

The Indo-Soviet Special Relationship and its Relevance to South Asian Regional Security

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Any meaningful discussion on the relevance of Indo-Soviet relations to the security politics of South Asian region can only take place within the context of each country's perspectives (regional and global) of its own requirements and role, as well within the parameters fixed by the developments of close relations between the two countries since the early fifties.

A requirement of the Soviet foreign policy, especially since the latter half of the fifties as Sino-Soviet dispute began (ideological, between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), to start with, but which then also developed into a dispute over border between the Soviet Union and China), has been to work for a peaceful, stable and friendly South Asia on the Soviet Union's southern flank.

Indeed, it has to be stated at the outset that, notwithstanding the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan (December 1979), its desire to safeguard the stability and security of its southern flank has not resulted in any attempt by it to destabilize the countries of the Indian sub-continent or to impose proxy governments there or to encourage and support the indigenous communist parties to adopt strategic-tactical lines more likely to further the goal of achieving socialism.

Rather, as we can see from the policy of the Soviet Union towards India, a lynchpin in any design concerning South Asia, which has succeeded in establishing close working relationship with it and accepted its aid: diplomatic, economic and military, the effect has been to strengthen the Indian national bourgeoisie. Historically, the Soviet Union has not hesitated to sacrifice the interests of either an indigenous communist party or the cause of socialism in a particular country, as in the case of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the socialist cause in India, on the altar of the Soviet foreign policy requirements.

During the fifties, the Soviet emphasis was on the establishment of close relations with India, which proved very useful to the post-Stalin Soviet leadership

- (i) in its radically new policy designed to break the mould of Stalin's international policy;
- (ii) in outflanking the American policy of 'containment' of the Soviet bloc; and,
- (iii) in providing a bridge to the Third World and the nascent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

However, India's military debacle in the Himalayas (October 1962) and the worsening of the Sino-Soviet relations encouraged the Soviet interest

in the sub-continent to include both India and Pakistan.

Considered from the Soviet Union's viewpoint, South India without its debilitating intra-regional wars and conflicts would be strengthened, and thus

- (i) better able to resist any Chinese blandishments, as well as to stand up to any Chinese challenge; and,
- (ii) at the same time, act as an effective and strong diversionary power on China's south-western flank.

In this context, the Soviet Union's role as an 'honest broker' and 'peace-maker' at Tashkent (1966) between Pakistan and India, following the war between the two countries (1965), was the most public affirmation of its interest in assisting in the task of bringing about peace and security to the Indian sub-continent.

Although a major factor in the rapid development of the Indo-Soviet relations had been the coincidence of the two countries' hostility towards China, the worsening Sino-Soviet relations, at the same time, contributed to the Soviet Union's adoption of a policy of balance between Pakistan and India (mid-sixties). The adoption of such a policy (with its inherent risks of disrupting the already well-established close Indo-Soviet relations) by the Soviet Union was in part dictated by its desire to woo Pakistan away its growing close ties with China.

It was within the context of the above considerations that the Soviet Union had, even before South Asian Regional Co-operation (SARC) was first mooted (May 1980) by President Zia-ur-Rahman of Bangladesh, encouraged the idea of co-operation among states on its southern flank. Indeed, the Soviet Union tried to interest not only India and Pakistan but Iran and Afghanistan as well in developing a regional economic trade area. But Pakistan declined to attend a conference (1969) at Kabul organized for this purpose. The Soviet leadership must have believed, or at least hoped, that such a regional co-operation would

- (i) lead to the diffusion, if not settlement, of intra-regional conflicts, for example, between Pakistan and India, and Afghanistan and Pakistan;
- (ii) increase the region's assertion of its independence *vis-a-vis* the West in general and the United States in particular; here Pakistan (and Iran before the revolution) would have been particularly in the mind of the Soviet leadership; and,
- (iii) reduce and hopefully eliminate any geo-strategic compulsions in the region to adopt a pro-China policy (with particular reference to Pakistan).

With the establishment of India's regional pre-eminence following its total victory in the Bangladesh war (December 1971), Mrs. Gandhi became actively interested in the rest of South Asia and took initiatives to consolidate India's new found position. Indian national bourgeoisie had, of course, always looked upon South Asia as almost its own 'preserve' which could provide India the necessary prop in its efforts to extend its

strategic and geo-political influence.

The "Simla Agreement" (July 1972), by stipulating that in future all problems and conflicts between India and Pakistan be resolved only on a bilateral basis, not only effectively ruled out any role for an outside third power in the sub-continent's conflicts but, simultaneously, established for the first time the important principle of bilateralism in Indo-Pakistan relations. The same principle was by inference and subsequent practice to be applicable also in India's relations with the other South Asian neighbours. It was a reflection of the new geo-political realities in the post-Bangladesh-war in South Asia. This formed the background to Mrs. Gandhi's initiatives to consolidate India's position as the regional power in South Asia. She sought to normalize relations with Pakistan by ensuring that the American penetration of it was severely limited, at the same time, attempting to keep it from becoming a nuclear power. She also welcomed, though cautiously and only in principle, Soviet Union's initiatives in encouraging regional co-operation among South Asian countries. Her attitude to the region was conditioned by a sense of India's geo-political dominance, as was evidenced, for example, by the manner of Sikkim's absorption into the Indian Union (1975). In the early eighties, as communal conflict broke out in Sri Lanka (1983), the Indian government despite its conciliatory attitude to the resolution of the island's Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic conflict, in assertion of India's regional status issued warnings in the wake of reported Sri Lankan approaches for help from Bangladesh, Britain, Pakistan and the United States that no external powers could be invited to Sri Lanka without India being included. (1)

The Soviet Union for its own reasons welcomed Indian initiatives in the region. Indeed, it had already given the 'nod' to the expansion of India's sphere of influence by signing with it the 20 year "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation" (August 1971). Moreover, in the global perspective India's regional interest and initiatives were aimed at limiting the United States' 'presence' in Pakistan, also a goal of Soviet foreign policy, which was to assume particular relevance for the Soviet Union in the wake of the establishment of its own 'presence' in Afghanistan.

A related aspect of Soviet foreign policy towards the sub-continent was the Soviet Union's desire, just as had been the case in the mid-sixties, not only to restore its relations with Pakistan but also for a stable South Asia and a secure Pakistan that reduced its dependence on China. But, of course, in the altered geo-political situation of the seventies, neither a repetition of the Tashkent type mediation was possible nor was the Soviet Union prepared to risk its more important relations with India, as it had done in 1968 by its decision to supply arms to Pakistan.

Perceptions of growing Chinese military threat dominated the entire Soviet foreign policy perspective from the first border clash on Damanskii Island (March 1969). Complicating and exacerbating the Soviet

Union's fears of a Chinese threat as well as the former's efforts to counter them were the increasing signs of a possible Sino-American rapprochement. Following the announcement (1968) of British withdrawal from east of Suez, the Soviet Union had begun to voice its worries about a 'vacuum' in Asia and the problems of security there which the United States, Japan or China might try to take advantage of. Although treating Nixon's Guam Doctrine (mid-sixtynine) which implied the United States' disengagement from Asia with scepticism, the Soviet Union could not rule out the possibility of an eventual reduction of American presence coupled with the extremely worrying prospect of renewed activities in the region by post-Cultural Revolution China. This was the background against which Brezhnev first mooted the idea of a system of collective security in Asia, embracing not only the South Asian region but also itself, at the Moscow "International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties" (June 1969). It was clear to all that such a Soviet proposal for an Asian military and political pact was aimed against China.

During the seventies, the Soviet Union tried hard to interest the South Asian countries, particularly India, in Brezhnev's collective security idea. Any eventual success in making headway with the Soviet plan was dependent upon winning India's crucial support. And the considerable Soviet efforts at building up India's international prestige was aimed at winning its sponsorship of the Brezhnev plan. But no Asian country goes out of its way to unnecessarily offend China. India desired to keep the door open to any prospects of normalization of relations with China. Another reason for Indian refusal to endorse the Soviet plan was the long-standing requirement of Indian foreign policy to prevent the entry of an outside power into the region permanently. And now that India's geo-political dominance in South Asia had clearly been established it was not eager to support the Soviet Union's regional role which could in the long-term be to the detriment of its own role and interests.

This vision of India's own interests and role in the region led to its differences with the Soviet Union over the issues of collective security and the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union sought to contain the perceived threat from China through its plan for an Asian collective security system, and reduce the United States' presence in the Indian Ocean whilst increasing its own. India, on the other hand, sought to keep the door open to normalization of relations with China and, therefore, distanced itself from the Soviet plan, whilst in the Indian Ocean it aimed to reduce the role and presence of both the Soviet Union and the United States. India's need for friendship and close ties with the Soviet Union did not include the desire to further policies that might help to establish the latter's exclusive presence in South Asia or the Indian Ocean. And that still holds true to this day.

Of course, given the poor state of India's relations with both China and the United States, the latter's growing military presence in the Ind-

ian Ocean and the memory of the threatening American naval task force in the Bay of Bengal in December 1971, India could not be too insistent on its Indian Ocean policy with the Soviet Union, for it was too well aware of the deterring role the Soviet naval presence there played.

The Soviet Union whilst increasing its naval presence in the Indian Ocean to match that of the United States followed the policy of building-up India as a buffer in the region. The development of India as a dominant regional power in the Indian Ocean which could eventually serve as an intermediary for Soviet security objectives lowered the risks of provoking the type of American response that would definitely result from direct Soviet military action in the area.

During the seventies, relations between the Soviet Union and India showed considerable overlap of foreign policy and security interests of both states despite the variance on the issues of collective security and Indian Ocean. The basis of continuing close and friendly ties between the two states was that the Soviet and Indian perceptions of the world largely coincided with no basic conflict of interests in the region.

Even although Brezhnev's proposal for a collective security system for Asia failed to take off during the seventies, it has, shorn of its military-security aspects and minus the Soviet Union, matured in the eighties into SARC.

Looked at from the Soviet viewpoint, SARC, if successful, represents the potential of loosening Pakistan's (also of Sri Lanka's and Bangladesh's) close ties with the United States, not to mention those with China in the long run, as well as of reducing the American presence in Pakistan which must appear threatening to their own interests and presence in Afghanistan. A successful South Asian regional grouping can only enhance India's international stature and role. And if we accept that it is most unlikely, in the foreseeable future, for Indo-Soviet relations to change suddenly for the worst the Soviet Union cannot but also benefit.

The history of Indo-Soviet relations shows that there is a correlation between the international standing of India and the profile of the Soviet Union's policy towards it. It was India's (not to forget Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's) international stature and role in the fifties, which proved so useful to the Soviet foreign policy interests, that played a significant role in influencing the Soviet Union to seek close ties with India. And as part of its efforts to bolster India's international prestige the Soviet Union regularly pressed for India's inclusion in international peace conferences and disarmament conferences (as, for example, in the case of Indo-China). Interestingly, on a number of such occasions, as if in set piece Cold War confrontations, the United States simply took the opposite side.

SARC without India is no SARC. And in any regional grouping of South Asian states only India can be the dominant country (without necessarily dominating the others). Whatever indices of power are considered: size, population, resources, economic strength, political stability,

military strength, or as Marshall Singer has described wealth (human and material), organization (formal and informal), status (ascribed and achieved) and will (conscious and subconscious),(2) India is a colossus compared to the rest of the SARC members. This is the given state of facts which neither India can escape nor the others ignore or wish away. Simply by its existence India affects the others and their regional and global relationships.

However, it is pertinent to note Pakistan's efforts, its lost status, albeit a weak one, of countervailing power on the sub-continent. Pakistan cannot expect or be expected to play such a role without the support of extra-regional powers (China and the United States), but its efforts in achieving rapid progress towards becoming a nuclear power and its development as a 'frontline' state in the West, particularly the United States; the confrontation of the Soviet Union at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border have given it a geo-strategic importance in South Asia not least because of the role it (and China) plays in influencing India's regional and global perspectives. And as a 'frontline' state Pakistan not only benefits from the Western, especially American, economic and military assistance but, in turn, also serves the global interests of both China and the United States in checking the Soviet Union's advance into the region. Pakistan has, thus, acquired a heightened significance in the American perceptions and become a very crucial part of the United States' strategic consensus in South-West Asia to counter Soviet presence in Afghanistan and to compensate for the loss of Iran.

Any regional co-operation in South Asia, therefore, which promoted understanding between India and Pakistan, and thereby had the effect of strengthening the latter's security, would also serve the interests of the United States. The growing power of the anti-United States Iran must be extremely worrying for the Americans, especially for its capacity to destabilize Pakistan from the West and absorbing Baluchistan. Besides, as a 'frontline' state there is a danger of a 'spillover' from the north-west. The presence of the majority of the nearly 3 million Afghan refugees in the north-western border region of Pakistan and the explosive potential they represent for mischief-making and for becoming a destabilizing factor in the future cannot be ruled out altogether. Nor can one totally rule out the issue of Pakistan being revived at an opportune moment by Kabul. Seen from the United States' perspective SARC represents a hopeful development that could help prevent the possible destabilization and disintegration of Pakistan.

In considering India's attitude towards SARC one has to take note of the emergence of a new leadership within the ruling Congress (I) party under Rajiv Gandhi. This leadership is unaffected by any socialistic aspirations - not that any previous Congress leadership's claim to be furthering the cause of 'socialistic society' in India could stand a serious and critical inquiry, but at least it went through the motion of making the pretence. The new post-independence generation of Congress (I)

leadership is far more committed to the capitalist path of development for India than any previous Congress or non-Congress leadership in power. Its pragmatic and technocratic approach with a commitment to rapid and extensive industrialization and modernization of India means both a need for and the opening up of the country to foreign capital.

It is not only Rajiv Gandhi's vision of leading India into the 21st century that necessitates the need for foreign capital. India's development, especially since the success of the 'green revolution' in overcoming its chronic problem of food-shortages, has brought to surface tensions and contradictions between the different segments of the ruling classes both at the national level and in the States. The industrial segment of the Indian national bourgeoisie expected India's achievement of self-sufficiency in food to enable it to undertake development and expansion of capitalist manufacture and a national market by transfer of capital from the agricultural sector. However, the increasingly powerful agricultural segment of the national bourgeoisie has not been amenable to such a programme of net transfer of resources from agriculture to industry. We have, therefore, a situation where each segment of the Indian national bourgeoisie is not prepared to sacrifice its own interests in favour of the other to enable it to maintain dynamic growth. In addition there are the regional economic demands of the various States. And it is doubtful whether the Indian government by itself can generate enough resources to satisfy the various economic expectations of the different segments of the ruling classes in India both at the Centre and in the States.

In the context of Indian need for foreign investment capital and for the transfer of advanced technology from the West, particularly the United States, Indo-United States relations have assumed a new significance. Transfer of advanced technology by the United States to India (as, for example, the sale of super-computer and collaboration arrangements with American firms for the production of mainframe computers in India) has emerged as a major factor in the improving Indo-United States relations during the past 18 months. Of course, the United States' transfer of its high technology to India is closely and very explicitly linked to its political-strategic interests in South and South-West Asia. And as part of the new dimensions of Indo-United States relations have been the Indian government's efforts to establish friendly relations with South Asian neighbours, particularly Pakistan; thus, the significant relevance of SARC. And also in this connection, it is both interesting and relevant to note (for example, in the Indian Defence Ministry's annual report for 1985-86) the greater understanding that India has recently shown to the United States' relations with, and military assistance to, Pakistan.

Although Rajiv Gandhi's economic policy would necessarily bring India closer to the Western capitalist world, and the United States in particular, it does not, however, imply any lessening of the close and friendly Indo-Soviet ties. The present Congress (I) leadership does not

see any contradiction in its efforts to build capitalism in India whilst continuing, at the same time, to maintain the time-proven advantageous relationship with the Soviet Union and also to offer the sub-continent, in the global perspective, as a strategic area on its southern flank. The key to the close and, on the whole, conflict-free Indo-Soviet relations, has been the coincidence, by and large, of the global perspectives of both India and the Soviet Union, as well as the lack of any serious conflict of interests in the South Asian region. That this is still the case, it is reflected in the mutuality of interests of both the Soviet Union and India in SARC.

The Soviet Union, India and the United States, each for its own purpose and in its own interest, consider the concept of SARC encouraging and a hopeful development worth supporting. Whereas the coincidence of Soviet and Indian interests is on the whole non-antagonistic, it is certainly not so in the case of the superpowers. As far as India and the United States are concerned, as long as Pakistan and China continue on the one hand to be the key factors in Indian foreign policy perspectives (regional and global), and on the other, the United States continues to give weight to its detente with China and, at the same time, consider Pakistan as crucial to its strategic consensus in South-West Asia, then, notwithstanding the recent improvements in Indo-United States relations, the coincidence of interests over SARC can certainly not be characterized as non-antagonistic.

It is in the interest of South Asian countries, including the regional power India, as well as the extra-regional powers most immediately involved in the region, to ensure stability and security of the South Asian region. In this context, it has to be noted that Indo-Soviet relations have on the whole served the function of underpinning India's interests. The danger to South Asian security comes from the Soviet-American confrontation over Afghanistan, in which Pakistan, an important SARC member, has become a 'frontline' state and a key element in the United States' strategic consensus in South-West Asia.

Notes

- * This paper was presented at the "Nineth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies", Heidelberg, Federal Republic of Germany (July 1986).
- (1) Since July 1986, developments in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka leading to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord (29 July, 1987) by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Junius Jayewardene and the dispatch of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (PKF) to the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka and its subsequent military operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have reminded the world in general and the countries of

South Asia in particular of India's preeminent position as the regional super-power, which could not allow persistent instability in its backyard nor any intervention there by a third power, notwithstanding its own serious domestic political and internal security problems.

- (2) Singer, Marshall R.: The Foreign Policies of Small Developing States, in: Rosenau, James N./et al.: World Politics: An Introduction. New York 1976, p.263.

Summary

A requirement of the Soviet foreign policy, especially since the late fifties as the Sino-Soviet conflict began, has been to work for a peaceful, stable and friendly South Asian region on the Soviet Union's southern flank. The "Tashkent Declaration" (1966) and the attempt by the Soviet Union to adopt a policy of balance between Pakistan and India, the two most important states in South Asia, during the latter half of the sixties, is testimony to this.

In this context, the Soviet Union had encouraged and tried to promote the idea of a regional co-operation in South Asia even before the South Asian Regional Co-operation (SARC) was first mooted (1980) by the president of Bangladesh. Indeed, one could say that Breshnev's first proposal for a collective security system for Asia, shorn of its military-security aspects and the exclusion of the Soviet Union, has matured in the eighties into SARC.

For the Soviet Union a successful South Asian regional grouping, with India inevitably as its kingpin, represents in the long-term the hopeful potential of loosening Pakistan's (also Sri Lanka's and Bangladesh's) close ties with the United States, as well as of reducing the American 'presence' there which cannot but appear threatening to its own interests in Afghanistan in particular and the South Asian region in general.

The key aspect of the 'special' Indo-Soviet relationship has been the coincidence of Indian and Soviet regional and global interests. India's interests and initiatives in South Asia have been to consolidate its pre-eminent position as the general power, and globally to limit the United State's penetration of Pakistan.

Although the post-Indira Gandhi Indian leadership's vision of pulling India into the '21st century' means a much greater Indian dependence on Western foreign capital than hitherto, it in no way contradicts the continuation of India's close ties with the Soviet Union. And in this context, SAARC assumes a particular relevance as it may increase the attraction of the region to Western foreign aid and capital investment.