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South Asia Today: The Need To Reset Regional Relations

Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world, there is a sad consistency in the abysmally low level of regional cooperation in South Asia. The region has vast potentials, and the author argues that in order to achieve their full fruition, there is a need for a fundamental reset of intra-regional relations. The alternative would be a calamity in all respects.

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We are in the midst of a rapidly changing world. Old paradigms of international relations are shifting. Traditional alliances are transforming. Tensions in parts of the world are rising. At the same time, some past strains are calming. Age-old linkages are altering. But there is amidst all this one phenomenon that is stubbornly persisting. It is the sad state of intramural relationships within South Asia. Between the principal protagonists, at any rate. Their energies appear to be sapped by crises and disputes peripheral to their interests. Their focus should be on progress and development in their own region, and expanding cooperation and connectivity. Otherwise these countries with their vast potentials will run the risk of lagging far behind other parts of the contemporary world. This is the gist of my thesis in this present piece.

As he assumed office in January this year, the new President of the United States, Donald Trump, gave the world an unexpected lesson in economics. It was also unanticipated, as it was

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coming from the head of State of a nation that had been seen, to date, as a bastion of free trade: “Protection “, said Trump, “will lead to great prosperity and strength”. Paying no heed to subtleties, he declared: “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs”. The underlying theme of his policies would be “America first” at all times, and he listed these thoughts as the ingredients of his aspiration to “make America great again”. He appeared to want to put the world on notice that, henceforth how America relates to the rest of globe will change, so all nations take heed!

It would appear from this mode of policy-making that the US seems to be on a drift, like a ship without a rudder on a night without a star. For starters, US relations with the key European allies soured as the Trump administration demanded the NATO partners pay in more into their defence coffers, 2 % of their GDP. This was exacerbated by Trump’s support to BREXIT. Indeed, NATO seemed to take a lower priority as the Trump team’s links with Moscow were becoming more known. A visit to Washington by Germany’s Angela Merkel failed to smoothen ruffled feathers. It is possible that the upcoming German elections may throw up the Socialist Martin Schulz who is open in his negative views on Trump into leadership role supplanting Merkel. The failure of the ultra- right in the Netherlands elections points to a future Europe being led by Trump-critics, which will have the overall effect of reducing western clout in global politics. The high moral ground that the US has traditionally sought to operate from in global politics is being lost and Washington does not seem to care. Instead it appears to be basking in the glory of the coinage of new terms like ‘alternative truths’, ‘post-factual’ and its likes. Some have accused it of pursuing ‘agnotology’, an expression made famous by the Stanford historian Robert Proctor who had done a study of how ignorance is deliberately produced and untruths are made to replace facts in the human psyche. The West has often been a frame of reference for South Asian politicians, and this situation is bound to drastically alter.

But this development is not entirely a new phenomenon. The Founding Fathers of the US, such as Thomas Jefferson, were often chary of forays abroad to “slay foreign monsters”. ‘Isolationism’ protected America from the tumultuous European politics of conflicts in Europe in the nineteenth century. The US, one might recall, was drawn reluctantly into the Great War of 1914-18, and thereafter President Wilson was unable to take it into the League of Nations. The enthusiastic participation in the post –war global structure through the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions in that sense was more an aberration than the norm. In many ways, the leadership of the so-called ‘free world’ was thrust upon the US, not always reluctantly

as those like Ronald Reagan would like the US to be perceived as the ‘city on a shining hill’. Oftentimes it took America to the brink of massive conflicts as during the Cold War. Eventually a backlash occurred and contemporary America calculated that it was paying an unacceptable level of price for its ‘globalization tendencies’. The result was public disillusionment and the consequent triumph of Donald Trump, who appears to take a modicum of pride in being *instinctual* rather than *intellectual*, driven by instincts rather than by intellect. Still, upon historical reflection, one is able to discern is therefore an element of rational continuum in America’s current mood or behaviour- pattern, like a pendulum swinging between isolationism and engagement. While one cannot disagree with Henry Kissinger that America’s pre-eminence is a fact of life in the near and mid -term future, its challenge is to recognise that with the passage of time its uniqueness will erode. So there is a marked retreat from America’s post-World War II role in the maintenance of a liberal world order as a “responsible fiduciary” or a “privilege-taker”.

On the other hand, China is rising, but one is uncertain if it is eager to fill up any void created by a possible withdrawal of the US into a kind of “Fortress America” from its earlier global commitments and engagements. Nevertheless a transition is occurring. Onetime critics of free-trade and globalization are transforming into champions of these ideas, and their votaries of the past appear to be changing their hearts and minds. Major powers are thus switching roles. At the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, at which President Xi Jinping made this switch very apparent, a Berlin –based private equity manager, Andre Loesekug –Pietri quipped: “We heard a Chinese President becoming the head of the free world”! New policies are being initiated that are likely to impact heavily on global politics. But before we delve into the new policies it may be worthwhile examining the philosophical basis of China’s current behaviour-pattern.

In terms of methodology the Chinese tend to reach out into the past to shape contemporary thinking. Take the ideas of the ‘yin’ and ‘yang’, in other words, the male and female forces. To the Chinese everything in the world has two seemingly opposing elements. The quality of life depends on bringing such opposing tendencies into balance with one another, ‘yin’ by the moon and ‘yang’ by the sun. To keep the heavens running smoothly the Emperor in ancient China had the task of maintaining the harmonious balance between the sun and the moon. With the Emperor eventually disappearing, the function devolved on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), representing the Chinese people, who as Mao Zedong famously said in 1949, had now ‘stood up’!

But as we know, through fundamental laws of physics, contradictions, in absolute equilibrium, impede movement. If there is no movement, there is no progress. It is, therefore, necessary to have the balance tilted through a kinetic force in a positive way. Enter Friedrich Hegel. The Hegelian dialectical progression via thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis provides the kinetic energy to break this inertia and cause forward movement within this paradigm. This is like the kite, which rises against the wind. This brought Marxism, or ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ into line with the Chinese value system in support of Mao’s Revolution. The ensuing behaviour pattern has eschewed any form of stridency. For instance, contrary to expectations in some quarters, China did not intervene in the wars in South Asia in either 1965 or 1971. This also is the reason why, as I have argued elsewhere² and argue now, there is an element of explicable consistency how China behaves in the global arena. Hence also its disinclination to use the expression ‘peaceful rise’ and the preference instead for the phrase ‘peaceful development’ to describe its current burgeoning influence.

But driven by necessity force has to be used to restore order, which would, however, only be done in the defence of ‘core interests’. In regard to this the Chinese are in consonance with the Hobbesian sense that order is a *sine qua non* for civilisation. But even an orderly society can produce waves. A great helmsman, in Chinese view, must guide the boat of society or State by using the waves. Hence the need for an Emperor, or a Sun Yat Sen, or a Mao Zedong, or a Deng Xiaoping, or, as now, a Xi Jinping. This is roughly the theoretical matrix which forms the basis on which Chinese behavioural goals are framed and executed.

The current leader Xi Jinping launched a new mantra, the ‘China Dream’ or *Zhunguo Meng* in Mandarin. It comprises mainly three elements. One a new kind of big –power relationship with the US, one of equality: it is not the ‘my way or the highway’ kind, but one that implies ‘you go your way and I will go mine, together or separately, but in peace’. Two, a ‘win-win relationship’ with partners and interlocutors, whether they be competitors like India or strategic allies like Pakistan, or Central Asia, so key to their ‘Road Belt Initiative’, which is also an essential component of China’s ‘westward march’ in quest of resources. This also involves the massive US \$46 bn infrastructural investment along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The Chinese argue that this aims at community development and is totally irrelevant to any territorial dispute (Kashmir). Just as its US \$ 24 bn or so investment in Bangladesh is made open to Indian participation. In other words economics supersedes politics. Three, stimulating

² See, ‘Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury “A Method in the Dragon’s Moods: Why China Behaves as it Does”, ISAS Working Paper No. 75, 21 July, 2009.

the local demand to boost the economy, as opposed to being export driven as before, on the backdrop of a stable growth. The GDP growth rate may have slowed to 6.7% or so from double digit figures, but this ‘new normal’ is now factored into China’s plans and policies.

Despite these moves to fill the void, these are not being conducted as a traditional ‘revisionist power’. Its goal is economic globalization, which it stressed in last month’s BOAO Conference, which is the Chinese version of Davos. It is not necessarily seeking out a leadership role and step right into America’s shoes. Not only does it not serve its perceived national self-interest, which is still its key motivation, but it also reflects its domestic predicament. This is evident in the government’s efforts to maintain stability at home while effecting the shift from labour – intensive investment-heavy economic growth towards a model based on domestic consumption and services. The Chinese *modus operandi* would preferably be to work within the current global order and not to supplant it. But China will need to determine how it would react if this order were to come a cropper and crumble.

The absence of a global order would also adversely impact on global multilateral institutions, in particular the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). To date these institutions have set global norms and standards, upheld by powerful countries, providing a level playing field for even the less powerful to feel secure and further the upliftment of their peoples. This would mean more active roles through regional groupings, as individually each would be too weak.

Understandably then, with the former ‘globalisers’ turning inwards and protectionists, and with the announcement by President Donald Trump to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiate the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, many regions in the world will soon begin to buttress their own organizations and deepen their intramural cooperation. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) seems to be bucking this trend. Mostly for reasons of India-Pakistan rivalry, the body is seen as being on the verge of disintegration. The India-Pakistan trade, in the words of the Association of Chamber of Trade and Industry in India, is “abysmally low”. Out of India’s total goods trade in 2015-16 of US \$ 641 billion, that with Pakistan has been only US\$ 2.67 billion, which is a very paltry 0.41%. As an example of a non-Indo-Pakistan South Asian State, Bangladesh’s export of US \$ 37.61 billion (2015-16 figures) is almost entirely destined for the US and Europe, and import of US\$40 billion is largely from China. Trade relations are at their nadir. Both the initial grant and current review by India are unlikely to have any impact on the actual substance, which

goes to underscore the tendency to politicize the processes for other unrelated gains (such as electoral benefits of nationalist sentiments).

Knowing full well that there can be no victors in a total war between India and Pakistan, both sides have around 110 to 120 nuclear warheads a piece, some of which would surely be used to avert an ultimate defeat, resulting in consequences of armageddonic proportions, there is no dearth of jingoistic pronouncements, only to advance political interests domestically. The danger is such verbal escalations could unwittingly lead to changes in the current deterrence policies, should advocacy of ‘nuclear war-fighting capability’ have greater public resonance. I refer to a news in November 2015 that Pakistan has shifted its nuclear doctrine from ‘credible minimum deterrence’ to ‘full spectrum deterrence’. Doctrinal shifts must be very carefully explained and understood. Incautious remarks could result in the laying of a ‘Thucydides trap’, meaning miscalculations might inadvertently cause a calamitous war. As the Greek historian of that name had famously observed, explaining the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), “when Athens grew strong, there was great fear in Sparta”.

If war is not feasible, nor indeed desirable, and the rewards of collaboration are so obvious, the obvious response is cooperation. The alternative is not an option. I am of the view SAARC shouldn’t be given up as a lost cause. If governments are unable to deliver, we should convert into a Peoples SAARC. A Group of Eminent Persons should examine this prospect. Alongside SAARC other sub-regional groups could also evolve, such as ECO, or BIMSTEC or BBIN. Sub-regional cooperation buttresses rather than weakens regional cooperation. Today the concept of the Westphalian State system, the basis on which the South Asian countries- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan- are under threat, whether from extremist propaganda emanating from ideas of either radical Islamist Caliphate, or the rising tide of Hindutva, or the burgeoning Buddhist fundamentalism, just across from South Asia resulting in the region’s largest refugee issue involving the *Rohingyas*.

The South Asian countries need to be wary of three things. First, they would clearly need to watch out for a Sino-US-Mexico trade war which appears to be just beyond the rim of the saucer. On the basis that Chinese exports take away US jobs, the Trump Administration may be about to slap on as much as a 45% tax on Chinese merchandise, and around 20% for Mexican. If the US were to levy such tariffs, China would most certainly retaliate and WTO norms would be thrown to the winds. This could not be an ideal situation for South Asian countries, which require the WTO to either create ‘a level playing field for them’ (India,

Pakistan, Sri Lanka) or to ensure ‘special and differential treatment (Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan). Of course, imposition of tariffs cannot be effected through Presidential Executive Orders’, Trump’s favoured method of administering. Eventually the decisions would require Congressional decision-making, and given the fact that even a Republican-dominated Congress is not under Executive control as the fate of the health care bill showed, which would either frustrate those attempts or at least provide some time to the South Asian countries to make necessary adjustments.

Second, South Asia must try and avoid being dragged into conflicts by getting unnecessarily involved with international issues that may be of peripheral interest to them. There has been a rise in US-China tensions, apart from in trade, in the military sphere as well. At his confirmation hearing at the Senate the new US Defence Secretary James Mattis categorically stated that China would be denied access to the ‘artificial islands’ it is said to have ‘constructed’ in the Pacific, though the earlier US position was to stay clear of the South China sea territorial disputes, but ensure international navigational rights. If such measures should come to pass, the Chinese would be certain to activate their naval assets (352 ships, 1 Carrier, 68 submarines), which though numerically smaller than that of the US, with greater capability to concentrate in a small area. The US would be on the look-out for allies (South Korea, Japan, Australia?) and India could fit the bill. Also Pakistan should not unnecessarily be emboldened (to take on India), by the fact that, perhaps encouraged by China, Russia has recently been warming to it, having lifted an arms embargo in 2014, and now committing to provide four MI-35 M attack helicopters.

Third, they must themselves feel and be able to demonstrate that they need not have to make a choice between India and China. The usual behaviour pattern of the South Asian countries, particular the weaker ones, has been the challenge to be able to live in consonance with but distinct from their more powerful neighbours. This must be clearly understood by the major concerned protagonists, China and India. This is precisely what Bangladesh is seeking to do in terms of its relations with China on the one hand, and India on the other. There has been some Indian concern at the elevation of the Sino-Bangladesh relationship from “comprehensive partnership cooperation” to “strategic partnership cooperation”. This was particularly so when this elevation was accompanied by commitments of US \$24 billion infrastructural investments, and two submarines (China is the primary source of military hardware for the Bangladesh military). This has not prevented Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from undertaking a bilateral visit to India first week of April that might include a Defence MOU (but not a 25 year defence

treaty the Indians had wanted). The message to India was, in the words of Mahfuz Anam, Editor of the *Daily Star* (March 25, 2017) that Bangladesh, which is ‘India-locked’ in three sides could accept India as the “closest friend”, but “not...only friend”. Bangladesh would welcome Indian and other participations in the Chinese funded projects, so that these benefit the country and all concerned find them mutually rewarding.

Sometimes in the paradoxical nature of international politics, it is more difficult to be a friend than an enemy. Nevertheless if South Asia is to allow its potentials fullest fruition, there is clearly a need to reset the regional relations. The alternative would be too calamitous to contemplate.

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