

Regional Balance – India and Her Neighbours

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INTRODUCTION

Asia is the largest land mass and also is the most populous of all the continents. Central and South Asia together account for a quarter of the world's population. While Central Asia is an important source of oil and natural gas, South Asia is of strategic importance for all the sea routes from West Asia to the Far East pass through this region. Of the eight nuclear powers in the world, this area has two, namely, India and Pakistan.

South Asia continues to be dominated by India and Pakistan, be it their conflict or the peace efforts over Jammu and Kashmir (J and K), their internal strife or South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The dynamic relations between the two countries have overshadowed most of the happenings in the region.

Insurgencies and terrorism have proliferated in South and Central Asia. It had reached alarming proportions, spreading its tentacles into South East Asia, till the formation of the alliance against terrorism after the infamous event of 11 September 2001. Although on this count there is optimism to resolve many of the issues; peace talks between India and Pakistan, peace talks between the Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, suppression of the Al Qaeda offshoots, to name a few, the threat still remains. The economies of the small affected nations are in dire straits and these nations would take many years to recover.

Central and South Asia have assumed geostrategic importance after the installation of the Karzai government in Afghanistan. The oil reserves of Central Asia are of strategic and

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economic importance. The proposals of exporting oil and gas from these reserves are being seriously considered after the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan. The inbuilt political considerations and ethnic suspicions are, however, posing serious hurdles in implementing these projects, be it the pipe-line through Afghanistan or Pakistan to India or the sharing of the oil by Iran with Kazakhstan.

It is proposed to consider the regional balance of the expanse comprising of India and her immediate neighbours, with a mention of the other nations in the neighbourhood.

SAARC COUNTRIES

Bangladesh

Bangladesh, with its internal problems and the porous border with India poses a very serious security threat to us. The country has been the recipient of sustained international aid to assist it improve its economy and demographic prospects, yet it continues to remain a poor, over-populated and ill-governed nation. Its geographical location has added to its miseries with natural disasters occurring at a regular frequency, thus acting as impediments to growth. Other major impediments include inefficient and ill-managed state enterprises, slow implementation of economic reforms, a high rate of unemployment that cannot be absorbed by the agriculture sector and prolonged delays in exploiting the natural resources.

Internally, Bangladesh faces a threat from fundamentalist Muslim groups. Due to political infighting, there has not been much control over the activities of such groups, leading to a continuous deterioration in the law and order situation. After the last elections, government control over such groups has further reduced, as some of the controlling fundamentalist parties are now a part of the coalition. With the US pressure on Pakistan to control terrorism on its soil, activities of the Al Qaeda and other Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) backed groups have increased in Bangladesh. The Government, of course, has denied this.

The relations between Bangladesh and India have not been

on the best of terms ever since the last elections in 2001. The sharing of the Ganga waters, illegal migration of Bangladeshis, provision of shelter to anti-Indian insurgent groups of the North Eastern (NE) states, are some of the prickly issues that have precluded harmonious relations between the two countries.

It is in India's interest that we see Bangladesh develop into a politically stable and economically growing nation. The threats posed to our national security through insurgency from that nation and the illegal migration needs to be resolved through dialogue and economic assistance. Apart from offering economic assistance, India can offer limited military assistance too, considering the commonality between the two countries in the military inventory. The recent visit of the Chief of the Air Staff is a step in the right direction.

Bhutan

One of the world's smallest and probably also the least developed kingdoms, Bhutan survives primarily on agriculture and forestry. Surface communication is difficult and expensive to build because of the mountainous terrain that predominates Bhutan. The economy of the kingdom is, therefore, closely linked with Indian connections. Bhutan relies mainly on Indian migrant labour for its industrial development projects. Its hydroelectric potential and tourism are the other key resources.

While Bhutan does not face any external security threat, its position along the Indo-Chinese border put it in a very strategic position in so far as India is concerned. It was also a safe haven for the Bodo and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) militants, they having set up regular camps inside Bhutan. Of late the military action by the Bhutanese Army has resulted in rout of the rebels, leading to large scale surrender.

India, as the big brother, needs to continue to maintain cordial relations with the kingdom, lest it comes under the Chinese influence. Towards that end, economic, industrial and military aid on a continuous basis should be the forerunner for our policy directed towards Bhutan.

Maldives

Maldives, the group of atolls and coral islands beyond the south western tip of India, sustains its economy on tourism, fishing industry being the next sustaining factor. The country is worried about the effects of global warming as their very existence is at stake, with more than three-quarters of the land being just one metre above sea level.

The country has no internal or external threat to it, though in 1989 it had faced an uprising, which was quelled with the assistance of the Indian Armed Forces. Considering the strategic location of the islands, India has to continue maintaining the existing relations to ensure that other countries do not take advantage of our absence. Economic and other assistance as asked for needs to be given at the earliest to maintain the tilt of the country towards India.

Nepal

Another Himalayan kingdom that is totally landlocked and hence dependent on India on its sea routes for trade. The country is amongst the poorest in the world with more than 50 per cent of its population living below the poverty line. Agriculture and tourism are the mainstays of its economy, however, both have been hit due to the Maoist insurgency.

Though Nepal does not face any external threats, it is suffering from severe internal problems. Inefficient governments in succession have led to an economic and social crisis, providing fuel to the Maoist movement. The insurgents, strike at will, stretching the police and military to their limits. In addition, the resultant poor law and order situation has permitted anti Indian terrorists to operate from Nepal.

India cannot afford to relax its vigil on the Nepalese front. It has to keep a close watch on the Maoist movement and not allow it to grow any further. The Indo-Nepal border needs to be sealed, if required, to ensure that the insurgents do not take refuge in the adjoining Indian states. In so far as aid to resurrect the ailing economy is concerned, it is in India's interest to enrol the assistance

of other SAARC states to bring Nepal out of the doldrums, providing a major share itself.

Pakistan

Pakistan is an impoverished and under-developed economy, suffering from internal and external disputes and years of making the wrong choices. Its long-standing dispute with India and the confrontations have taken a heavy toll of its development programmes. In addition, poor human development indicators and low levels of foreign investment have marred its economic prospects.

The present government under President Musharraf has capitalised on the 11 September 2001 happenings by abandoning the Taliban in Afghanistan and joining hands with the US alliance against terrorism. It has thus managed to garner substantial economic and military aid from abroad. It has also managed, for the first time probably, to complete a short-term International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan programme, thus improving its credibility with international creditors.

The economy of the country is closely interlinked with its external and internal security environment. Pakistan has been joining groups to suit its convenience. After joining the Mujahideen to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan, it switched sides from the Taliban to the American alliance after 11 September 2001. This helped the government to extricate itself from a precarious economic situation but it created political problems within the country.

The external security threat is a fallout of Pakistan's long-standing obsession over J and K. Its domestic and foreign policies are centred over J and K and it has availed of every opportunity to highlight the issue of "Indian presence" in various international forums. India, on its part has maintained that the insurgency in J and K is the handiwork of terrorist groups, operating from Pakistan with the covert support of the establishment. International pressure, mainly from the USA, has resulted in President Musharraf giving a public undertaking at the just concluded SAARC Summit, not to allow the use of Pakistani territory for terrorism.

With the recent exposure of nuclear secrets being shared by the head of the Pakistan's nuclear programme with Iran, Libya and North Korea, Pakistan is once again in the limelight. International media is asking for details of the leaks and the involvement of the Pakistani military, which controls the nuclear weapons programme.

There is a growing disenchantment in the general public with the government over the continuing involvement with the USA. The internal politics with President Musharraf holding the additional portfolio of the Army Chief would, therefore, continue to be turbulent.

Pakistan can consider itself fortunate to have the USA on its side despite many allegations and proofs of its involvement in proliferating terrorist activities and nuclear weapons. Most of the economic and military sanctions imposed after the 1998 nuclear tests have been lifted. The honeymoon may not last for long considering the fact that it is the election year in the USA.

Pakistan's relations with China continue to be friendly. China has been supplying it with nuclear technology, military hardware and infrastructure development at Gwadar, a prominent Arabian Sea port due west of Karachi. The development of this port satisfies the strategic requirements of both Pakistan and China, with Pakistan getting an additional port on the Arabian Sea and China getting access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

India needs to pursue the diplomatic efforts to ensure lasting peace in J and K and move towards a bilateral solution to resolve the issue. All avenues, be they regional bodies like SAARC or international bodies like the Commonwealth or the UN, need to be relentlessly explored. Use of military power, as a tool of statecraft, should be the last resort, but when required, should be used without fear of the use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan.

Sri Lanka

Ever since adopting the market oriented economic policies, the Sri Lankan economy had been on the upswing till the internal security situation deteriorated in the late 1980s. The civil strife had taken a toll of the economy and the social structure of the country,

but with the Oslo sponsored ceasefire, the economic situation is once again looking up.

Sri Lanka has no external threat. The ceasefire between the Government and the LTTE is holding after almost two decades of conflict. The stumbling block, if it may be called so, is the internal political situation in Sri Lanka.

As a close maritime neighbour, the country is of strategic importance to India. It is in India's interest to see that peace returns to Sri Lanka with political, economic and social stability. India has to continually involve itself in the affairs of Sri Lanka to ensure no third party, inimical to India's interests, steps in. The involvement need not be of the type of the misadventure of 1987, but can be in the form of diplomatic and military support and economic assistance.

OTHER NATIONS OF IMPORTANCE

Afghanistan

The fall of the Taliban regime and installation of the Karzai government in Afghanistan has completely altered the geo-strategic situation in the area. The countries of the region do not, any longer, face a threat of terrorists from Afghanistan. Even Russia and China seem satisfied with the turn of events, as Chechnya in Russia and the province of Xinjiang in China had become the targets of Islamic terrorism emanating from Afghanistan.

India is a part of the international effort to rebuild Afghanistan. That the present regime has an inclination towards India is beneficial for our national security and has to be maintained through sustained diplomatic and economic support. Afghanistan, though not an immediate neighbour, is of immense strategic importance for India, being the hub of the fight against terrorism, with the US troops operating from its territory and the diversion of Pakistan Army towards its western borders. In addition, there is the proposal for an oil and gas pipeline link from Iran to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan, which on the face of it, appears to be a mirage.

Myanmar

Myanmar, though a resource rich country, suffers from dismal poverty with a bleak future. The economy, under the Army, has been suffering from serious imbalances. With the ceasing of international aid due to the suppression of the democratic movement and ignorance of a democratic election in 1990, the economy has been further slipping. Little or no data is available, and what is available is not reliable.

India, though opposed to military dictatorship, has been pursuing a pragmatic approach in its relations with Myanmar as the two countries share a common border and have common national security problems. Many NE insurgent groups have been taking refuge in the adjoining territory and operate from Myanmar. The porous border has also been a conduit for the supply of drugs into India. India is interested in maintaining a reasonable working relationship with Myanmar, as China is its main supplier of arms and military assistance. China is also setting up surveillance facilities in some of the islands north of Andaman Islands.

China

China is the major power in Asia and the adjoining Pacific region. The Chinese economy is the fastest growing in the world, though of late it has been showing some signs of slowing down. The Chinese leadership has set a goal for itself to be militarily, politically and economically at par with the major powers of the world by 2025. The system operates within a political framework of strict Communist control that has withstood the test of time and has continued to function even after the collapse of erstwhile Soviet Union, though recently, non-state managers and enterprises have been on the increase.

China's main external security problem is the annexation of Taiwan to the mainland. It considers Taiwan as a province that had broken away after the Communists took over and hence the aim towards reunification. This step, in its assessment, is the first to attain parity amongst the major powers. China's fear is the supply of the latest weapon systems and the cover of National Missile

Defence from the USA may encourage Taiwan to declare independence and complete the breakaway. China is, therefore, building and modernising its military capabilities at a rapid pace, much to the concern of not only Taiwan, but also other nations in the region. Its external security situation has been strengthened with a 20 year friendship treaty with Russia.

Within the country, the problem of Tibet persists, but it is being suppressed with a heavy hand, like other movements for democracy. It has also been facing a problem with the Falun Gong movement and has been successful to control it to a large extent. In the western province of Xinjiang, it has been facing Islamic militancy. This extremism, originating from Afghanistan, is also coming under control with the international fight against terrorism.

The new military modernisation programme has given it a fillip to project its military power not only in conventional terms but also in terms of nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) warfare. China has the capability to strike any part of India with its intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) and inter continental ballistic missiles (ICBM). Although China has declared no first use of nuclear weapons, the threat looms large. China has improved communication infrastructure in Tibet and in Aksai Chin area for sustaining large forces along the Indo-Tibetan border. The agreement of maintaining peace and tranquility on the Sino-Indian border and the confidence building measures were initiated in 1996. Notwithstanding, the Sino-Indian border dispute remains unresolved. Talks have been initiated but the resolution does not seem to be on China's priority list. However, India on its part cannot afford to let down its guard, militarily and diplomatically. With China aiding Pakistan in a big way and also having its naval presence in the ports of Myanmar and its islands in the Bay of Bengal, India needs to be cautious, lest a "1962" is repeated, this time from the sea.

Central Asia

Most of the Central Asian countries that gained independence from the erstwhile USSR are now a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Their armed forces are in an embryonic stage and they continue to be dependent on Russia for defence.

The USA has come in and is operating its armed forces from their territories for fight against terrorism. The area is rich in oil and natural gas and hence the US interest in the area, is of concern to Russia.

East and South East Asia

All countries east of Myanmar have been included in this region. This area is under the influence of three major players – the USA, China and Japan. China is apprehensive of the US hegemony while the other nations are chary of China's rising economic and military strengths. Concerns of China's increasing presence in the area through the ports of Myanmar and North Korea, are being manifested by other nations by resorting to deals with the USA for military or naval presence in their territories. In the Islamic nations, the US presence is in turn giving rise to dissatisfaction among the locals. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries are seeking to further strengthen their economic and security environment through a regional dialogue and establishing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). India is one of the 23 dialogue partners.

CONCLUSION

The continent of Asia is the most populous area of the world but houses some of the least developed countries. It is, therefore, a politically volatile area with a complex interplay of interests from within the region and from the western world.

India has to exploit its strengths in the region to establish itself firmly with its neighbours and the adjoining countries. One such example is the expertise in software, which can be shared with nations to increase their dependency on us. Other infrastructure, like a rail link between Afghanistan and India and the suggested road link through Myanmar to the Far East can be considered as long term plans. The proposal of South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) and a common currency mooted in the last SAARC meeting in Islamabad needs to be pursued. Other assistance in the form of sharing educational facilities can also be explored.

With an economic and military giant like China, emerging as a key player, other nations are concerned of their political, economic and military existence. With the world looking upto India for its democratic example, strong industrial base and economic revival, India is now close behind China in a region of strategic importance and needs to continue its efforts towards establishing itself as one of the leading players of not only the region but of the world.

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