

# Indian subcontinent requires a new confederation of nations

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It seems it has finally dawned on the Pakistani leaders that the years of violent movements in the Indian part of Kashmir—which have brought India and Pakistan to the brink of yet another destructive and meaningless war and which insurgency continues to receive generous support from Islamabad in cash and kind even today—were not the spontaneous actions of Kashmiris trying to break the Indian shackles and join Pakistan, but a movement to create a free and independent Kashmir state. Only recently, Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, following earlier exhortations promising her countrymen the annexation of all of Kashmir during her present reign, has finally come to acknowledge the fact, widely known to most observers for years, that given the right to self-determination, the Muslims in Kashmir would opt for independence from both India and Pakistan. Having acknowledged this, Bhutto has stated that Pakistan would oppose independence for Kashmir.

Bhutto's statement brought the Pakistani understanding of the situation very close to that of India, a situation which poses the need to take the entire issue to a higher level, where a real solution might be found. Yet there is no indication thus far that leaders of the two nations are making any special effort to act upon this new realization.

Bhutto's observation could not have come at a more opportune time. A few weeks ago, Beijing had made it clear to both India and Pakistan that China will not accept an independent Kashmir. Recent reports indicate that the people residing in the Kashmir Valley are getting increasingly upset about the militancy perpetuated by the terrorists, secessionists, and foreign mercenaries, otherwise known as Afghans. There are indications of a growing rift between the Jihad brigade, trained by the West during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and maintained as assets by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and whose job it is to "deliver" on behalf of their Pakistani masters, on the one hand, and the secessionists who are motivated mostly from Britain, by such typical British frontmen as Lord Avebury and MPs such as Madden and Waller, on the other. It also seems that Islamabad's opportunistic plea to the world

to act against India's human rights violations in Kashmir has lost its appeal. Moscow, for one, has recently made it clear that the Kashmir issue is not a human rights issue, but a political one.

## The British gamemasters

Nonetheless, Bhutto's defiant statement that Pakistan will oppose an independent Kashmir has triggered the expected militant responses from such Britain-based Kashmiri organizations as the Jammu and Kashmir People's National Party (JKPNN) and Jammu and Kashmir Peace Conference. JKPNP chief Afzal Tahir shot off a rejoinder reminding the Pakistani prime minister that "the struggle against India could become a struggle now against Pakistan." Tahir's statement is also in sync with what the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), politically the most powerful of various militant separatist groups headquartered in Britain, has been working toward for years. It is also not much different from what the late Sheikh Abdullah, a personal friend of Jawaharlal Nehru and the man who was trusted with the political shaping of the Indian part of Kashmir following the accession, had all along been designing. In effect, one could see that it is not only the Pakistanis who have been suffering from self-delusion, but the Indians as well. Nonetheless, it is ironic that leaders of the subcontinent, which split into two in 1947 and then into three countries in 1971 following the emergence of Bangladesh, still suffer from amnesia and refuse to face up to the realities.

The failure to identify a definite pattern in events since 1947, which included the violent breakaway of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 and the militant secessionist uprising in the Kashmir Valley which erupted in January 1990, has made the people of the subcontinent pay dearly in the form of loss of human lives, economic backwardness, external interventions, and the inability of the subcontinent as a whole to play a meaningful role in world affairs.

In addition, the internal instability caused by these upheavals has given rise to religious, ethnic, and sub-ethnic divisions with secessionist undertones. At the least, these

conflicts are potent enough to retard economic progress and degenerate the tenuous political systems. Despite the obvious drawbacks caused by the conflicts afflicting all three nations in the subcontinent, there are clear indications that each nation enjoys the difficulties the other nations face. Once, Islamabad used to join the western nations in citing internal troubles within India as a sign that India is disintegrating. Now, however, the same Pakistani leaders, faced with hostile separatists in Sindh, Baluchistan, and the North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan, have come to realize that what is sauce for the goose is also the sauce for the gander.

### **The zero-sum game**

Such festering of wounds, although not unusual in any country which has a legacy of European colonial rule, has been allowed to continue because of a number of factors, not least of which is the overwhelming paranoia that all the nations in the subcontinent suffer from. Every intervention by another nation, however insignificant it may be, is played up as the cause behind any setback. Investigations of all subversive activities carried out against any national institution or eminent individuals are always attributed to the intelligence agency of the other nation. This practice of blaming the other nation has further complicated the relations among the nations in the subcontinent.

There is no question that Pakistan lives under a constant "fear" that India will do its best to unsettle the settled borders. Such "fears" have created a class of rulers who thrive on feeding anti-India campaigns to the population. Pakistani politicians, burdened by this self-created obsession, have practically run the country down. The country's foreign policy is determined by the simple logic: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The problem is that the Pakistani politicians refuse to face up to the reality that some of these friends are worse than their so-called enemies.

If the Pakistani political system suffers from such paranoia, the Indian scene is not much different. The obsession of Delhi to dismiss any complaint by either Pakistan or Bangladesh as a motivated ploy to extract advantages from India or to belittle India before the world, has to be seen to be believed. As a result, New Delhi's relations not only with Islamabad, but also with the Bangladesh government in Dhaka, still leave much to be desired. While the poverty and illiteracy of the three countries have remained comparable, the technological level, the effect of mutual help to each other, among the three has remained highly uneven. India's technological level is much higher than that of either Pakistan or Bangladesh, due to its successes in research and development in the space and nuclear areas. However, none of this has trickled into the other two countries, a matter of great distress to some observers.

Another factor which has played a significant role in

creating and intensifying mistrust among the nations in the subcontinent is the British-promoted two-nation theory, which talks of the subcontinent as one country with two nations (a Hindu and a Muslim nation). While the Pakistani leadership still rigidly adheres to this fraud, some in India point at the fraud to de-recognize both Pakistan and Bangladesh. The independence of Bangladesh from the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani rulers in 1971 had exposed this fraud once, and now the JLKF, JKPNP, etc. are out to prove it once again. What Islamabad and New Delhi fail to realize, is that the two-nation theory was expounded as a "foot in the door," but what the British gamemasters and old colonial geopoliticians believe in is *balkanization*, the kind that disintegrated the Soviet Union. In order to achieve such disintegration, various promoters of multicultural and multi-ethnic society are emerging on the scene. While there is no doubt that the borders drawn in the past cannot be erased or redrawn without another massive human tragedy, what the subcontinent leaders must recognize is that the plan of the geopoliticians of the British variety cannot be encouraged: More nations cannot be carved out of the body of the subcontinent.

### **Self-defeating hostilities**

The mutual hostility among the nations in the subcontinent has prevented these nations from resolving some of the most important issues, as well as the insignificant ones. Some issues like the territorial control of the Siachen Glacier, a snowbound terrain situated in the northwest of Ladakh in Kashmir, could not be resolved, and have led to armed conflicts. Both India and Pakistan are spending fortunes to maintain troops at a height of 18,000 feet above sea level, and the slopes of the glacier became key points of conflict between India and Pakistan soon after China completed the construction of the modern Silk Route from the border town of Kashgar in Xinjiang to Pakistan-occupied Gilgit in Jammu and Kashmir. Over the years, both India and Pakistan have periodically exchanged gunfire to maintain their strategic positions and to enhance tensions between the two countries.

Similarly, the dispute between India and Bangladesh over the sharing of the Ganga River's water, following the construction of the Farakka Barrage to divert the Ganga 11 miles upstream from the India-Bangladesh border, has not been resolved and, in fact, the issue is shaping the politics of Bangladesh. More than ever before, one hears Bangladeshi politicians blaming India for the desertification of northern Bangladesh. Bangladeshis complain that India is drawing almost all the water from the Ganga during the dry season, the crucial period, leaving practically nothing to flow into Bangladesh.

Whether the Bangladeshi allegations are exaggerated or not, what is obvious is that Bangladesh, incapable of forcing India to act, has turned virulently anti-India. Bangladeshi

politicians, many of whom are indebted to India for helping Bangladeshis to shake off the oppressive yoke of the Pakistani rulers in the early '70s, are becoming increasingly polarized, and there is hardly any political force that exists today in Bangladesh which can organize on the basis of seeking friendship with India.

Such a distorted relationship between the two neighboring countries has taken a major toll on Bangladesh's body politic. Today, the pro-Saudi Jamaat-e-Islami orthodox group is taking over control of the streets of Dhaka, espousing anti-India and anti-Hindu slogans. Such an ugly mood in Bangladesh is also preventing the two countries from discussing meaningfully the large-scale Bangladeshi illegal immigration into India. Under the prevailing mood, while India talks about setting up barbed-wire fences to fend off the illegal immigrants, Dhaka authorities flatly deny that there is any illegal migration into India.

The list goes on and on.

### **The futile SAARC**

In the mid-1980s, an attempt was made to have cooperative relations among the South Asian nations. Although the grouping included countries outside of the subcontinent, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) soon turned out to be a hotbed of politics. Although bilateral disputes were kept out of the discussion process by charter, over the eight years of its existence, observers have seen with dismay that open efforts to sabotage the association have come to predominate. If India was responsible for sabotaging the Colombo Summit of the SAARC in 1991, Pakistan was found busily organizing others to bring up the demolition of a mosque by fanatic Hindus in Ayodhya in 1993. Throughout its existence, the SAARC has acted as a political football kicked around by the participants to score meaningless political points over each other.

Last year, the SAARC countries had agreed to a December 1993 deadline for completing the process of negotiating trade concessions. They had also agreed on an end-1995 deadline for ratifying the SAARC Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA), signed in Dhaka in 1993. However, it is taken for granted that the SAPTA is a still-born baby. While there is little doubt that India, being the largest of the SAARC nations, will benefit the most from the SAPTA, Pakistan has clearly begun to stay away from endorsing the SAPTA, and there are indications that Islamabad is actively imploring the other SAARC nations not to ratify the SAPTA. All in all, as regarding most other issues, the picture on South Asian cooperation is bleak and there is hardly any one who sincerely believes that anything worthwhile can come out of either SAARC or SAPTA.

### **Concept of a confederation**

Having come to a situation like this, it is important for the subcontinent leaders to look around and see where the

subcontinent is heading. The mutual distrust has given rise to a large-scale militarization, which, at least in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, has kept the democratic political process suppressed. People's requirements in these countries are decided by a handful who are more keen to keep themselves in power than anything else. As a result, the economies of Pakistan and Bangladesh are entering a stage of no-return and becoming more and more dependent on foreign donors and foreign financial institutions. The very security for which so much has been spent in procuring arms and ammunition is thus getting subverted by a process which escapes everyone's attention. In addition, more ethnic and sectarian conflicts have cropped up in recent days than ever before.

It is difficult to say how long such a condition can persist. The end of the Cold War has brought about a significant change in the world situation. While the dangers of "free market" and "free trade" schemes to loot the South Asian nations have become real now more than before, there are also opportunities, in the form of developing relations with new nations of the former Soviet Union, and in Gaza-Jericho, and South Africa. But the South Asian nations, bound by the morass of their own creation, have failed even to evaluate the situation, let alone work out a strategy to take responsibility for these new-born democracies to succeed. And there is no telling when, if ever, the South Asian nations can come out of this slow degenerative state.

It is obvious that there is little scope for statecraft at this stage for any national leader in South Asia under the prevailing parameters within which they have been made to function. It is time to break out of that and think about a confederation of South Asia where the borders will remain the same, but the nations will act to enhance their citizens' capabilities. Such a confederation will not jeopardize national security, but will strengthen it. Such a confederation will not look at the people of South Asia as foreigners or usurpers, but people of the same confederation working for the prosperity of the region as a whole. Such a confederation will not get bogged down trying to resolve such absurd issues as control of the Siachen Glacier, nor would it shirk from dealing with the distribution of riparian river waters for the benefit of most.

The subcontinent's population has already exceeded 1 billion and most likely will exceed that of China in a few years. It is also to be noted that in South Asia, a large section of the population continues to remain deprived of such basic necessities of life as electricity, safe drinking water, basic medical care, modest housing, and primary education. The way the South Asian nations have "progressed" over the last 47 years, there is hardly any reason to believe that the coming decades will provide them with any better opportunity. The worst, on the other hand, is genuinely to be feared. It is time for the South Asians to wake up to the realities and think of improving the policy formulations and implementations of policies through a different and friendly mechanism.