CHAPTER IV

REGIONAL IMPERATIVE EQUATIONS AND IMPACT

The major powers of the post-war international system, who were better known as the super-powers, sought to ordain the global politics according to their wishes and interests. Irrespective of the ideological commitments and leanings of the individual actors (states) the major powers or super powers, viz., the USA and the Soviet Union plus China tried to extend their influence virtually over all the countries of the world. These alignments of power politics have even cut across the non-aligned nations.

South Asia, which occupied a very important geopolitical place in the international system of the contemporary times, was not an exception to this modern version of the politics of balance of power. South Asia, a well defined and coherent region, however, has in the post-colonial era developed a peculiar system of power politics for itself. The political subsystem of this region cannot strictly be called a subordinate of the global system. However, it has become a fertile ground for the power game of the major powers. The diversity of political system, interests, mutually contradictory claims, suspicions and fears among the South Asian States indeed provided an easy opportunity to the major powers to make inroads into the politics of this region.

The most important powers that have developed keen interest and
consistently tried to influence the power equations of this region are the United States of America, the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union (Russia). Emerged as a superpower in the post-war period, the United States took upon itself the responsibility of leading the ‘free world’ in countering the threat of communism and to provide security to the world by adopting appropriate policies. This perception became the basis of the cold-war politics and prompted the strategy of containment of communism. This strategy encompassed all parts of the world, especially those surrounding in the vicinity of the rival superpower, USSR, the bulwark of communist system. The policy makers of the United States were disheartened to hear the talk of non-alignment, i.e., joining neither of the power blocs and adopting an independent policy based on the merits of the issues, mainly articulated by the architect of India’s foreign policy, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru’s idea of non-alignment was not only meant to give India an independent approach but also to keep the Indian subcontinent away from the interference of the superpowers. However, India came under bitter attack from the United States and its allies for this.

India was shocked at the US attitude on the Kashmir issue in the United Nations.1 The US attitude strengthened the case of Pakistan. Thus the US helped to formalize the rift between India and Pakistan and extended the much needed initial support to Pakistan’s desire to grab Kashmir from India and also to perpetually challenge the position of India

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in the South Asian region. However, that was not the real beginning of the
involvement of USA in the India-Pakistan relations. The crucial step came
at a later date.

The US might have conceived the move to arm Pakistan as a part of
its large (global) security concerns. But its effects were undoubtedly felt on
the India-Pakistan relations which were on the softening course. Pakistan
accepted the offer made by the US too willingly. The interests of Pakistan
and the US at the regional level and the global level respectively converged
and the relationship took firm ground. The US Pakistan relations were to
become an important determinant of the India-Pakistan relationship in
general and the military balance in particular. The India-Pakistan
adversarial relations since then were set on the path of no-return.

While India wanted to keep the superpowers out of the subcontinent,
Pakistan deliberately wanted to involve the US in the affairs of the Indian
sub-continent. In pursuance of this policy Pakistan signed the Mutual
Defence Assistance Agreement with the United States of America on 19
May 1954. Pakistan also joined the US sponsored collective security
arrangements viz. the SEATO and the CENTO. The US involvement in
South Asia in the 1950s, particularly with the formal alliance with Pakistan
was more an encirclement of India than anything else.²

The interest of the US in South remained in tact all through, but the

Pakistan's turning towards China in the late 1950s and early 1960s made the US a little cautious in its approach. The Sino-Indian border conflict resulting in war between the two countries in 1962 provided a chance to both India and the US to come together.

In contrast to the US stoking the fires of conflagration between India and Pakistan, the Soviet Union offered to mediate between the two States in 1965 and in the presence of the then Soviet Premier Alexie Kosygin India and Pakistan signed an agreement at Tashkent.

Johnson administration in the 1960s to uninterrupted military and economic assistance to Pakistan. The Nixon administration also continued the same policy. In 1971 the US involved itself in the affairs of the Indian subcontinent in support of the military regime of Pakistan during the war of Bangladesh liberation. By doing so the US tried to intimidate India by despatching its Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal.

The superpower rivalry, between the US and the USSR (now defunct and disintegrated) too has caused severe impediments to the peace, security and economic well being of South Asia. The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in late 1979.

While America justified the arming of Pakistan from the point of its global security interests, Pakistan always perceived India as her major threat. Hence, for Pakistan the US military aid was a welcome development in a bid to achieve a military parity with India and if possible to over-take
it. In other words, the Afghanistan crisis created a new threat to the stability, peace and security of South Asia. The arch-rivals India and Pakistan were thrown into an unprecedented arms race, with the induction of the most modern and sophisticated warfare into Pakistan by the US. If the US is Pakistan’s main source of the fresh supply of arms, for India it was the Soviet Union, France, UK and Sweden. The mad race for the weapons build-up inevitably increased the burden on both the economies and also added to the growing external debt. Yet the race was to go on. During his visit to the United States, the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi impressed upon the US administration to realise the implications of arms build up in Pakistan.

India’s stand on the NPT has been clear and consistent. Even during the formative stages of the NPT India expressed her disagreement with the draft prepared by the superpowers. India argued that the NPT is discriminatory and the problem of nuclear weapons should be treated in the global context. While asserting that India was committed to non-spread of nuclear weapons and to the peaceful uses of the nuclear energy she has been consistently refusing to sign the NPT. Pakistan recently declared that she has acquired the nuclear capability. Though officially there were contradictory statements about the nuclear programme and its progress in Pakistan, a leading nuclear scientist of that country Dr. A.Q. Khan declared

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that Pakistan has acquired the nuclear power whether anyone believed it or not.⁴

The US attitudes towards India and Pakistan have been varied and discriminatory. While it has been insisting that India should sign the NPT and agree to the international safeguards and inspection of the nuclear installations since the mid-1970s, its attitude towards the Pakistani nuclear programme was that of benign neglect.⁵ In fact, during the 1980s when the US was vigorously trying to arm Pakistan to its teeth, Pakistan was on the thresh-hold of the nuclear capability. The US was quite aware of the development but pretended ignorance and continued the arms supply.⁶ Having reconciled to India's reluctance to sign the NPT the US has put forth a proposal for holding a Camp David type of summit of five nations viz., the US, Russia, China, India and Pakistan to resolve the nuclear issue of the South Asia. India is averse to the idea, though no firm negative answer has been given.⁷ The US is still keenly pursuing the matter, with the fond hope that some regional arrangement (for South Asia) could be worked out.

In the changed scenario of the international relations particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union their appears to be a change in US attitudes in respect of South Asia. If this change in attitude means equi-

⁴ The Hindu, 23 October 1991.
⁶ K.L. Kamal and Prabha Arun, Op Cit., p.75.
distance between itself and India and Pakistan, then it will go a long way in bringing about the necessary peace in Indo-Pak relations and in paving way for a more meaningful cooperation under the aegis of SAARC. But the situation is still in a state of flux. The change in international relations however has not so far affected positively the existing India-Pakistan relations.\(^8\)

Though officially, the Pentagon document has been declared as not authentic, the contents of the document if implemented or given effect to will portend a grim future for south Asia. Thus the intrusive and divisive policy of the US may continue and the Indo-Pak conflicts would be perpetuated.

Given the current mood of the United States, its state of economy, growing competition and protectionism in the developed world, its interest in South Asia does not appear to be limited to the security and strategic concerns. It most important interest is to gain access to the vast markets of this region. As the most important State and the most industrially advanced country of the region, India has the potential of posing a threat to the US penetration of the south Asian markets. This may provide a rational and motivation for its continued involvement in this region and also in keeping the Indo-Pak rivalry and the phenomenon of Indophobia alive.

China too alongwith the US and the Soviet Union, is actively

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interested and involved in South Asia. Her interest in South Asia is not merely due to strategic and ideological reasons, but due also to the common borders she shares with at least four countries of this region. Most of the northern neighbours of India, viz., Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan. The integration of Tibet into China in 1950 has considerably enhanced the territorial and strategic interests of China in the region of South Asia. Obviously, the main rival to China in South Asia was undoubtedly India especially in terms of exercising political influence over this region. Gradually her policy and undergone perceptible changes from that of outspoken friendship based on the five principles for peaceful coexistence (Panch-sheel) to that of claiming to have disputes over the settlement or border and finally to that of an aggressor.

China's strategy of building up friendly relations with the countries of South Asia particularly with Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and during the last one decade or so, with Bangladesh and Bhutan worked quite smoothly because of the bilateral problems and disputes these States had with India in spite of Indophobia. That is, Chinese diplomacy made an adept use of the internal discords in South Asia to isolate India and weaken its political prestige. This has contributed to a great extent in keeping South Asia a divided house bereft of chances for an effective regional cooperation in political, social and economic fields.

India regards Nepal as extremely important from security and strategic points of view because of her geo-political conditions. The India-
Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 was considered by India as a bond of good relationship between the two countries. However, in the latter part of 1980s Nepal's purchasing of arms from China altered not only this special relationship but also the strategic environment of India. In spite of protests from India, Nepal proceeded with the arms purchases form China with the hope that it can have economic assistance also if the same is denied by India. However, China did not promise any economic assistance matching the loss due to the displeasure of India.9

The classic trend of balance of power relations, with the colossal of China, throwing its weight with any smaller States of South Asia and automatically turning them anti-Indian continued. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh also have come prey in the latter period. It is not that these States did not have reasons to be afraid of India. But the fact that the biggest power of Asia was on their side made these smaller State more recalcitrant and more outspoken in their hostile postures against India.

There is a welcome change in the attitude of China during the past few years. It has been more receptive to the idea of improving relations with India based on mutual goodwill and accommodation. The recent postures of China cannot be interpreted as its acceptance of India's prominent role in South Asia. It is, more of an outcome of identity of views on various international crisis such as Afghanistan and Kampuchea. The realisation of the fact that India was not a stooge of the Soviet Union seems

to have impressed China in recognizing the potential of India. The Sino-Indian relations were severely paralysed after the 1962 border conflict. However, they were revived in 1976 and have received a favourable consideration in the 1980s. Currently China appears to be keen on improving its relations with India. The recent visit by the Chinese Premier Li Peng to India opened a bright new chapter in Sino-Indian relations as well as in the political and economic cooperation in South Asia. Coming after a gap of 30 years, the visit of the Chinese Prime Minister to India certainly raised hopes of better prospects for South Asia with the evolution of friendly relation between India and China.

The Soviet involvement in the region of South Asia during the past four decades have been more of a reaction to the enthusiastic and vigorous anti-Soviet and anti-Communist strategies of the Western block and America. Unlike America, the USSR was not willingly harboured by the States of this region except India. Particularly, in the initial period of the cold-war era the Soviets were more keenly engaged in consolidating their position and influence in the Eastern Europe. Hence, its interest and involvement in this region was minimum whereas the US was tenaciously trying to extend its containment policy into South Asia also.

The attitude of the Soviet Union during the early 1950s was more of a reaction to the US postures rather than active support or opposition to the

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11 Fontline. 10 April 1992, pp.1-10 and pp.120-122.
local actors involved in the problem. On the Kashmir question the Soviet activities varied between support and indifference in the initial stages, but later on once the US-Pak alliance was finalized in the mid-1950s it was more forthcoming to support India.\footnote{Sisir Gupta, \textit{Op.cit.}, pp.300 and 320.}

The Indo-Soviet Treaty was a subject of much criticism both within the region of South Asia and at the international level as well. Pakistan denounced it in strongest terms and Nepal too was critical of it. Sri Lanka too did not conceal its displeasure about the implications of the treaty.\footnote{Vijay Kumar, \textit{Op.cit.}, p.124.} The Chinese were also critical of the Treaty and the non-aligned status of India in the wake of it. Truly, the Indo-Soviet Treaty was a subject of serious debates both for and against it for quite some time. Even now, in retrospect critics quite often differ on the nature and implications of this Treaty. However, one things could be said that this treaty was one of the few controversial subjects with raised quite some dust in South Asia. It was a balancing factor in South Asia which ensured peace and stability in the region.

Based on the success of the Indo-Soviet Treaty, Soviet Union later on floated the idea of forming an Asian collective security system.\footnote{Stephen P. Cohen, \textit{Growing Soviet Interest in South Asia}. In Asia in Soviet Global Strategy, Ed. by Ray S. Cline.} Naturally, they wanted India to play a significant role in it. But India was not quite enthusiastic about the idea. This idea of the Soviet Leader Leonid
Brezhnev remained a still-born child.

The Soviet interest in the Indian Ocean and maintaining its military presence there has been a counter product of the American presence in the area. While the US had its permanent base at Diego Garcia and facilities of port of call at Karachi in Pakistan and Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, the Soviet Union did not have any base. Friendly relations with India were construed as India's offering facilities to the USSR, but India explicitly offered no base of facilities to either of the superpowers keeping her non-aligned status in tact. The Soviet Union had its naval fleet permanently deployed in the Indian Ocean to counter the US presence. India was always averse to the presence of superpowers and the deployment of nuclear submarine in the region. The US and the USSR, however, continued their military presence in the Indian Ocean despite the requests from the littoral states and the UN resolutions declaring the Indian Ocean as a zone of Peace.

The Soviet Union showed willingness to reduce or withdraw its military presence from the Indian Ocean provided the US also did the same. In his response to the Indian politicians on this matter Gorbachev, the then President the USSR wrote:

"The Soviet Union, as you know, it is for scaling down the non-littoral states naval activity in the Indian Ocean, for freeing it of foreign naval squadrons. In the quest for ways to solve this problem, we are prepared for cooperating with all
countries concerned."\textsuperscript{15}

The motive for the Soviet involvement in South Asia or in the Indian Ocean region was mainly in the context of the coldwar politics and the superpower rivalry. The desire to support and to protect the progressive and pro-Soviet regimes was also one of the Prime motives. The Soviet presence or influence in the Indian sub-continent was only limited to India. The Indian support was always circumscribed by its own independent foreign policy guided by the principles of non-alignment. The Soviet Union too respected the non-alignment policy of India.

Now, with the dissolution and disintegration of the Soviet Union, its involvement in South Asia remained only as a thing of past. The successor States of the USSR are too busy in grappling with their own economic and political problems to be able to extend their influence to any part of the world. Even if they like to do so, their capacity to influence the political equations of the region is open to doubts.

The above narration of the great powers' involvement and its consequences in South Asia clearly confirms the general pattern of international relations set in practice in the post-war period. That is, the international relations at all levels are ordained and controlled by the superpowers generally. The superpowers, had a definite and relentless hold on the intra-regional relations of South Asia. Everything went according to

their game plan and both the superpowers had a complicity in this.

South Asia, a region with a fair degree of cohesive and collective identity, was in effect functioned as a subordinate of the international system operating at the global level. The States of South Asia, knowingly or unknowingly served the strategic, security and hegemonic interests of the major powers who were involved in the region. It was done so effectively that most of the countries of the region (except India) did not feel the pinch of such political and economic subjugation. The main powers were always treated by these States with respect and expectation because these States of the region were generally not in close relations with each other. On the contrary the major countries of the region (India and Pakistan) were traditional rivals. Most of the other States of South Asia had some or other bilateral problems with India. This suited the major powers to gain a free opportunity to interfere in the region. The major power needed control over all the regional systems including South Asia not merely because they wanted to protect and maintain their influence but they also had crucial economic interests in these regions.

The breath-taking changes that have taken place in the last three years leading to the cessation of rivalries between the US and the USSR and the consequential reduction of nuclear arms deployments, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and finally the disintegration of the USSR have changed the international relations drastically. However, it did not alter substantially the situation in South Asia.
The New World Order (NWO) contemplated and controlled by the US envisaged only a status quo for South Asia. That is, South Asia is supposed to remain a subordinate to the US dominated global system. It is also expected to serve the strategic and economic interests of the US and its allies. The New World Order aims at containing the growth of India as a regional power. To ensure this the US attaches more importance to make India and Pakistan sign the NPT and submit themselves to the international safeguards.

The Pentagon document, which came to light recently, which was discounted by the US officials as an obscure position paper and not (yet) a policy,\textsuperscript{16} sought to spell out the American plans for the global order in the coming few years. This document proposes the use of force, if necessary against India to destroy its nuclear capability.\textsuperscript{17} It is also proposed to continue military aid to Pakistan to maintain the security and strategic concerns of the US in South Asia. Thus America clearly intends to maintain a status quo in this region by isolating India and helping Pakistan to counter-balance it.

The New World Order of the US also includes the strengthening of the free market system throughout the world. This is only to ensure new markets to the crisis ridden US industries. Even in the changed strategic environment the US does not want to neglect the interests of the military

\textsuperscript{16} Frontline, 10 April 1992, pp.18-23.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
industrial complex.

China, the only major power of Asia also shows keen interest in maintaining status quo in the region. In the recent times China is striving to improve relations with India. But its ties with the other States of the region are likely to cause problems to India. Like the US, China is also averse to the idea of India becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Thus, there is still a grim suspense over China attitudes and its impact on the intra-regional politics in South Asia.

Apart from being a strategic prey, the vulnerability of South Asia is further increased by the poverty and economic backwardness of its components States. All the members of SAARC without exception are underdeveloped mainly with agrarian economies and a fragile industrial base. Most of these States are economically depended to the western countries. Low levels of industrialization, high unemployment rates, low per capita incomes, poor standards of living, illiteracy and disease are major features of these countries. Naturally, social backwardness, low levels of participation, lack of legitimacy in political systems and instability follow in tandem to the deep rooted economic and social problems. The ruling elite's of these States which are generally of autocratic nature, irrespective of the outward features of the political systems, fall a natural prey to the temptation of aid and assistance from the extra rational powers.

The external problem of adverse balance of trade and the ever
growing debt problem of these States is also a contributory factor in the impulsive desire of these countries to approach for aid from the developed countries of the West. A glance at the external trade and debt position of the States of South Asia will serve as an indication of the magnitude of the problem.

TABLE 5
(Figures in 1989)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the country</th>
<th>Trade balance in m dollars</th>
<th>External debt in m dollars</th>
<th>Debt as % of GNP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>-3692</td>
<td>62509</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>-2477</td>
<td>18509</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>-4654</td>
<td>5101</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>-2119</td>
<td>10712</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>-424</td>
<td>1359</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: World Development Report, 1990*

The commitment to economic development and the internal political problems are said to be important reasons for the dependence of these States on the external aid. But the key to the problem of the external interference and the dependence on the external assistance lay in the mutual rivalries and suspicions among the States of South Asia. Unless this basic problem is resolved an atmosphere conducive to economic
development free from external interference cannot be created in this region. Regional cooperation will be possible only in such an atmosphere.

No intelligent observer of South Asia can escape the logic of regional cooperation. Between the idea and the reality, however, falls the shadow of problems which are both conceptual and practical. These often obscure such elements of regional cooperation as already exist and inhibit efforts to strengthen them or launch new ones.

**IMPERATIVES FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION**

South Asia is sometimes compared to Europe in size and because of diversity of language, nationality and experience overlay unifying strands of culture. Admittedly, there is practically nothing in common between the historical experience of South Asia and Western Europe in the past three hundred years. Many would assert that the European experience is therefore irrelevant to this region. On the other hand, if France and Germany and Britain can overcome the bitterness of past conflicts enough to engage in regional cooperation, what prevents India, Pakistan and Bangladesh from doing so? What is needed is the vision to recognize the imperatives of cooperation and the political will to overcome the formidable in the path.

We stress five sets of circumstances which compel urgent consideration of regional cooperation in South Asia. First, the global circumstances of political and military rivalry between the United States of

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America and the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union and China impinge directly on the countries of South Asia. Every fratricidal dispute on the subcontinent since 1947 has provided ingress to outside powers, every break down in friendly relations has also provided access to outside influence. Pakistan's disputes with India and with Afghanistan and consequent American, Soviet and Chinese interference in the Nepal and Bangladesh through normal trade, aid and diplomacy led their governments to turn to China and the US at various times. This had deleterious effects on their relations with India and perhaps on the stability of their internal politics as well. There is no doubt that a South Asian region free of tension would be capable of limiting the mischief-making proclivities of outside powers if only by refusing them the opportunities so abundant in the past. If a tranquil region appears to be only a dream today one reason is that the avenue of regional cooperation has been insufficiently explored. The road to conflict are strewn with bitter words – and armaments.

Secondly, the circumstances of world trade, investment and economic assistance place all developing countries (South) at the disadvantage in their dealings with advanced industrial countries (North). The thrust of the movement to build a New International Economic Order (NIEO) has been to improve the individual and collective self-reliance of the south so as to enhance its bargaining power with the North. All the countries of south Asia have contributed to the NIEO movement. To that end they supported the moves by the oil producing countries to raise the
real price of petroleum products despite being most seriously affected by those moves. All South Asian countries hope to benefit from the generation of surplus petro-dollars. The links between the oil producing countries of the Persian Gulf region on the one hand and India and Pakistan on the other have grown rapidly in the last decade. In 1978 I argued that there was possibility of South and West Asia being considered a single new region to the context of NIEO.19 But in the 1980s it is equally necessary, and potentially as beneficial for the countries of South Asia to cooperate among themselves as with West Asia. Specifically, the raising of food production in South Asia – where land and irrigation are as yet underutilized – could obviate the use of food as a political weapon by present day food surplus states; exchanged for oil, increased food production would safeguard South Asia’s needs for imported fuel. Further, the highly reputed scientific personnel of the subcontinent could work with known reserves of natural gas and water, and coal or advance the harnessing of renewable sources of energy, or develop electric power from nuclear energy at a faster rate, so as to reduce dependence on oil.20

The inequality of present day economic arrangements with the North is a strong argument in favour of regional cooperation. For example, common shipping and insurance services, reciprocal banking facilities to


20 In 1978 the oil exporting countries supplied the following percentage of total imports to South Asian countries: Bangladesh 11.14; India 14.09; Pakistan 13.67; Sri Lanka
provide regional credit arrangements, and a clearing house for different currencies would help to keep those profits in the region which now accrue to firms like Lloyds of London or Citibank, New York. Were all the governments in South Asia to cooperate in drafting and enforcing a code of conduct for multinational corporations and a framework for private foreign investment, they could probably accelerate the flow of capital into the region without individually paying high political costs. Though neither jute nor tea carry the weight of strategic minerals in the international market, India and Bangladesh benefit from joining forces on jute, as do Sri Lanka in the case of tea; consumer manipulation of commodity markets is more difficult in the face of producer solidarity. An obvious area for future cooperation is in the exploration and exploitation of off-shore resources and deep sea mining. The achievement of India’s R.V. Ganeshan in dredging polymetallic nodules off the Minocoy islands in early 1981 should strengthen the hand of the south when next the United Nations conference on Laws of Sea meets provided India’s neighbours act in concert.

The list of possible cooperative ventures to further economic self-reliance is so long that perhaps no other rationale is needed for regional cooperation. NIEO arguments, however, are not peculiar to South Asia. Another set of circumstances is unique: the familiar and religious ties that cut across political boundaries in South Asia. If the people of the region were asked their opinions, not many would be likely to opt for the endless bureaucratic formalities and hazardous reports to police stations they have
to undergo before being able to fulfil some deeply felt obligation. An obligation such as: marriage of an offspring to member of the same community, but different nationality; attendance on the death bed of a parent; pilgrimage to holy places including the birth place of Gautama the Buddha, or Guru Nanak, or Sheikh Salim Chisti; study and enjoyment of related fields of music, art, literature, architecture; competing in sports events. Going one step further, one may ask if government should or can prevent their people from walking across borders to seek a wage or make an investment? The effort and funds expended on border security forces could beneficially be transferred to cooperating with each other in improving the quality of life for people who live in the region. Reducting restrictions on travel would be one step in the right direction.

A fourth set of circumstances is created by the ecology of South Asia. We are in an age when the squeeze of population growth combined with rapacious attitudes towards the environment threaten soil, water, forests and wild life. The population of the seven South Asian countries in 1960 was totalled at 580.3 million. In 1979 it was estimated as 848.07 million. The figure projected by the Population Reference Bureau Inc. for the year 2000 is one billion three hundred and sixty two million. The rate of population growth is similarly alarming with the lowest growth rate of 1.6 per cent in Sri Lanka, and the highest of 3 percent in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{21} Equally alarming is the deforestation and soil erosion that is taking place.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.15.
all over the region. Bhutan, north-eastern India and parts of Nepal retain some of the sub-tropical tree forests for which the subcontinent was once famous, but some environmentalists calculate present area of forest in India to be 12 percent and in Pakistan 3 percent of the total area. Overall, the subcontinent is reaching dangerously close to desertification, though official figures for forest lands are higher. One result of deforestation and the reduction of pasture land is that the landscape celebrated in the artistic masterpieces of the civilization – from Sirigiya to Gandhara to Mughal miniatures is fast vanishing, alongwith the water wildlife represented there. Another result is decrease in the water retention properties of the soil which leads to faster soil erosion and lower flows of river water in dry season. As is well known, one problem at Farakka is that the lean season flow of the Ganges is no longer sufficient to satisfy the legitimate needs of both Calcutta and Bangladesh, as it was when the barrage was first planned. There are other grave consequences of neglecting the environment and allowing birth rates to remain high. The point at issue is whether any one country in the region can tackle the problems without cooperating with others. The problems of soil salinity in Bangladesh caused by tidal waters flowing inland will ease only when the waters of the Ganges river system are augmented; the problems of flooding and soil erosion in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar will become more acute until Nepal controls deforestation and harnesses its fast flowing rivers; the beaches and fisheries of the region will be subjected to pollution and marauding until all the countries
cooperate in caring for them. The ecological imperative for regional cooperation is strong indeed.

Finally, we return to the political imperative. The positioning of armed forces by external power on our maritime threshold in the south-west and inside out mountain doorway in the northwest cannot be acquiesced in without peril to the entire region. European naval activity in the Indian Ocean during the 16th century led directly to the establishment of Empires later, largely because the kingdoms of South Asia were convinced that "the world outside did not matter." The maritime Hindu kingdoms of the south also made the mistake of believing that their security and tradings interests would be safeguarded by Christian fighting Muslim on the seas. In the north, thousands of years of history show how ambitious men from Central Asia have satisfied their lust in the Indo-Gangetic valleys largely because the rulers of Kabul, Lahore and Delhi or their ancient equivalents seldom shared the same threat perceptions. At the risk of hyperbole one may compare the situation today to that of the mid-18th century. The third battle of Panipat in 1761 was not fought by the de facto victor, Britain. Any battling on the subcontinent today is similarly likely to advantage an outsider rather than combatant power.

Because of India's unique position in the region, cooperative arrangements made bilaterally between India and any neighbour could benefit the region as a whole. For example, 1980 agreements among

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officials of India and Bangladesh on rail and transit links could help transform the entire eastern portion of the subcontinent, once they are implemented. Nongovernmental organisations also have an important role to play in furthering the idea of regional cooperation. In 1978 representative from research institutions in Bangladesh, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka met with representatives of the United Nations Asia and Pacific Development Institute to form a Committee on Studies on Cooperation for Development in South Asia (CSCD). With the Marga Institute in Sri Lanka functioning as the coordinating body and secretariat, the CSCD has initiated an impressive series of studies based on the imperative of regional cooperation.23

The plant of regional cooperation is of slow growth. It will remain so until the governments and peoples of South Asia discover that the benefits of regional cooperation will accrue to all the countries. There are major obstacles impeding such realization.

It is hardly surprising that the smaller states of South Asia should suspect regional cooperation as a mask for Indian domination. They seek to balance their giant neighbour India by developing close ties with other giants external to the region. They posit internationalism against regionalism. This tendency in turn arouse, fears among Indians dealing with neighbouring states that any multilateral negotiations in the region

would automatically lead to an anti-Indian coalition among the smaller states abetted by one or more outside powers. Bilateralism, or "beneficial bilateralism" as it was called, is posited against regionalism. Both sets of fears act as brakes on regional cooperation. Reassurances of good intent at the bilateral level are insufficient. Association of other countries in the wider region of southern Asia could prove beneficial. For example, when Iran as well as India were encouraging economic links between South and West Asia in the late 1970s, the prospects for regional cooperation appeared bright. Similarly, development of linkages between South and Southeast Asia have always been considered desirable from the point of view of regional cooperation as well as NIEO.

The links of history, religion, race, language and culture between India and each one of its neighbours have not yet borne more fruit than spontaneous enthusiasm for cultural exchanges expressed by ordinary people. On the contrary, these ties create problems of identity for states which are culturally close but politically distant from India.

The Indian government has adopted an attitude of tolerant understanding and non-interference towards it neighbours' domestic tensions. But India's national identity too is not so well established or so unshakably institutionalized in all parts of the country that India can continually absorb the political and human fall-out of its neighbours' identity problems without cost to itself. The idea of open borders, therefore, is not well received in New Delhi's corridors of power.
Another major obstacle to regional cooperation is the dissimilarity in the strategic perceptions held by different governments in the region. Without common definitions of threat they cannot proceed to meet it. The imperative of jointly protecting the region from outside interference is ignored while the governments separately assess the intentions and capabilities of outside powers to harm or benefit them. The divergences of strategic perception have been sharpest between India and Pakistan since the early 1950s. Divergences also underlie the different reactions to Nepal’s proposal to constitute itself into a ‘zone of peace’, and the differing interpretations of the 1971 United Nations Resolution on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, first moved by Sri Lanka. The countries of South Asia are deprived of the most compelling force for cooperation—common defence—because they cannot answer the question “defence against whom?”

As outlined earlier, the tremendous disparities in economic resources through the region create several obstacles to cooperation. One is the absence of common developmental strategies. For obvious reasons, India’s five year plans have been more ambivalent in concept and in execution than the developmental plans of its neighbours. No common tariff structure—even outside the framework of a common market—could be evolved. As a result, vested interests in it which could lobby for further cooperation. The pattern continues because it is reinforced by the need for external assistance faced by all the South Asian countries. Their exports are mainly
directed to the sources of financial aid and major imports: the industrialized countries and the oil exporting countries.

Increased economic cooperation in South Asia can be brought by utilizing such complementarities in resources and products as already exist and by increasing the amount of financial and technical assistance available intra-regionally. The goal of bilateral balanced trade would need to be amended with the help of a regional clearing house so that the chronic deficits do not develop. None of these steps can be accomplished without India playing an important role in the trade for the economic development of her neighbours. The stages of modernization and expansion reached in certain sectors of the Indian economy make it feasible for India to provide many of the goods imported from industrialized countries and to offer a market for South Asian exports.