The events happening in the former USSR have started to transform the architecture of the world order so radically, that the full extent of the changes won't be understood by practising politicians for some time yet. The complicated processes that are taking place in what was just recently the largest country in the world and a super power are not just changing the intricate system of the international balance of power which has evolved in the last 50 years but are unavoidingly going to create a completely new one.

Actually the processes taking place in the former Soviet Union can be divided into two methodologically unconnected categories. First is the post-communist transformation of the society which, by itself, leads to monumental changes in any nation's political, social, economical and, therefore, military priorities. Second is the disintegration of what was in effect the last and also the largest of the world's empires.

When Gorbachev started his famous “perestroika” six years ago, he had an objective of reforming and modernizing communism while maintaining the old union. He went on believing in “the socialist perspective” practically until his very resignation and insisted on holding on to the idea of a unified super-nation even when some of the former republics were already exercising control over their territory. Gorbachev, as Dmitri Simis of the Carnegie Endowment in Washington stresses in a recent issue of Foreign Policy quarterly, “failed to see that his country was not a voluntary federation based on common laws, culture and interests, but rather a multi-ethnic empire built by force and sustained largely by repression”.

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TRANSFORMING USSR INTO COMMONWEALTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIA’s SECURITY
So, Gorbachev has failed in fulfilling his own objectives of reforming communism and maintaining the old unified state, but his failure was also his greatest accomplishment. Gorbachev, as an editorial of the Newsweek pointed out, ‘freed his country to reinvent itself’. The dual process of such reinvention will undoubtedly change the world situation in practically every aspect.

The world history’s store of examples of post-communist transformation is quite recent and rather amazing. It would have been extremely difficult to imagine even 3-4 years ago that communist regimes, being rigid and oppressive structure and having quite a lot of time to perfect their methods of self-protection, would vanish practically into the thin air so quickly and without much counterfight. (Here it must be pointed out that the present bloodshed in Yugoslavia is not a purely post-communist phenomenon and is related largely to the local ethnic and religious conflicts). Of course, the fall of the communist military regime in Poland or “the velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia were not such great surprises, but the quick reversal from communism in Bulgaria or the instant disappearance of “the model socialist German state” were quite startling even for professional political analysts who definitely expected a more diehard stand from their party elite.

Even more amazing was the quick and practically painless demise of the communism in the Soviet Union, the country where the system in question was elaborated and from where it was forced upon the others. As late as in July 1991 even the wildest optimists wouldn’t dream that well before the end of the year the communist party would be banned and practically declared a criminal organisation, its offices sealed, assets confiscated some of the most prominent leaders imprisoned. And all that has happened without really hard resistance and extended loss of life.

Almost the same could be said about the second process in the disintegration of the Soviet Union as an empire. Not a single world empire be it Roman, Osman, Habsburg’s or British have finished its existence without extended wars and destruction. And while there are undeniable regional conflicts, internal strife and regrettable loss of human life in
South Asia's Security

Some parts of the former Soviet Union, still it has a relatively limited character, particularly if you think of the size of the country. And again, speaking of political observers' predictions, several years ago one of them could have easily lost his professional credibility if he would seriously propose the possibility of a non-cataclysmic demise of the Soviet empire in the age of nuclear superarmaments. Actually, the disintegration of the Soviet Union into fifteen unstable nuclear states with the possibility of extremists getting control of nuclear warheads was quite a popular scenario of a horror film variety. Now the USSR is buried, the warheads are not collected yet in the Russia's territory, but the passions around its nuclear button have largely calmed down. The image of the country's strategic nuclear forces have been cleared from the added political speculations, emotions born out of ignorance or purposeful ignoring of technical data, from the influence of Gorbachev, who tried to frighten the world community with the nuclear threat into supporting his own version of the USSR's future. But as soon as it became clear that the Union cannot be reanimated by playing up the nuclear threat, the objective opinion of the knowledgeable experts was heard.

The facts are that the now defunct Soviet Union has left quite a safe and multi-dubbed system of controlling Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles which excludes the risk of catastrophe even in case of terrorists getting control of IBMs' silos and control panels. First, there are at least two code systems in existence: one to activise the nuclear warheads and the second to prepare for launching the missiles themselves. The communication channels for the fatal codes are still guarded quite closely, particularly now. Without priming of the nuclear warheads the missiles themselves, even if the culprits will manage to launch them, can harm only the persons it will fall directly upon; also the actual launch can be hardly effective without the complicated network of the space reconnaissance and centralised homing guidance. During the last meeting of the Commonwealth leaders on the 30th of December it was agreed upon a single "nuclear button" governing strategic nuclear forces and their unified control.
As for getting control over the technical nuclear armaments the possible extremists will have to overcome practically and statistically unbreakable safeguards. In case of their using the wrong code or the communication channel, trying to force their way into a command post or anything similar the automatic and autonomous systems of self-destructions are engaged.

It seems that the existing system of nuclear safeguards was something the former Soviet leaders should have been proud and boastful about, but their political ambitions have taken over. Now the objective information is available and it explains the easyness with which the Commonwealth’s leaders have handed over “the nuclear button” to Russia’s President.

So, at present the disintegration of the Soviet Union does not look like an interlude to a nuclear chaos. Of course, the possibility of a nuclear disaster remains, but, in the absence of a strong ideological and military confrontation, the probability of it is sufficiently low.

The two processes of the post-communist transformation and of the changing of the Soviet Union or parts of it into a Commonwealth has also twin implications for the South Asian countries.

First, the post-communist transformation of the societies of most of the former Soviet republics, the return to the democratic, as a whole, and non-ideologised ways of development has in effect put an end to the Cold War, to the deadly rivalry between the two superpowers to the very terms “first”, “second” and “third world”. The many implications - and most of them positive - of this process for South Asian countries will be undoubtedly discussed for long.

The second process, that of transforming the Soviet Union into a Commonwealth, can bring much more complicated implications. Until recently the world community has been living with unified USSR, a single country with a single (be it good or bad) policy. Now within the same territory there are emerging several states or blocs of states, including those, who do not want to be a part of the new commonwealth in any form. That obviously means the emergence of several and in some cases quite different attitudes to the international
relations, including relations with the South Asian countries.

The separate countries or blocs emerging are the Baltic states, Georgia and Armenia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Moldova, Moslem republics of Azerbaijan and five Central Asian republics and of course Russia proper. Now, a brief description of possible future attitudes or, in some cases, non-attitudes, of these states to the South Asia follows here.

The Baltic states, after getting out of the Soviet Union even before it started to transform itself into the Commonwealth of Independent States, will be definitely reorientating their international priorities towards Europe or, more exactly, Northern Europe. I do not suppose that any of the Baltic states would be interested in establishing serious political or economic relations with South Asia.

Practically the same could be said about Byelorussia and Moldova, who, though staying within the Commonwealth, will hardly have the possibility to relate in any way to the distant countries of South Asia.

The Trans-Caucasian republics of Georgia and Armenia, though geographically closer, will be definitely preoccupied in the foreseeable future either with its internal (Georgia) or external (Armenia) conflicts.

Ukraine looks like it is also going to reorientate its interests and to concentrate its political efforts on the relations with its immediate European neighbours. But, having in mind the size and the population of Ukraine that roughly equal those of France and also its fairly large but uncompetitive in the European market economy, one can predict that Ukraine would want after some time to start developing economic ties with South Asia.

The most interesting group for the purpose of our discussion is definitely the Muslim bloc, i.e., Azerbaijan and the five republics of Central Asia, namely Turkmenia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia and Kazakhstan. For the first time since these countries were included into the Russian Empire they have got the possibility of formulating their own foreign policy. Lacking any modern diplomatic tradition as well as tradition of modern polity as a whole, they will be most probably looking for patterns in some known and traditional frame of reference that is, for them, Islam.
These former Soviet and now, as they are being called more frequently now, Muslim republics are already active in establishing economic and diplomatic relations with the neighbouring countries, mainly the Muslim ones. Azerbaijan, for instance, is looking at Turkey as a model of social, cultural and economic development. Uzbekistan is quite interested in establishing close ties with Pakistan. Tajiks, being the only non-Turkic people in Central Asia, would like to get as close to Iran as possible. All of the republics are extremely keen on being on good terms with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states; most of them are thinking of establishing direct links with culturally close India.

Now we can pass to Russia. Now, of course, this country is preoccupied with sorting out the economic and political mess that the present democratic government has inherited from the previous regime. We can definitely see the decrease of the Russian influence on the international scene both politically and economically. But it would be quite wrong to forget that Russia remains a very large country that is in the process of getting the inheritance of the former Soviet Union in many areas.

Already Russia have taken the USSR's place in the UN and its Security Council. The former Union's diplomatic services have also been taken over by Russia, as well as "the nuclear button" and general control of the larger part of the army. Of course, for the time being Russia could not allow itself to play a very active role in South Asia, but such time will definitely come.

Speaking of Russia's possible future involvement in the Subcontinent, it may be noted firstly that relations with India, the traditional partner, will have to find a new base. Wide government level links in a '71 treaty style will have to be replaced by relations based on the realistic interests of the both peoples. Particularly that is important for economic relations, where politically-based decisions have created a tangle of problems.

Relations with Pakistan for many years depended upon USSR geopolitical interests and Afghan situation and actually did not have much in common with the real political interests and economic possibilities of the two peoples. Now, hopefully,
a fresh start can be made, particularly in the economic field.

Apart from events of '71 when the Soviet position was dictated by the Indian connection, relations with Bangladesh were not paid much attention to. The same situation, I am afraid, will continue for the time being. A reassuring factor is that quickly developing Bangladeshi consumer products manufacturing industry makes closer economic relation with this country more and more attractive for the rapidly emerging private Russian companies.