective disciplines. Our weakness in the main lies in our abject external dependence, in finance as well as technology, and a culture of poverty. Output is negligible, and our acquired technology, including the military, requires a lot to be adapted and improved upon to suit our particular conditions. Out biggest strength, on the other hand, remains our national will, evident in an express Bengali pride sometimes distorted in aggravation by neighbourly condescension.

Historically, we have immunised ourselves to such condescension over centuries, although not without the accompaniment of a dissolute guile factor of self-devigration. In the mid-fourteenth century, Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah used to be ridiculed in the writings of Delhi historians as Shah-i-Bhangra in corruption of his title Shah-i-Bangla, to suggest that his air of royalty was but a narcotic illusion of Bhang. Today in late twentieth century, Indian columnist-diplomat Kuldip Nayar calls us "alarmingly proud" people. In the late eighteenth century, Francis Buchanan, traveling through eastern parts of Bangladesh by order of the Board of Trade of East India Company, wrote: "The magical power attributed by the Chakmas to their Deearees has by the silly Bengalese been extended to the whole tribe .............. It is to such foolish
prejudices, joined to the absurdity of national pride, that we are to attribute much of the unfavourable character given by the people of Hindoostan to their eastern neighbours. " (vide Francis Buchanan in South East Bengal, 1798, by William Van Schendil). Intoxicated, alarming, absurd or whatever, Bengali national pride remains a positive element to be taken into account in security calculations to defeat any Sikkimisation maneuvers. At the same time, our obvious inability to absorb our tribal minorities in our cultural milieu, perhaps from quasi-religious overtones, is a nagging weakness.

Let us now look at SAARC from our security and environmental concerns. A mere look at the map tells every Bengali that he belongs to SAARC, and if there is a South Asian destiny, he is part of it. But as yet, that destiny is unclear. Caste orientation and Hindu revivalism in Indian political establishment keep its people violently divided, not to speak of separatist ethnic insurgencies of significant potency. They are serious obstacles to confidence-building within SAARC nations, nationalities and communities, raking historical wounds. More than that, historical animosity and a subcontinental arms race between India and Pakistan, unabated by three wars, remains at the core of SAARC morbidity. Kashmir remains divided between India and Pakistan with an armed struggle raging there in Indian held parts, and its status unresolved after 44 years of a UN resolution and subsequent bilateral postures. Pakistan is accused of aiding and abetting not only Kashmiri guerrillas, but also Sikh rebellion in Indian Punjab. In turn, India is accused of instigating Sindhi separatism in Pakistan. The nuclear rivalry between the two neighbours is in a state of flux below the stage of mutual deterrence, and as such potentially dangerous for the entire region.

Another thorn in the flesh of SAARC is Indian haste and insolence in hegemonistic maneuvers. Hegemony and zones of influence are recognised by neo-realists as facts of international life with a stabilizing role. But somehow India has chosen to rub its small neighbours repeatedly on the wrong side in transmitting its message of superiority. In Sri Lanka, India is perceived to be the wicked cause of years of devastation by Tamil insurgency, which in turn Indian Army failed to contain coming in aid of Sri Lanka after the latter had acceded to India's
demands for exercise of an imposing naval presence in Trincomalee. Indian slight upon Sri Lankan President over the last SAARC Summit was also unfortunate. Trade blockade of Nepal by India finally helped a more obliging government into power there, but very strong and articulate opposition is also surfacing in Nepal against Indian water-plans, and a general air of suspicion, far from diminishing, is now resounding. In Bhutan, the agitating Nepalese immigrants were perceived to be a Sikkimisation maneuver masterminded by India. The suspicion has since been somewhat dimmed by subsequent Indian aloofness for the time being on the issue of Nepalese evicted from Bhutan, for whom some international care only has been mobilised at present and refugee camps set up within Nepal. In Bangladesh, India is regarded by most people as the villain of the piece for stalemate on Ganges water-sharing and for sheltering cross-border Chakma violence. In turn, people in Bangladesh betray undisguised sympathy for Kashmir, Khalistan and Assam separatist insurgency, which they see as genuine national liberation movements, although the last one has an overtly anti-Bengali bias. In fact quite a few in Bangladesh like to believe that if Assam separates, there may be increased scope of revival of traditional cooperation between Assam and Bangladesh at grassroots level, whereas right now all traffic is virtually closed. With the growing realisation of the importance of neighbourly people to people contacts for sustainable development, some in Bangladesh also dream of expanded relationship with Lusai Hills people in the near future. Crossborder trade in Bangladesh is now limited to West Bengal, Bihar, Meghalaya, Tripura and Myanmar. Small entrepreneurs in Bangladesh want its expansion all the way around, denied at the moment. Relationship, nevertheless, at the governmental level between Bangladesh and India has markedly improved after the opening of the Tin Bigha Corridor.

Yet it is no wonder that smaller maritime states in the SAARC welcome, as indeed so some other Indian Ocean states, Pakistan's unequal attempt to deny Indian naval domination of the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, U.S. and Indian joint naval exercises as well as Indian Defense Minister's goodwill visit to China point to a changing scenario in Asian security perspective that cannot fail to be taken note of.
How can Bangladesh then find solace in SAARC? Threatened as Bangladesh is from within SAARC itself, it certainly cannot put all eggs in one basket, and it has to explore multiple involvements to underpin its security. A SAARC Security Cooperation at the moment is a far cry. Independent military exchanges between Bangladesh and China, Bangladesh and U.S.A., Bangladesh and Thailand, Bangladesh and Pakistan as well as Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia contribute to a limited assurance on the ground. For greater self-assurance, Bangladesh of necessity shall have to evolve its own peculiar non-conventional defence strategy, in addition to conventional mix of deterrent national services and supportive international pressures.

Institutional cooperation other than military within SAARC also offers only a narrow focus so far as our national interests are concerned. The two major SAARC powers, India and Pakistan, have a natural bias in trade westwards. Bangladesh has a growing interest eastwards. They have significant maritime activity along the Indian Ocean extending from the Gulf to the Pacific. Ours is likely to grow around the Bay. Culturally, Bangladesh stands apart from the commonalties of the Hindi-Urdu belt of the north or the Tamil-Telegu belt of the South dominating the subcontinental divide. Our social mobility is characteristically more fluid compared to the lingering rigidity in other parts of the sub-continent. Our civil administration has a markedly different development bias. There is certainly room for increased judicial, monetary, economic, educational, scientific, technical and medical exchanges. The most promising among them, and indeed pressing from Bangladesh point of view, is climatic and satellite study cooperation, where conflict of interest and attitudes are minimal. Besides our own special interest in such cooperation for disaster-preparedness, a lot of confidence-building may take place by its means. If India decides to open up its Antarctic research facilities to SAARC participation, it will have nothing to lose and something to gain. Perhaps by cooperating in the skies, we may find firm common landing grounds.

On the other hand, in the shifting tensions of power-balance in the world, it is obvious that the eclipse of superpower bipolarism has not led to a unipolar world, but a multipolar one.
Signs of multipolarism were discernible from the early eighties with ascensions of differences in outlook by Japan, China and Europe. Significant retention of superpower capability if not will by the Russian military, as well as high-technology military brain-power available to some other nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States add to this trend of multipolarity. During the Cold War saga, superpower rivalry used to fuel pockets of tension. Now the Georgian civil war in the midst of CIS, the Somali catastrophe, in the midst of Organisation of African States (OAS), the Bosnian tragedy in the midst of Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), as much as the re-emergence of Iraq, after defeat by a coalition of 33 in the Gulf War and despite continuing UN sanctions, in an unsettled Middle East scenario left to seminar under an inadequate peace initiative are stark reminders of power gaps in the world order. The Gulf War in particular is a lesson in the ineffectiveness of high-tech power superiority. Ultimate security still boils down to one's capacity to sustain a cost-effective strength on the ground. To that extent, the world is more free from supremacist dictates, and mighty powers may be more willing to listen to recalcitrant small fries. But this also means that the current power balance in international life is visibly unstable. Added to that, the current decline in world output, and economic mess all around, is very worrying indeed. For all the hopes raised by the Earth Summit, global partnership may in reality offer little more beyond some green cover, repair of ozone layer, and some health foods for the time being. Security may, therefore, need to be buttressed by growing roots in more than one ring of regional cooperation. Pakistan is in SAARC, and is busy at the same time developing ECO involving Iran, Turkey and some of the states of the former Soviet Union, and Afghanistan also in due course. Turkey is a candidate for EEC membership, a promoter of ECO, and is also trying for Black Sea cooperation inclusive of Greece across Dardanelles. Bangladesh may find its roots in SAARC on the one hand, in what is being projected as Greater Indo-china Asia-Pacific sub-zone of transborder complementality involving Maynmar, Thailand and Yunnan province of China, as well as in Bay of Bengal littoral cooperation. In the last-named field of cooperation, indeed, a key to our future prosperity may be found.
in sea-bed resources sharing, if we may develop adequate naval and submarine expertise and obtain littoral partnership of Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India.

To sum up, environmental and development concerns of Bangladesh involving land and water management as well as mercantile growth are intimately and intricately tied up with SAARC destiny, but to be realistic in the fast-changing world order, Bangladesh must seek support in other alignments and potential economic communities developing around. To secure itself, Bangladesh must also independently strengthen its national institutions including the military to be able to defend its national will and rights under a progressively reviewed multi-dimensional compound security strategy.