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South Asia and the Rapidly Changing World¹ – I

Challenges of Identity and Issues

There is a question whether Pakistan and Afghanistan will continue to be part of the South Asian sub-continent in their global outlook, or will drift towards becoming part of Central Asia or West Asia.

Shahid Javed Burki²

Introduction

The world is changing in ways faster than expected. Even the most astute and knowledgeable analysts of world events had not anticipated some of the changes that are affecting the global landscape. The future direction of this change is harder to predict. Most contemporary observers view their own situation, the situation of the countries in which they are located, and that of the world through narrowly-focused lenses. They neither look far into the field that is

¹ This series of four papers draws upon the author's forthcoming book, *Rising Powers and Global Governance: Changes and Challenges for the World's Nations*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016. It also flows from the discussions in a three-day workshop on "Expanding Regional Linkages in South Asia" held in Lahore, Pakistan, on 7 to 9 March 2016. The workshop was sponsored by the Burki Institute of Public Policy at Netsol (BIPP) and the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore.

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always a difficult exercise, nor do they deeply reflect on the past and how it may inform the present. The present dominates their thinking.

That said, it would be appropriate for the region of South Asia to reflect on what is occurring in places near as well as far from the region's borders. One of the conclusions I will draw from the analysis presented in this set of four papers is that the region we currently refer to as South Asia may see a change in its composition. There is a question whether Pakistan and Afghanistan will continue to be part of the South Asian sub-continent or will become part of Central Asia or West Asia. Countries don't move physically but they can – and often do – change their orientations. Will the northern part of what is generally referred to as South Asia continue to look south or shift its gaze in some other direction.

It appears that China is rethinking its own place in the world by looking west, and the “West” for it includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the states of Central Asia. In 2013, soon after assuming power, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a large programme aimed at linking his country with the countries to its west. In a speech delivered in Astana, the new and gleaming capital of Kazakhstan, the Chinese President had announced the launch of a programme that has come to be known by several different names: One Road, One Belt Project or the New Silk Road. The choice of Kazakhstan for floating the initiative made sense. It occupies a large landmass between Russia and China. Most of this land is empty, and building roads that would traverse it will not involve relocating many people. What is intriguing about this initiative is that China is hoping to develop land-based commerce as a way of breaking out of its semi-landlocked situation. China is the only large landmass-country that is open to the sea only on one of its four sides, the east. It is shut out from the north, west, and south by uninhabitable deserts or high mountain ranges.

At the same time, the United States has turned its attention inwards. In what can be called the “Obama Doctrine”, the United States is not willing to play the role of an international policeman it had assigned to itself following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Its stance may change under Obama's successor when that person moves into the White House, especially if he is from the Republican Party. Even under a Democrat when the dust raised by the 2016 presidential contest settles down for a while, there is likely to be much greater focus on domestic issues. The next group of Washington-based policymakers are likely to focus a great deal of attention on improving the economic and social situation of several disgruntled

and angry segments of the American society. There will be consequences of this for South Asia. The sub-continent's future will depend partly on how the policy makers in various South Asian capitals handle global change.

The deep change occurring in the global system should be the subject of interest for the policy-making elite in the South Asian capitals. There are several issues the world confronts, of which full cognisance should be taken. A discussion of the changes in a number of states and geographical areas that will shape South Asia's future should begin with a list of the states that will matter a great deal for the sub-continent. Such a list is made up of those that are both obvious candidates as well as those whose inclusion at first sight may seem to be surprising. The United States, China, India, and Russia are the obvious candidates for the list. Although Saudi Arabia and Britain have been prominent influences on the development of South Asia, they are not included in this category of nations. The former should be looked at in the context of the Middle East, and the latter as the country which for the moment is a part of Europe but may depart from there following the referendum to be held in June of this year. They will be discussed in this set of papers as belonging to two different regions rather than as individual countries. To the above list of countries we should add Iran and Afghanistan. Both are small, relative to the big four on the list but are faced with uncertain futures; in which direction they go will significantly influence South Asia. How the Middle East and Europe evolve in the years ahead will also matter a great deal in determining South Asia's future.

In addition to the on-going developments in half a dozen countries and in the two regions to which the South Asian policy-makers should pay attention, they should also take note of at least half a dozen issues the world faces today. Most of them are important as independent issues, while some will intersect with one another. They include climate change, global warming, pollution of air and water. The South Asians will have to deal with all aspects of this set of problems. Demographic change and international migration have also become important in the way countries relate to one another. The rate of human fertility has declined in South Asia, and in some parts of the sub-continent it has begun to approach the replacement level. However, the high rates of the recent past will result in the region having the largest population of any defined area in the world. Large-scale movements of people have already occurred in the region, and will continue to be a factor in the future. For instance, 14 million people moved

in a few months following the partition of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan.³

The conduct of international trade is another issue that should be of interest to the policy makers of South Asia. Although the region does not trade as much as several other parts of the world which gained higher rates of economic growth by using commerce as an important determinant of development, international trade is another issue of some concern to South Asia as well. The global system that was created after half a century of trial and error is collapsing and will have consequences for South Asia.

The rise of extremist Islam poses an important challenge for South Asia. This phenomenon is not confined to the Arab world, although it is there that it has taken the form that threatens world peace. The Al Qaeda as a political entity first appeared in Afghanistan, and has had consequences way beyond the borders of that country. The terrorist attack on the United States carried out by 19 young men, all of them Arab, followed a plan of action that was developed in a sanctuary in Afghanistan. This attack which came to be known as “9/11” since it took place on 11 September 2001, changed world history. Similarly the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is likely to have lasting consequences for the world including the South Asian sub-continent. There are more Muslims living in South Asia than in any other part of the world, and they are likely to be affected by what happens to political Islam in the Arab world.

Two other issues will impact South Asia’s future. They include the development of new technologies and their impact on development, and the turmoil in the oil markets. Both will have consequences for the economic performance of South Asia. The South Asians could deal with these developments if they act collectively rather than individually with each nation pursuing its narrow national interests.

The four papers in this series include a discussion of how the world looks at present. This is the subject of this first paper. This will be followed by an analysis of the changes taking place in the countries that matter to South Asia; an analysis of some of the critical issues the world

³ This large two-way movement of people in 1947 and its impact on the history of Pakistan was studied by me in a book published in 1980. See Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan Under Bhutto, 1971-77*, London, Macmillan, 1980.

faces; and, finally, the ideal policy-making choices which the leaders currently in power should make in order to maximise the welfare of some 2 billion people who live in South Asia.

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