

South Asia: Economic Cooperation and Security

COL R RAMA RAO (RETD)

SOUTH ASIA

This populous region, is bounded by the Himalayan range in the north, the Indian ocean in the South, and the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal in the west and east respectively. To the north are the Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan. In the south west not far from the subcontinent's coast-line stands the Maldiv group of islands. Also close to the coast lies Sri Lanka in the south. These island nations too form part of South Asia.

The countries of the region which have large populations to support and are extensive in area are India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The subcontinent is by no means a homogenous entity. Wide variety of climatic conditions occur in the region; extremes of temperatures are encountered as also wide variations in rainfall as between one segment of the subcontinent and another. However, the region as a whole is well endowed with natural resources. Its extensive coast-line provides easy access to the oceans' riches as well as to other countries and continents. Two countries, Bhutan and Nepal, however, do not have direct access to the oceans but enjoy the assured cooperation of their southern neighbours for facilitating transit of goods and personnel from and to these countries.

Other natural resources also occur in the region. Extensive land area watered by perennial rivers provide excellent conditions for crop production. Properly utilised these two assets could transform the region into one that can not only enable its people to enjoy high nutritional standards but also grow enough surpluses for export. The mineral resources of the region cover a wide range. Some of these non-renewable resources such as iron and manganese ores are being exported. Other non-renewable resources such as copper, zinc and lead too have been found but in comparatively limited quantities.

Energy materials also occur in the region though not as extensively as in Australia, China, USA, USSR or West Asia. Its human resource potential too is high. Thus, the region has almost all the resources that are needed for making it rich. Yet excepting for Pakistan which is on the way to join the group of middle income countries, South Asia is among the poorest regions in the world with more than a third of its people existing below the poverty line i.e. lacking the means of buy minimum requirements of food, clothing and shelter.

Two centuries of alien rule over the greater part of the region, no doubt accounts for this to some extent. But it is also a sad testimony to our failure, after forty years of independence to utilise our resources and talents to create adequate productive potential so that people of working age can be gainfully employed and lead a tolerable existence. India endeavoured to attain this objective by adopting the strategy of planned economic growth. Other countries of the region too followed this example. Even so economic growth has been distressingly slow, except in Pakistan as noted earlier, where several other factors have been at work.

India's planning philosophy though praiseworthy proceeded on some wrong premises as is now generally recognised. The emphasis was on import substitution, not export promotion. Had the stress been on the latter, we would have striven to attain economies of scale, technological upgradation of production processes and product designs and enabled our industry to attain its rightful stature. The other was the pernicious system of licensing which apart from condemning units to limit production to uneconomic levels served to discourage competition and product improvement. This provides a lesson to India as well as other countries of the region. Because of the lack of homogeneity, poor education and low standard of living, and above all, want of trust in each other, the countries of the region have neither been able to cooperate with each other to eradicate poverty nor ensure reasonable security for themselves. This apart, the human resources of the region are only potentially of high value and can be utilised properly only when people are well trained and are motivated to work constructively and produce more goods and services. The key to economic growth and assured security for the individual and the nation is the proper development of its human resource potential. Failure on our part to devote adequate attention towards developing and harnessing this resource would further retard our economic development besides making us more vulnerable to external pressures. This aspect of regional security would merit the earnest consideration of leaders of countries of the region.

One important factor which effectively strengthens regional security is increased economic cooperation amongst the countries concerned. Close cooperation amongst the countries of South Asia is essential in the interests of the countries themselves and is attainable. A little reflection on the part of leaders of the countries would show that the people despite the divisive influence that religion has been made to have for quite some time, have several things in common. Excepting for some fanatical individuals and groups, the people of the region irrespective of the country to which they belong are not averse to mutual cooperation. The greater the area of such cooperation, the greater the advantages that all would derive. Further as the areas of mutual cooperation expand, the security climate of the region too would improve,

since powers interested in destabilising the region would find it more difficult to play their game. We need make no apologies for stressing that since Independence, Indian leaders have been earnestly advocating close cooperation between countries of the region in matters of trade, education, cultural development and people to people understanding. This is important since external powers, have been trying, not without some success to create splits in the region by drawing some countries into their alliance systems.

MUTUAL RELATIONS AND THE EXTERNAL FACTOR

The three bigger countries of the region, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were one in colonial times. Given the legacy of religious differences among the people, some muslim majority areas, at the time of independence wanted to emerge as a separate state, Pakistan, while the rest wanted to remain in India where people professing different faiths could live in peace without being discriminated against in any way.

In contrast, it was impossible for minorities to stay in Pakistan, who fled for safety here. Unhappily Pakistan since its inception has tended to follow anti-India policies which have obvious communal and religious overtones. This is one factor that has enabled interested external powers to manipulate the affairs of the region to serve their own geostrategic interests.

EMERGENCE OF BANGLADESH

Following years of neglect and denial of employment opportunities in their own country by West Pakistanis who treated them as second class citizens, Bangladeshis were disenchanted with the Pakistan that they had helped to bring into being.

The end came when Pakistan's army in its genocidal mania began killing man, woman and child, first in Dacca and subsequently throughout Bangladesh in its bid to suppress people's movement for freedom. Bangladesh emerged free but has paid heavily for attaining independence. It has to tackle problems of economic development arising from the siphoning off of its resources to the west wing for almost a quarter of the century.

Pakistan after 1971, though somewhat reduced in size has become more compact and has progressed faster than other countries of the region. The Seventies saw the oil boom and with that excellent employment opportunities for Pakistani skilled, semi skilled and unskilled labour in the Gulf region. Added to this was the demand for sizeable bodies of Pakistani troops and para military personnel in West Asia which brought in welcome remittance from expatriate Pakistanis. External assistance too has helped as also investments in Pakistan's industries by West Asians.

India's approach to regional problems is that countries of the region, by

enlarging the areas of mutual cooperation, will be furthering their long term as well as immediate interests. Indian leaders have also been stressing that by resolving to abjure the use or the threat of the use of force in dealing with other countries and to settle differences between neighbours by discussions on a bilateral basis, intra-regional disputes could to a large extent be prevented from arising and if they do arise there would be a better chance to resolve them peacefully than otherwise. This approach would make it difficult for outside powers to intervene and in the process weaken all the countries of the region.

Pakistan, however, has over the past three decades been encouraging external powers to use its territory for furthering the latter's geostrategic interests. The recompense sought by Pakistan and given by the external power was military assistance and political support in dealing with India. US-Pakistan military alliance was formalised by Pakistan's entry into SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation) and METO (Middle East Treaty Organisation) in the mid-Fifties. As explained at that time by Pakistan's then Prime Minister Mohammad Ali of Bogra at Bandung to China's Chou en Lai, Pakistan entered into these military alliances with USA, China's enemy at that time, for the sole purpose of dealing with India. Chou was apparently satisfied that Pakistan, though a camp follower of USA, would not be against China.

Over a period of time China-Pakistan friendship has blossomed into a firm military alliance, at least in the context of their relations with India, because of the commonality of interests in Kashmir. Following the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations especially after the Ussuri incident of 1969, China has moved close enough to USA to provide the latter facilities for monitoring Soviet air space, so has Pakistan once again. Pakistan-China-US military alliance that came into being in the early Eighties was an important development. It served to complete the ring with which US had been seeking to contain the Soviet Union, i.e. encircle it, confine it to European Russia and to the extent possible squeeze it further.

The Pakistan-China-US alliance is in some respects different from USA's alliance with West European countries formalised by the creation of NATO.

NATO came about in the wake of the upheaval caused by six years of devastating war in Europe, North Africa and the Far East during 1939-45. This war, generally referred to as the struggle between democracy and fascism, could perhaps be more accurately described as that between two groups of European countries, one trying to regain the colonies that it had lost following its failure to win the First World War and the other trying to retain its colonies in Africa and Asia, that provided it with all the mineral and other

natural resources that colonial powers needed, and more importantly served as dumping ground for their manufactured goods.

The war lasted far longer than Hitler intended and devastated West European Allied countries as well as Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union. West European colonial powers lost their colonies and in consequence, their dominant position in world affairs. The axis powers, former 'enemies of democracy', were, in a comparatively short period after the end of the war, drafted into the Western alliance. The Soviet Union which lost over 30 million dead and its territory ravaged during its bitter struggle against fascist forces - had really fought West Europe's and America's battle for them - was treated as an enemy after the war.

America's unceasing efforts to retain, and to the extent possible, reinforce its overwhelming military superiority over its adversary has its origin in its perception of the strength it acquired following the Second War. When the war ended, America was the only country that had a nuclear weapon - the weapon of decision. Its leaders realised that in order to retain USA's position as the World's unchallengeable power, the weapon must remain its exclusive possession. It has striven to retain its position as the most dominant power in the World ever since, although following its failures in Vietnam and sober appraisals by some of its statesmen, it seemed that US was growing out of its obsession for securing overwhelming strategic superiority.

It is important that third world countries, especially India, understand the nature and true dimensions of USA's efforts to attain new levels of military capabilities in order that its supremacy over the Soviet Union, and indeed over any combination of countries, will prevail for the foreseeable future. This period was the early Seventies when Robert Mc Namara and even Henry Kissinger had noted that overwhelming strategic superiority has no meaning, as long as the adversary has the capacity to inflict serious damage on one's own population centres or other sensitive targets. But USA is striving once again to attain overwhelming superiority so that the adversary can never be able to challenge it. /

That the security environment in South Asia and in several other sensitive regions, will to a great extent be conditioned by USA's policies and actions, is to state the obvious. Yet, this has to be kept constantly in view.

THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

America's global interests and objectives as its President and his advisers visualise them at a given point of time guide their policies and actions. These have been broadly defined in a statement on 'An American Perspective' released by the White House in March 1987.

This document to start with outlines US interests as under:

1. The survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact;
2. A healthy and growing US economy;
3. The growth of freedom, democratic institutions and free market economies throughout the world, linked by a fair and open international trading system;
4. A stable and secure world, free of major threats to US interests;
5. The health and vigour of US alliance relationships.

Every country, big and small, has the right to be free and independent, just as USA has. Likewise would every country like to have a healthy and growing economy, as US likes to. Every country, especially of the third world, would like the growth of freedom and democratic institutions throughout the world, as apparently US likes to. However, US seems to consider that an inseparable linkage between democratic institutions and "free market economies" ought to exist. USA itself violates this principle whenever and wherever it suits its strategic or economic interests. It imposes or threatens to impose restrictions on imports of high technology goods, as for example from Japan, and rigorously controls imports of low technology wares from developing countries. Above all, its concern for the 'growth of freedom and democratic institutions' throughout the world, seems purely for purposes of record. In practice USA has often sided with oppressive and totalitarian regimes of the third world, and does not hesitate to discriminate against developing countries which are democracies and struggling to improve their economies.

What could and does cause justifiable concern among peace loving countries are USA's measures to maintain the "health and vigour of US alliance relationships". USA's alliance diplomacy started soon after the end of the Second War and Winston Churchill's call to his patron power to take measures to isolate the Soviet Union behind what he referred to as the 'iron curtain'.

USA organised the NATO alliance in order to deploy its forces as close to the Soviet/East European borders as possible. This was to ensure that the theatre of a future war would be as far away as possible from Fortress America. It would avert the danger of West Europe reverting to neutrality and further that with unfriendly forces poised 'at the ready' along its borders, the Soviet Union and its allies in the Eastern bloc would feel insecure and waste resources on defence thus delaying their economic development plans. This in turn, USA hoped, would in time create domestic conflicts in the

Eastern block and possibly lead to the defection of some East European states to the West. It is no secret that right from the end of the war, USA has been trying to create disaffection in Eastern bloc countries. But an important consideration from USA's point of view is that unless cold war conditions are maintained in Europe, West European countries may slip out of its control.

US policy in Europe directed towards containing the Soviet Union has been referred to at some length since it has relevance to the alliances that USA has nurtured in Asia over the past few decades, extending from Eastern Mediterranean to the Malacca straits.

Until the late Sixties China was treated as an enemy; but when General Yahya Khan formally brought China and USA together in 1970, there was a profound change in the global strategic balance with its inevitable repercussions on the security environment affecting several countries. Chinese missiles and conventional forces instead of being directed at USA's allies would henceforth be aimed at USA's adversary and neutrals like India. From India's point of view it also meant that China - Pakistan alliance had further firmed up and enjoyed USA's active support. The two would thus be able to operate even more in concert against India, than earlier. There are other dimensions as well to the threat to India and other countries of the subcontinent that may elect to follow a non aligned policy. Among these are USA's occupation and development of bases in the India Ocean and littoral countries, such as Diego Garcia and Oman, the positioning of its intervention forces in the region and more recently the creation and permanent positioning of its fleet units in the Indian Ocean. These forces though initially meant for intervention in Gulf states in the unlikely event of their withholding oil supplies to the West, are now available for intervention anywhere in the area, especially in non aligned countries in furtherance of USA's interests. AWACs based in Diego Garcia, as well as USA's orbiting satellites routinely monitor events in India and not so long ago sent a false alarm to Pakistan regarding imagined movement of Indian aircraft and troops towards Pakistan.

South Asian countries, especially the non aligned, have to reckon with the long shadow cast by Pentagon and CIA, operating overtly and covertly through regional surrogates supported by US forces positioned closeby.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Pakistan is a nuclear power. The father of Pakistan's bomb project has made no secret of this. Nor for that matter did Late General Zia-ul Haq. To drive this point home to friends and adversaries alike, Pakistan has indicated obliquely that it is prepared to sign the Partial Test Ban Treaty which permits only underground testing of nuclear explosives, with an explosive yield not exceeding 150 kilotons. The significance of this offer by Pakistan has apparently

been missed by Indian public; namely that Pakistan does have the weapon. USA has tacitly recognised Pakistan as a nuclear power and permitted export of sensitive equipment needed for fabricating such weapons. As early as 1984, Senator Cranston, after a visit to Pakistan, had told a Senate Committee that Pakistan can enrich uranium on an 'assembly line' basis. By now it must have stockpiled a sizeable nuclear arsenal, whose only target is India. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is unlikely to be any different from that of USA, namely threaten the use of nuclear weapons and if necessary use it first.

The public in India, at least those trying to follow our defence policies, probably consider that if India acquires a token nuclear armoury, Pakistan would not be able to deliver a nuclear threat. In India's case, considering regional developments a token arsenal is unlikely to be effective. Pakistan, backed by USA and China could deliver a stern warning to this country and present its list of demands for immediate compliance or face the consequences. Simultaneously USA could indicate that in order to avoid large scale devastation and loss of life, India had better meet Pakistan's demands. China could announce its support for Pakistan by large scale intrusions across our borders besides delivering warnings that India's major cities and industrial complexes are well within its reach. Thus, in a crisis India may have to stand up to threats far more formidable than that posed by Pakistan on its own.

A reasonable measure of security is attainable by following up from the Pokharan test of 1974, building a sizeable arsenal of warheads and adapting them for fitting on rockets already available/or to be developed.

Unlike some countries, India does not believe in settling disputes by resorting to the use or threat of the use of force. It has pioneered the concept of Panchsheel and is convinced that it is the course to be adopted by nations, so that people are spared the agonies of war and have a chance of working for a better future. But India must survive and aggressive neighbours will be disposed to leave India alone, only if she is seen to be strong enough to discourage aggressive neighbours from delivering threats or preemptive strikes.

A strong India is the best assurance that India's smaller neighbours can have peace in the subcontinent. This in turn will provide them with opportunities for orderly economic and social development.

Even so, India and its peaceful neighbours must reckon with external agencies which see third world unity as a threat to their plans to dominate the world. The sooner the non aligned third world recognises this, the better their chance of survival. The first step they must take is to attain collective self reliance. This will help them attain faster economic growth and correspondingly greater immunity to threats from expansionist and hegemonistic powers. This is one element of security.

Mr. Gorbachov during his visit to India in November 1987 advocated precisely this. Greater cooperation among countries of the subcontinent and dialogues to settle mutual differences is another. In the Delhi Declaration issued at that time, Mr. Gorbachov and Mr. Rajiv Gandhi enunciated ten principles which if observed, would promote good neighbourliness among countries of the region, ensure their political and economic independence and further the cause of nuclear disarmament. It is worth recalling these ten principles:

1. Peaceful co-existence must become the universal norm of international relations.
2. Human life must be recognised as supreme.
3. Non-violence should be the basis of community life.
4. Understanding and trust must replace fear and suspicion.
5. The right of every state to political and economic independence must be recognised and respected.
6. Resources being spent on armaments must be channelled towards social and economic development.
7. Conditions must be guaranteed for the individual's harmonious development.
8. Mankind's material and intellectual potential must be used to solve global problems.
9. The "balance of terror" must give way to comprehensive international security.
10. A nuclear weapons free and non-violent world requires specific and immediate action for disarmament.

The Super Powers have agreed to eliminate Intermediate Range Nuclear weapons (INF) i.e. missiles, with ranges extending from 500 km to 5000 km, from their arsenals. A treaty to that effect has been signed and the process of decommissioning the weapons commenced. Although this step by the Super Powers amounts to reducing their nuclear arsenals by no more than four per cent, it is an important development as it reverses the weapons build up trend so noticeable over the past four decades. Two disquieting-factors however exist. First, China seems to be in no mood to build down its nuclear arsenal. Neither is France. Kissinger has been against INF Treaty, since it prevents USA from deploying intermediate range weapons in Europe and deprives it of opportunities to exercise greater control over West Europe and over West Germany in particular.

General Bernard Rogers, American Commander of NATO forces in Europe feared that by removing American missiles from Europe, the Soviets would be tempted to attack West Europe with conventional forces. As he put it "The last thing we want to do is make Europe safe for a conventional war". This was echoed by British conservatives one of whom said - "We are not comfortable with the zero option. It would leave us, at a terrible disadvantage given the Soviet Union's overwhelming superiority in tanks, planes, and of course numbers". The so called overwhelming Soviet superiority in conventional weapons is however as much of a myth as Soviet nuclear superiority, given the fact that the Soviets have to defend their eastern frontiers too.

West Europe, especially its smaller countries, recognise the wisdom of eliminating all nuclear weapons from Europe's soil. The others too eventually have to fall in line. But that will be more easily accomplished when USA rethinks its SDI options.

Second is USA's persistence in proceeding with its SDI (Strategic Defence Initiative) programme whose objective is to place weapons and electro-optical systems on board orbital satellites for destroying missiles in flight as well as ground installations.

It needs no elaborate strategic analysis to recognise that if USA proceeds further with its project to build SDI systems, - already it has succeeded in terminal phase interceptions - the other power is likely to follow suit and over a period both sides will be further strengthening their nuclear arsenals as a measure of reinsurance. Gorbachov's proposals seek to avoid this expensive and highly dangerous course which if not controlled would make nuclear war by accident, misreading of signals, loss of nerve on the part of political leaders or military personnel more, not less, likely.

India's endorsement of Soviet peace proposals is based on the consideration that a halt to nuclear arms race promotes world peace which helps all countries. Additionally, India strives to promote peace and mutual cooperation in the region, in order to insulate it from the destabilising effects of military alliances and create a climate, conducive to rapid economic, social and technological progress.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

South Asian countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have come together forming SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) in a move to foster closer cooperation amongst themselves. This has not come a day too soon.

South Asian countries having been under colonial bondage for over two centuries were poor and underdeveloped when they regained their freedom.

Although considerable progress has been achieved by individual countries of the subcontinent and the island nations close-by, their general economic condition still leaves much to be desired. Inability of incumbent governments to solve their countries' economic and political problems predictably generates popular discontent. This is the general pattern in the developing world and the countries of South Asia are in many ways typical of this world.

POLITICAL EMANCIPATION

While under colonial rule, Indian leaders had the vision and wisdom to realise that not merely India (i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) but all countries of Asia and Africa then under foreign domination must secure their freedom. They approached the issue accordingly. What grieved Indians, as also other fellow Asians, was that because of imperialistic domination, one Asian could approach a fellow Asian from another country only through a dominant European or other foreign country.

On attaining freedom, the countries of the region, at least in theory, can mould their own future. They are striving to do this and in varying measure have achieved successes but formidable problems remain. In the case of the three most populous countries of the subcontinent, given the circumstances under which they achieved freedom, religious conflicts have had a serious and negative effect. The other countries of South Asia were fortunately spared this agony, but in one, Sri Lanka, there have recently been unhappy ethnic conflicts. In Pakistan people of 'minority' provinces, Sind, Baluchistan and the Frontier Province remain unreconciled to the dominance of the Army and people of Punjab. Linguistic as well as political and economic issues are involved. These remain unresolved and to some extent negate the commendable progress made by Pakistan over the past decade and a half in agriculture and industry.

In India too although progress has been made in agriculture and industry, very much more remains to be done. An unhappy feature for some years has been avoidable suspicions and incidents in Punjab and in eastern States where a section of people have been endeavouring to assert their rights to secede.

At one time external agencies for their own reasons, it appeared, were encouraging dissidence in India. The problem has since largely been overcome, by a judicious mix of firmness and conciliation and the average citizen in the two regions feels somewhat relieved. The lesson is that strenuous efforts for more rapid industrial growth in the Punjab and equally more rapid agriculture related as well as industrial growth in the North East have to be made so that adequate employment opportunities are generated and the energies of youth may be channelled along constructive and socially benefi-

cial channels. This is the challenge facing Indian political and administrative planners.

Bhutan and Nepal are geographically disadvantaged to some extent since they have no direct access to the seas. However, neighbouring India is committed to assist these countries in every way including practical assistance in the development and harnessing of their water and energy resources, assisting in the setting up of agro based and other industries and in every other way possible. India is equally committed to extend assistance, to the extent it can, to neighbouring island countries as well.

India's approach has been to strive for greater cooperation with neighbours in economic and cultural matters. This approach is good in itself since it can be of immense mutual advantage. It is also otherwise valuable since, with closer economic cooperation, other issues which may be exploited by third parties would tend to assume less significance and become manageable in course of time.

Proceeding further from this, India through the forum of SAARC is striving for meaningful cooperation amongst all countries of the region. The argument generally endorsed by all member countries is that while bilateral trade and economic cooperation would best serve the concerned two countries in specific areas of agriculture, trade and industry a regional forum such as SAARC can appropriately deal with issues which may be of interest to all the countries and hence they may be willing to cooperate for the common good.

The areas for bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation amongst SAARC members are many. In such cooperation lies not only the future of SAARC but of all developing countries. India and fellow SAARC nations do not need to be reminded that their external debts are growing. Nor is there any immediate prospect of these debts coming down, given their uncomfortable trade balances. A noted Pakistani political commentator, the late A.T. Chowdhry had noted that "foreign debt is self financing" implying that once a poor country borrows from the affluent west (or from a financial institution controlled by them), the borrower will go on paying more and more towards debt servicing. This is so since creditors have the means to force the borrower country to devalue its currency periodically thereby making it necessary to export progressively greater quantities of natural resources. The reason for this is that after each devaluation, the borrower would have to export more and more goods to earn one dollar.

The solution obviously is greater cooperation among SAARC countries and more generally for closer and more extensive South-South cooperation in all matters of common concern such as trade, economic, industrial and tech-

nological development. This is the key to the economic well being of the developing world. As their economies begin to grow and as South-South cooperation matures their dependence on the industrialised countries would be reduced and the security environment for the developing world would improve.

Such mutual cooperation and understanding is especially called for among SAARC countries, since the people of the sub-continent have been victims of the former colonial power's "divide and rule" policy. Indian leaders have been actually conscious of the need to ensure that external powers especially the super and aspiring Super Powers do not bring their rivalries in to South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The latter's presence in the region means the presence of their coercive instruments namely armed forces and covert operational elements with their plans for intervention in third world countries, and intimidation and destabilisation of countries that seek to remain non-aligned and independent.

Unhappily for South Asia, an interventionist great power has established firm bases in the Indian Ocean region and was until recently semi-actively involved, in a conflict between third world countries in the Gulf region next door. It has allies among SAARC countries too. Although the great power may not have any designs on SAARC countries, its presence and covert operations in adjoining regions would have their inevitable - and undesirable - effects on countries of South Asia. However, till SAARC finds its feet and member countries come a little closer to each other contentious issues are best avoided by SAARC as a group.

From India's point of view, the aim is to invite neighbours to come closer to each other and take up the challenging task of forging closer economic and cultural ties between governments and peoples, for the good of all in the region. As India's then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had observed at the first Asian Conference in March 1947, all at the conference would be equal. He had said, "There were no leaders and no followers, and that Asian countries had met on the basis of complete equality in a joint endeavour". This coming together is logical given the imperatives of geography. This was so then. It is so now. Two other points that Jawaharlal then stressed are also equally relevant today. Asian countries had met together, he observed, not to proclaim pan Asianism. In trying to come closer to each other, Asian countries were not trying to forge an anti-American or anti-European grouping. His other observation was that Asia had woken up and Asian countries could no longer be used as pawns by others.

Such indeed was the view on the horizon four decades ago as imperialism began its retreat from South Asia.

A positive factor strengthening SAARC, bilateralism as well as South-South cooperation and the non-aligned movement is the cordial relationship established between India and Sri Lanka. The credit for this goes to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Jayewardene. This, as fervently hoped on both sides of the Palk Strait, will lead to even closer economic and cultural ties between the two countries and serve as a model to others in the Third World.

However, while doing its utmost to promote cooperation amongst developing countries of the region, and among the non-aligned, India has to be wary of the Super Powers' regional policies and operations.

An aspiring Super Power to our north is building up its own intervention potential across our borders. It has virtually made all of Tibet's people prisoners in their own country and seems poised to extend its frontiers further.

Hence the imperative need to be prepared to defend ourselves against expansionist neighbours while striving to strengthen regional cooperation in economic, technological, cultural and other areas of common concern.