Indian Foreign Affairs Journal Vol. 6, No. 2, April–June 2011, 152-164

South Asia's Destiny: Conflict or Cooperation?

Rajiv Kumar Bhatia*

Since the dawn of civilization, India has been blessed with a global vision, inspired by the age-old wisdom of the familiar dictum Vasudaiva Kutumbakam ("The world is a family"). Why then are we perceived as an insular nation, quite comfortable in looking inwards? Do we, the educated class and particularly the youth, have adequate awareness, knowledge and interest in the changing global situation, the shifting power balance, impact of globalization, transformation brought by the information and communication technology, rise of other phenomena such as international terrorism, winds of change blowing in favour of democracy, and the challenge of climate change? As part of this wider inquiry, another set of questions comes up: how do we view our neighbourhood, South Asia; do we see it as a land of interminable internal strife and interstate tensions and conflicts, or as a region striving genuinely to build tangible and lasting cooperation among its national governments and peoples?

We shall need to consider all this and more as we objectively explore the prevailing political scene in South Asia, with the specific aim to understand where this region stands today and is heading in the coming years; whether its future will be different from its past; and how the present will shape the contours of its tomorrows?

We need to undertake this task, approaching it not as astrologers but as inquisitive and informed students of international relations who know that the history of South Asia contains many useful lessons – some learnt, others unlearnt – and that at the end of the day South Asia's destiny lies in the hands of its people, especially its elite – political, military, business, bureaucratic and, indeed, academic. In handling this exercise, we cannot avoid being India-

---

This article is an updated version of a lecture delivered on 14 March 2011 at the Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, under the "Distinguished Lecture Series" of the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs and is published with their permission.

***The author**, Former High Commissioner/Ambassador of India to South Africa, Lesotho, Mexico, Kenya and Myanmar.

centric, not only because our country plays a pivotal role in South Asia, but also because of our assessment that unless we change ourselves and reflect a different and improved mindset, i.e. unless we show a positive kind of leadership, given not to (perceived) domination but constructive consensus building, we should not expect other South Asian nations to change and cooperate with us in taking the region towards the goal of peace, stability, integration and progress.

The Region – A Primer

Let us begin by defining South Asia. Does it include or exclude Afghanistan and Myanmar? The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) includes the former, but excludes the latter which nevertheless is now an "observer" in it. Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, but in the scheme of things favoured by India's Ministry of External Affairs, bilateral relations with it are handled by those specializing in neighbourhood diplomacy rather than those specializing in South East Asia. For our purposes today, we may take SAARC area as South Asia, while keeping in view the special position enjoyed by Myanmar as our important and immediate neighbour.

SAARC has eight members: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives and, of course, India. Total area (5.1 million sq km), total population (1.6 billion), estimated GDP $4, 382, 700 million and per capita income of $2779 are worth noting. As comparisons are drawn between SAARC and other important regional cooperation organizations such as NAFTA, ASEAN, EAS, SADC, etc., two features stand out. First, our region faces massive problems of security and socio-economic development. Secondly, it is a region stamped by huge asymmetries of size, resources and power. India accounts for about 75 per cent of SAARC's population and area, and 80 per cent of its GDP, whereas the next-largest member, Pakistan, has only 11 per cent share of each. India enjoys an overwhelming military advantage, but it is not the only nuclear weapon power in the region: Pakistan too has nuclear weapons – a very important factor to remember.

Another significant facet of South Asia as defined earlier is that India shares borders with all other SAARC member countries (except Afghanistan and Maldives), while no other member, except Pakistan, shares a border with any other country except India. So in fact, they all are neighbours due to India's location. Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked, dependent on India for their access to the sea. Bangladesh has access to sea but is surrounded by

India on all other sides. Yet Bangladesh holds an edge when it comes to connecting our North East region with the rest of India. Needless to add that though China is not a part of South Asia, it is an "observer" in SAARC and a very important factor in the politics of South Asia.

A major, almost defining, feature of South Asia is its diversity. Ethnically diverse, the region has over two thousand ethnic entities of varying size ranging between a few thousands and hundreds of millions. The region's linguistic diversity is both phenomenal and bewildering, although English does serve as a common language. In terms of religion, Hinduism and Islam dominate the landscape, with their inter-relations having moulded the area's history for over one thousand years, even though other religions – Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Sikhism – have flourished well.

In terms of economy, South Asia is one of the poorest regions of the world, with poverty, disease, illiteracy and lack of education and health facilities being the principal challenges. Economic development should, therefore, be its priority No. 1. Further, as a World Bank report in 2007 pointed out, it is also the least integrated region in the world; trade among South Asian nations was only 2 per cent of the region's combined GDP, as compared to 20 per cent in South East Asia.

South Asia's peculiar geography – a contiguous landmass ringed by the Himalayas in the north and surrounded by sea on three sides, with several rivers criss-crossing the region – favours mutual interdependence of SAARC member states. Other favourable factors are a common history, shared culture and languages, a similar mindset and collective memory of being children born from the same womb, influenced by an unbroken record of over five thousand years of human habitation and civilizational development. Economic interdependence, the common goal of member states to ensure economic progress of their peoples, the dream to enable the region to play its vital role on the world stage – these are all positive factors. The phenomenon of globalization has further strengthened the impact of these factors.

However, despite these objective conditions, South Asia is far from becoming a fabled land of peace, security, stability and progress today. What explains this situation?

The Conflict Scenario

Following the end of the colonial era, the advent of independence during the

late 1940s and resultant political transformation of the whole region, a new hope had been created, of its peoples taking their destiny in their own hands, instead of being dictated any longer by rulers from a distant land. As home to poverty, underdevelopment, disease and illiteracy and of masses afflicted by terribly inadequate health and education facilities, South Asia had seemed set to look towards an era of multi-pronged socio-economic development. Even without any conflict within the region, this task was far too daunting and overwhelming. What, however, made it nearly impossible was the inescapable fact that independence was accompanied by interstate and intra-state conflicts resulting in enormous bloodshed, setbacks and loss of opportunities and time.

India was partitioned into two states in 1947 – India and Pakistan – and eventually East Pakistan seceded to become Bangladesh in 1971. The former event was compounded by communal riots and two wars on Jammu and Kashmir in 1948 and 1965, and the latter was preceded by conflict within Pakistan, outflow of ten million refugees from East Pakistan into India, and India's role in Bangladesh's liberation. All this left a deep imprint on the subcontinent's psyche. On the one hand, against the backdrop of national humiliation suffered by India due to defeat in the border conflict with China in 1962, the victory in 1971 instilled immense self-confidence in India as the military balance in the region was decisively turned in its favour. On the other hand, Pakistan saw in India's success and assertiveness a disinclination to accept the partition of 1947 as well as a long-term strategy to further destabilize and balkanize Pakistan. What was overlooked on both sides of the border were two fundamental facts: first, Bangladesh would never have emerged as an independent nation if Pakistan's leadership had handled its internal tensions and strife better, granting adequate autonomy and space to East Pakistan; and second, since 1971 India's clear and consistent policy has been to support the unity and integrity of Pakistan.

My considered view is that the complex equations involving India, Pakistan and Bangladesh can only be understood in the larger historical context of how ancient India gave way to the medieval times, the arrival of Islam, the rise of communal tensions and conflict, coexistence and synthesis that resulted in the formation of modern-day South Asia, a mosaic composed of different religions, languages, regional and sub-regional identities.

While the last conventional, full-scale war between India and Pakistan was fought in 1971, the Kargil war of 1999 underlined the dangers of armed strife by means other than a conventional war. Militancy in the Kashmir Valley since the late 1980s became the central issue around which Pakistan continued

its strategy of waging war through other means. Subsequently, the rise and spread of terrorism across India and now even within Pakistan has largely "Made in Pakistan" written all over it. Condemned widely as the global epicentre of terrorism, Pakistan is now seen as being hurt by the Frankenstein's monster phenomenon. The lethal combination of Islamic fundamentalism, a complex tribal/ethnic strife in its border region with Afghanistan, the adverse impact of unresolved problems in Afghanistan and, above all, the state sponsorship through ISI of terrorist organizations and the feebleness of its democracy have brought Pakistan and the region to an extremely grave stage today.

But can the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir and the serious problem of terrorism alone explain why the atmosphere of conflict and distrust has prevailed in South Asia for decades? I do not think so. As we dig deeper, we discover other factors too.

(i) First, from time to time our neighbours other than Pakistan have had grievances against India. They still do.

The civil war in Sri Lanka turned out to be a major conflict in the region. It lasted for about twenty-six years from June 1983 to May 2009 and resulted in the killing of thousands of people and displacement of a large section of the population. It also resulted in the involvement of India's defence forces when, as a result of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was deployed in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990 to secure the compliance of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a mission which eventually failed. This entire episode represents a dismal chapter in South Asian history, but its lessons were not forgotten. Eventually, when the LTTE was vanquished, it was at the hands of Sri Lankan defence forces which received calibrated support and assistance from India. Today Sri Lanka understands, but nonetheless resents, our legitimate concern and interest in the resolution of the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka. The hope in Delhi now is that the Sri Lankan leadership would somehow show adequate wisdom, resilience and speed to craft a lasting and just solution.

Bangladesh has had its own set of problems with us, springing from the fear that India dominates it geographically and can do so politically and militarily, and that New Delhi craves for Bangladesh's natural resources without wishing to invest enough in its economic development. Soon after its liberation, problems with India arose. Relations were marred by a long list of unresolved issues including water sharing of the Ganges and other rivers, Teen Bigha question and other border-related disputes, and

problems pertaining to developing an economic regime of mutually beneficial cooperation. They were accentuated by the rise of fundamentalist, pro-Pakistan political forces that were opposed to the ideology of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation. India struggled to craft a right mix of policies but achieved only uneven and limited success.

The rise of Sheikh Hasina to power, following elections in 2008, was followed by her historic visit to India in January 2010. The Indian and Bangladeshi leaders agreed on "a vision for the future in pursuit of the common good – bilaterally, regionally and globally". They reiterated their commitment to work together on issues "through cooperation and mutual understanding". For this purpose, they decided to put in place "a comprehensive framework of cooperation" covering diverse sectors such as water resources, power, transportation and connectivity, trade, tourism and education. Both governments are now engaged in finalizing measures for various areas of cooperation. Their success in implementing the agreements could take India-Bangladesh relations in a positive direction.

Other neighbours too suffer from the apprehension that India poses a threat by its sheer size, attitude and policy approach, with the result that certain political parties in countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh find it highly expedient to use India-baiting as an effective vote catcher.

Conflict in Afghanistan for the past thirty years has had an adverse impact on South Asia. Forces within (such as the Taliban) and outside Afghanistan have played a negative role, even as India has shown a consistent commitment to peace, democracy and inclusive development in Afghanistan. Pakistan seems to want to dominate Afghanistan politically, keen to deny any role to India on the ground that Pakistan's need for "strategic depth" should trump all considerations including Afghanistan's legitimate national interests.

A brief reference to Myanmar is in order here. As mentioned above, it is India's immediate neighbour but not a member of SAARC, enjoying status as an observer only. India-Myanmar relations are rooted in history, Buddhism, ethnic ties and shared culture. They flourished reasonably well after independence, but following the military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement during 1988–1990 and India's unflinching support for the latter, they reached their lowest point. After a policy review in the early 1990s, India began a serious engagement with the military government, while continuing to support pro-democracy forces. In the past two decades (1991–2010), bilateral relations have improved

and strengthened considerably, marked by a regular exchange of high-level visits, cooperation in countering insurgencies as well as in other spheres like security, defence, trade, development and human resource development. However, the question after the elections in November 2010 is whether Myanmar will move towards genuine democracy and whether it will work for an appropriate balance in its relations with China, India and other key Asian countries. The answers to these questions will undoubtedly influence the future pattern of India's relations with that country.

(ii) Secondly, India's historical experience indicates that South Asia is an area where both threats and opportunities exist; the challenge has always been how to manage the former and leverage the latter. In the post-economic reforms/post-Cold War period since 1991, political trends have broadly favoured South Asia moving in the desired, positive direction, but Pak-sponsored terrorism still remains a major and real threat. India is often advised to recognize that respect from smaller neighbours cannot be commanded, that it can only be earned, but it often feels let down by some of its neighbours. India's growing economy seems to have now afforded it the means to show generosity by opening its market and by showing through action that Delhi is willing to more than reciprocate friendly action by neighbours. India has offered economic assistance including lines of credit amounting to $1 billion each for Afghanistan and Bangladesh as well as undertaken major infrastructure development projects in Myanmar, Maldives and elsewhere. But the point is that India is expected by its neighbours to do more, much more.

(iii) Thirdly, extra-regional powers have been a factor of instability, triggering tensions and strained relations and participating, albeit indirectly, in interstate conflict in South Asia. As the former colonial power UK's influence declined, the US and USSR – the erstwhile superpowers – brought the Cold War to South Asia's doorsteps. Much of the region was a votary of the Non-Aligned Movement, but this did not prevent the US from drafting Pakistan as its military ally, which, in turn, compelled India to seek support and assistance from the Soviet Union.

In recent decades, China has become a more prominent external factor impacting adversely on South Asia. As viewed from Delhi, it has been trying to build stronger cooperation with each of India's neighbours, forging close political, military and economic ties and tying up supply of natural gas and minerals and timber in Myanmar. This, combined with its "all-weather

friendship" with Pakistan, the unresolved border problem with India, and its general global strategy to engage India in a competition for political influence and economic gains, has resulted in many observers concluding that China is set to encircle India.

China certainly seems to follow a policy of creating counterweights to India within the region, by developing close partnerships with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and others. Its objective is not only to restrict India's role to this region but also to limit it even within the region. This cannot be acceptable to India, driven as it is by a global view, ambition and interests. Hence through a blend of diplomatic creativity, vigour and receptive international environment, India strives to play a vital role within the region as well as the outside world. In doing so, it probably recognizes that in the global context the India-China relationship is stamped by a triad of cooperation, competition and conflict and, therefore, South Asia is unlikely to be an exception.

In particular, the deepening of China-Pakistan relationship causes much anxiety in New Delhi. As Indian officials have often pointed out, China's presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, China's policy on Jammu and Kashmir, and China-Pakistan security and nuclear relationship have been a source of "genuine concerns". Without China showing due sensitivity and ample accommodation, it is hard to see how India-China relations will remain unaffected by the China-Pakistan equation. A Chinese scholar, Tan Yun Shan, opined recently that Sino-Indian relations would be "the most important of the most important" relationships shaping the current century. If so, China's South Asia policy should encourage and accommodate rather than hamper mutually beneficial regionalism in South Asia.

The Cooperation Perspective

The cooperation pillar of South Asia's diplomatic architecture may not be very strong, but it exists. It has been growing, albeit gradually, in strength and impact; and it has a promising potential for the future. It is possible to evaluate in detail India's relations individually with each of its South Asian neighbours in order to appreciate the degree of progress in bilateral cooperation in political, trade, economic and other spheres. But as our focus is on the regional context today, an objective assessment of SAARC – its achievements, failures and challenges – should give us useful pointers for our dialogue here.

SAARC was launched in December 1985, after years of deliberations, with a set of bold objectives to promote the welfare of the people of South

Asia. The essential goal has been to improve the quality of their life through accelerated economic growth, to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance, and to enhance cooperation among member states in international forums of common interest. Its Charter excludes discussion of essentially bilateral issues and focuses instead on common regional matters so that mutual trust and understanding are created as a means towards promoting active collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, culture, scientific, technical and developmental fields.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi described the creation of SAARC as "an act of faith". Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has observed that it was also "an act of great foresight and statesmanship".

In the twenty-five years of its existence, SAARC has secured modest achievements. The decision first to initiate SAPTA (South Asia Preferential Trade Arrangement) and then to replace it with SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Agreement) in 2006 indicated a shared desire to move South Asia towards (relatively) free trade. Trade under SAFTA has been growing. It has now crossed $1.2 billion, although it is still well below the potential. The signing of the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) in 2010 has been welcomed as an important step in broadening the scope of regional trade.

Common development projects have been crafted under the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). Issues pertaining to cooperation to counter terrorism, to expand cooperation in infrastructure development, financial sector cooperation, tourism and culture engage the members' attention. The decade 2010–2020 has been declared as the Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity in SAARC. Progress achieved in establishing the South Asian University in New Delhi, though limited, is particularly praiseworthy. A $300 million enterprise, it has begun recently with only fifty students, but it holds promise for the future.

The setting up of a number of regional institutions devoted to specific activities of cooperation such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre and SAARC Food Bank should help in addressing common problems in due course. Further, as climate change has become a serious challenge, member states have been striving to increase their coordination and cooperation in this field. The SAARC Convention on Environment signed at the Thimphu Summit has given boost to this cooperation.

It is notable that India's proposal to create a South Asian Forum for exchange of ideas on the future development of South Asia has been accepted.

External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna pointed out at the 33rd Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers on 8 February 2011: "As SAARC completes twenty-five years of its existence, the need of the hour is to identify ways and means for the Association to become a more dynamic component of the larger Asian resurgence, characterized by increasing inter-linkages and growing interdependence."

SAARC Summits and ministerial meetings provide excellent opportunities for meetings on their sidelines, for discussion between leaders of member states, especially India and Pakistan. But SAARC cannot really resolve essential bilateral political problems; this is outside its mandate.

What it can and has to do more is to expand regional trade and broaden economic development. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was candid in stating at the Thimphu Summit that despite recent positive trends, the share of intra-regional trade and investment flows in total trade and investment flows in South Asia is "far below what we see in East and South East Asia. It is well below the potential."

If SAARC represents the best hope for the cooperation scenario in South Asia, we need to evaluate it critically. But more often than not we hear its detractors claim that it has achieved very little; in doing so, they generally fail to point out that the failure or success of SAARC depends entirely on its member states. I do not accept the claim that SAARC has failed. A more calibrated evaluation was presented by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Speaking at the SAARC Summit in Thimphu last year, he made a pertinent point: "In looking back at these two and a half decades, we can claim the glass is half full and compliment ourselves, or we can admit that the glass is half-empty and challenge ourselves."

Certainly, going by the number of "observers", the Association seems to be taken quite seriously by the outside world. The latest list of observers includes Australia, Myanmar, China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Mauritius, USA and the European Union. SAARC has helped South Asia in developing common positions on a number of significant regional and international issues. For example, the sixteenth Summit of the Association adopted climate change as the central theme and initiated suitable action to address it as a major challenge. SAARC has striven hard to promote cooperation in agriculture and energy, devising a cooperative approach pertaining to various aspects of the energy sector such as energy trade, energy efficiency, non-conventional and renewable energy.

Sheel Kant Sharma, Secretary General of SAARC, observed aptly in his SAARC Charter Day message on 8 December 2010:

> Through diverse actions over decades, SAARC has sought to engender a distinct South Asian identity and a culture of peace, cooperation and partnership for the collective benefit of our peoples, brought up potential of regional cooperation, embarked on a free trade area, and enhanced sharing of experience at the level of peoples, intellectuals, artists, litterateurs and business communities.

India is central to the success of SAARC. Its policy approach towards its neighbours in the region is based on the promotion of not only its own but also their economic interests, and the fundamental interlinkage between the two. New Delhi's view was best articulated by Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao who, speaking at the French Institute of International Affairs in February 2011, stated:

> We want to create an economic environment with our neighbours so that we can work together to build on our common objectives on our economic development. A peaceful neighbourhood is mandatory for realization of our own vision of economic growth.

Conclusion

The whole set of "pull" and "push" factors that drive South Asia towards conflict as well as cooperation is worth debating, as is another question: can India become a truly great power without a stable, secure and prosperous South Asia? Clearly the answer to this question is in the negative. As I see it, our neighbours need to show greater sensitivity to our security and strategic interests, and we need to be more generous and credible in crafting and sustaining arrangements for both bilateral and regional cooperation.

The key challenge facing not just governments but societies in South Asia is to manage negative tendencies and strengthen positive trends. The degree of success will determine whether we can reduce tensions and conflict and enlarge cooperation in the next twenty-five years. SAARC certainly has the potential to be more successful at 50 than it was at 25.

A key step towards addressing the conflict or cooperation dilemma is to recognize that the leaders of South Asia need to work on both fronts, namely to remove the causes of conflict and to build on new models of cooperation, especially economic cooperation, given that poverty remains the central, shared challenge. C. Raja Mohan put it wisely at the SAFM conference in August

2004: "South Asian nations have wallowed in poverty for so long and marketed it abroad for aid that they find it hard to conceive of shared prosperity through greater economic integration." He added: "Breaking out of this cycle is possible if South Asian states move to depoliticize issues of economic cooperation and build the habits of collective security."

Experts on SAARC have numerous other prescriptions to offer. I would particularly endorse the diagnosis presented by V.V. Desai in his July 2010 ADB Working Paper entitled "Political Economy of Regional Cooperation in South Asia". His balanced conclusion is that SAARC can do much better in future, but such an outcome is "predicated on the successful management of three deficits", namely the trust deficit among all member states, the trade account deficit of smaller SAARC economies with India, and the institutional capacity deficit to support regional cooperation.

To this trio of deficits, I would add one more: the deficit in awareness, interest and vision on the part of the educated classes about the region's role in world affairs.

In order to remedy the present situation from the Indian perspective, I should offer a five-point blueprint for wider consideration:

(i) South Block should strive to refocus its priorities, ensuring that, at best, only one-third of its political and diplomatic energy and resources are devoted to Pakistan, with the rest directed towards improving and deepening relations with other neighbours.

(ii) The President/Prime Minister should initiate a new tradition of visiting every South Asian country or receive its head of state/head of government once a year. These visits should be more in the nature of "drop-in by a neighbour" rather than elaborate trips rich in protocol rituals.

(iii) Senior officials representing India in the Security Council and G-20 should keep in close touch with their counterparts in South Asia so that the region feels a sense of ownership in India sitting at the top table.

(iv) India Inc. needs to pay greater attention to expand business linkages with and investment flows to India's immediate neighbours. It has to create a greater stake for them in its growth and a greater stake for it in their progress and prosperity.

(v) Contribution by the academia to study and analyse changes and challenges in South Asia with the objective to offer new proposals and ideas should be enhanced through greater interaction among institutions of excellence

throughout the region.

The inescapable conclusion is that South Asia's recent past has been marked by a combination of conflict and cooperation. For the cooperation pillar to be strengthened further, India as well as its neighbours will need to show greater wisdom and commitment to the transformation of South Asia into a region of peace, progress and prosperity.

✶ ✶ ✶