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South Asia and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges of Implementation

With the seeming withdrawal of the United States and much of the West from the global scene, the role of Asia is unquestionably on the rise. Within Asia, South Asia constitutes an important ‘sub-system’, both in terms of policy and analysis. Its own contribution in this regard will largely depend on how it is able to surmount its current developmental challenges and infrastructural gaps. This would depend on the capacity of the region to implement the goals and targets contained in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This paper attempts to examine the constraints and possibilities in this regard.

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The United Nations (UN), as an institution, was meant to be a triumph of man’s hope over experience. It was set up by ‘we the peoples’ of the world, grounded in the hope that, out of the experience of the gargantuan conflicts of the early 20th century, entailed in the two World Wars, can arise, like a sphinx, an edifice of peace, abjuring war forever. The ideal of Emmanuel Kant’s “Perpetual Peace” deeply influenced the founders of this body. The English romantic poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, in a rambling work called ‘Locksley Hall’, penned in the 19th century, had conceived of a “Parliament of Man”. In many ways, the UN

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looks to being such a body, striving for peace by removing causes for conflict on the one hand, and improving the quality of life through development on the other.

Today the UN faces challenges. These emanate mainly from those who wish for the post-war order to give way to the new. The reason is that they feel greater benefits will accrue to them thereby. This has placed us on shifting grounds. We are witnessing a withdrawal, or a retreat at any rate, of the most relevant actor to date, the United States (US), from much of the global scene. Perhaps it is doing so in pursuit of its own national self-interest; and also perhaps from a burgeoning pressure from assertive newcomers on the global scene. The laws of physics, and politics, tell us that nature hates vacuum. Europe today is a tad exhausted from its historical role. A growing sense of neo-nationalism seems to be marking its current ethos. Today, then, it is a rising Asia which appears to define the story of our times. Asia's growth, as also its development, has been phenomenal. However, these have also been uneven. Asia, originally a Greek concept, is a vast disparate land mass, with little commonalities across the board tying it together, which is why the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (UNESCAP) geographical focus from Afghanistan eastwards makes sense. This area comprises regions which may be described as sub-systems in the language of international relations research. It is because of certain shared characteristics that are unique to the region and different from others. These are expressed in commonalities of arts, culture, traditions and beliefs. South Asia is one such region. Much of the author's comments will focus on this region that he knows best.

South Asia, as it ever so slowly emerged from its colonial past, seems now to have been able to tap its inherent non-technological or intellectual resources. These are imbedded in its rich heritage. They also dictate the balancing of, on the one hand, economic progress through market mechanisms, with, on the other hand, casting the safety net wide enough to cover the unfortunate who cannot make the grade. This, in other words, is the Asian value of 'walking on two legs'. This implies the belief that 'no one should be left behind' which ties in nicely with the driving motivation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 17 main components of Agenda 2030. South Asia, as a subsystem, is, in many ways, a microcosm of the world. Parts of it have demonstrated remarkable economic and technological progress. Bengaluru in India has often been compared with the Silicon Valley of the US. Yet, it contains swathes of poverty that match Sub-Saharan Africa. With 20 per cent of the world's

population, South Asia accounts for 37 per cent of its poor and 50 per cent of its malnourished children. Besides, there exists in the region huge development and infrastructural gaps.

The region's aspirations, however, are great. A significant forward movement in the attainment of the three-fold aims of the UN goals – ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring peace and prosperity – would render their fruition possible. With regard to the earlier set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000 to 2015, South Asia had largely fared well. This was particularly with regard to the targets concerning poverty eradication, gender equality in primary education, reduction of tuberculosis, increasing forest coverage, curbing carbon-dioxide and obtaining access to drinking water. However, there is also a considerable unfulfilled MDG agenda. The challenge would be to address this unfinished business with the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs through a methodology that would integrate their operationalisation.

There is need for a number of strategic thrusts. The rapid move from agriculture to the service sector, by-passing industry, has had some negative impacts. It is particularly so with regard to the employment of the growing youth-bulge. It is said that 80 per cent of the workforce remains within the informal sector. A regionally coordinated industry-oriented structural transformation could add more than 56 million additional jobs and lift 71 million out of poverty. If the infrastructural gaps could be closed, it could increase per capita income by roughly one per cent for each percentage point increase in infrastructure availability. This amply attests to the fact of interconnectedness between SDG 1 (poverty alleviation), SDG 8 (economic growth), SDG 9 (transport infrastructure) and SDG 7 (electric power).

Sufficient investment in human development through universal health coverage (SDG 3) would enhance opportunity for all (SDG 4). One would have no problem with the current emphasis on rights-based education as prevalent in South Asia. However, it would be better if buttressed by quality education and training to bridge the skill-development deficit. Social protection and financial inclusion could be extended by 'smart investments' on such initiatives as micro-credit, a concept in the development of which Bangladesh has played such a critical role. Innovative ideas like branchless banking and mobile-based financial services will assist financial inclusion.

Food security and eradication of hunger (SDG 2) will always remain a key challenge. In the past, the region had witnessed successful ‘green revolutions’. However, now it shows signs of flagging in parts, exacerbated by water-shortages. Pakistan’s Punjab, a traditional ‘bread basket’ of the country, is a case in point. Women employment would increase household incomes, a sine qua non for access to food. Gender equality (SDG 5) could add up to US\$3.4 trillion (S\$4.64 trillion) to South Asia’s gross domestic product (GDP) by 2025. Support to women’s entrepreneurship would be important, as also women’s empowerment through a gender-responsive policy attention, and “one-stop shop” for information and guidance, incentivising of credit availability and regional sharing of good practices.

Issues such as climate change require, indeed demand, robust addressing (SDG 13). South Asia is highly vulnerable to this phenomenon. Changing energy-mix in favour of sources viz., hydro, solar and wind, moving towards cleaner fuel such as gas-based energy, and employing new technologies for reducing emissions from conventional energy generation will need to be incorporated in a suitable decarbonisation strategy in the region. The author would like to add in this regard that Bangladesh has decided to go nuclear, the third country in Asia to do so in three decades. However, the author also underscores that should any other country choose to do so, the decision must be preceded by a national debate and a careful calculation of pros and cons. In any case, lifestyle changes, including the famous three ‘Rs’ (reduce, reuse and recycle), must be adopted as practices, not just in the region, but also universally.

Governance, is, as always, and everywhere, key. South Asia has its due share of deficits in this respect. In each country, a national coordinating agency is a categorical imperative. The author would urge that every government appoints a kind of Ephorate of Eminent to draw upon a practice in classical Athens – we should never cease to learn from the ancients – to advise and counsel on policy directions. The new Malaysian government has done so, largely for its economy. These Ephors could then form a regional council to hold broader collaboration. We must pay attention to adopting outcome-based approaches. In the formulation of such measures. This would help tackle multi-dimensional challenges, avoiding a silo-oriented mentality. Decentralisation and devolution in this respect would be helpful. However, care must be taken just so that it does not impede positive understandings at central levels between sovereign states. An example would be the position of the West Bengal government on water distribution of the Teesta River that has queered the pitch in the

reaching of a pact between the Indian Union government and Bangladesh. Similarly strained relations between two central authorities, such as those of New Delhi and Islamabad, should not inhibit collaboration on addressing the common problem of smog between Lahore and Amritsar.

In this connection, the author would like to add that he recently attended a Climate Change conference on Adaptation Futures, in Cape Town South Africa. It is a city affected by four straight years of drought. The information shared at that event was that, by 2050, over 800 million people globally would be vulnerable to sea-level rise due to global warming, including entire island states, such as the Maldives in South Asia. Also, 650 million people in cities would suffer severe water shortages akin to Cape Town, such as New Delhi. Mayors of what is called the C-40 Cities, a global covenant of municipal bodies for research into climate change, made a consensus observation that, “This is the future that nobody wants. Our research should be a wake-up call on how urgently we need to be delivering on bold climate change actions”. The SDGs should show the way.

Regional organisations everywhere, as also in South Asia, must be appropriately empowered. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) does have a mandate in this regard. However, currently, SAARC is in a state of limbo. The reasons are many and varied but the most important one is the fierce rivalry between its two most powerful member states – India and Pakistan. However, there is a growing number sub-regional organisations such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation and the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative, which are happily showing signs of some activity. The author believes that the UNESCAP should recognise this reality and come forward to assist them in capacity building. The UNESCAP should seek and obtain the requisite approvals from the governing body.

Now to respond to an all important question – the implementation of the SDGs in the region would require vast resources. How is this funding to be organised? Some key goals such as SDG 17 include mentions of some means. The cost projections of a package of social investments just for the elderly and the disabled would require up to 10 per cent of the GDP in India and 20 per cent in Bangladesh by 2030. To close the infrastructural gaps that the

author has spoken about, the estimates will total up to about US\$2.5 trillion (S\$3.41 trillion) by 2020, and US\$4 trillion (S\$5.45 trillion) to US5 trillion (S\$6.82 trillion) by 2030. Environmental sustainability will require even more funding. The answer would have to lie in combining domestic resource mobilisation by tapping on private investments and public-private partnerships (PPP), and securing external credit,

The horrendously low tax-to-GDP ratio in South Asia, around only 10 per cent, must be improved by better governance. Less than three per cent in India pay income tax. In Pakistan, the figure is even shoddier at less than one per cent. Harnessing the potentials of PPP appears to be getting better, however. For instance, India is expecting PPPs to provide 48 per cent of the projected infrastructure investment of US\$1 trillion (S\$1.36 trillion) under the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017). Effective policies are also in place in Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Nepal. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives are looking to bilateral partners for support as well, such as on China and its Belt and Road Initiative. The 21st session of the Conference of Parties in Paris in 2015 reiterated commitment of US\$100 billion (S\$136.4 billion) per year by 2020 through the Green Climate Fund. The US' withdrawal would impact negatively on its financing, but not in a manner that is insurmountable, at least with regard to South Asia.

Should there, indeed, be a breakdown in the existing global economic order, Asia must minimise its impact of it. The Asian nations remain committed to the aims and purposes of the UN. Most see the prevalence of a global order as a prerequisite for growth and development, as well as for progress and prosperity. For most Asians the UN is not a structure located in Turtle Bay Manhattan or at the Palais de Nations, Geneva. It is an idea-stream that must continually innovate and change. It is a mental construct that is being forever added on to, and, like a Gothic Cathedral, is never quite finished.

The Asian countries, as most of those that are represented in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the surrounding nations such as China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, are already forging ahead in catching up with the developed segment of the globe. Indeed, some are even looking to surpassing it. The manifold challenges that many cities of the South Asian region confront, indeed many of the world as the list of C-40 would indicate, could learn from the experience of Singapore, typical of a contemporary 'smart city'. It is

universally accepted as being one of the world's most liveable ones. SDG 11 would be most relevant in this regard. Indeed, Singapore is assisting the building of Amaravati, the newly-planned capital of the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh.

All South Asian states are now looking, and, in some cases as that of India, acting East. They hope to emulate their neighbours by drawing power from those who are ahead, like a flock of birds that follow their leader, in what is known as the 'flying geese paradigm', a model of technological development, first conceived by a Japanese economist, Kaname Akamatsu. Yes, it will require collaborative initiatives and calibrated endeavours. Yes, it is a tall order. However, it is doable. Asia must derive its necessary kinetic energy from dynamics, not statics, from movement not inertia, if it is to carve out for itself its due place in a niche in human history.

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