

FROM PREDOMINANCE TO PARTICIPATION: RECASTING U.S.ROLE IN SOUTHERN ASIA. - AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE.

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I.

This is an age of unprecedented flux. Contradictory tendencies like economic cooperation and political rivalry characterize today the relationship between the superpowers blurring the neatly drawn lines of the cold war days. Powerful forces of nationalistic self-assertion in the Third World join quite the opposite forces of interdependence operating on a global scale. The old international structure is clearly crumbling; vision of a new one remains at best opaque. And yet, the need is clearly felt for a new international interaction pattern; a new "action system", to project Talcott Parsons' concept<sup>1)</sup> on a transnational scale.

This remains especially true in the context of the superpower Third World relations. This article, however, restricts its scope to a less general frame of reference and proposes to analyse the action system created by the USA vis-à-vis Southern Asia<sup>2)</sup>, to bring out its major lacunae (as seen from an Indian perspective), and to design a framework for future U.S. orientation towards the region.

II.

For the present purposes, Southern Asia is conceptualized as a system of states sharing a multiplicity of similar problems of nation-building which are accentuated by the dynamic age of modernization and industrial growth which is ours. Conceivably the Southern Asian system is in the arduous process of "adaptation" to a rapidly changing global environment. It is, hence, an "open" system in the sense that it interacts with the latter. And finally, U.S. foreign policy is seen as a means of controlling the delineated environment of the system.

Several questions arise in connection with the conceptual framework sketched above. Which objective trends and forces are prevalent in the Southern Asian system? How has U.S. foreign policy interacted with them? To what effect? Ever since the formulation of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, U.S. foreign policy underwent a total metamorphosis. Sustained and reinforced by cold war perceptions, the USA cast itself in the role of a global homeostat seeking to control environments around the world in search of "stability". The latter was perceived to be threatened by a monolithic world-communist movement: The extension of the cold war to Asia began with the Korean War at the turn of the 1950's. Ever since, U.S. interaction with the Southern Asian system has been characterized by a massive display of power tangibles designed to discourage forces which might adversely affect "stability" and "freedom". A staggering amount of economic and military aid poured in as simultaneously a series of bilateral and regional military pacts were brought into being. The climacterics of the military inflection that U.S. foreign policy received in the course of the past decades were reached in turbulent Indochina. Despite its best efforts with capital-intensive warfare (including 6.3 million tons of air ordnance dropped over Indochina till 1971<sup>3</sup>), the U.S.A. failed in its political purpose of controlling the environment in Indochina. In fact, large chunks of the Southern Asian system have remained or slipped beyond U.S. control. The reunification of Vietnam under Hanoi's predominance in April 1975, the replacement of monarchy by Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975, and the establishment of Democratic Cambodia in January 1976 constitute the most striking indicators of the limits of U.S. power. In South Asia, India, which was for long held to be a fairly successful experiment in Western-type democracy, continues adding to the executive powers of the central government and taking the sanctity out of her constitution, fundamental rights and the judiciary<sup>4</sup>). Pakistan and post-Mujib Bangladesh present va-



rieties of the same spectrum. While Thailand's recent experiment in Western democracy was abortive (only 47.9 % of eligible voters showed up at the polls in the general elections of January 1975<sup>5)</sup>), the Philippines under President Marcos has been under the spell of martial law since fall 1972. In terms of foreign policy, both Thailand and the Philippines, hitherto staunch allies of the U.S.A., are re-orienting themselves by reducing their reliance on the latter<sup>6)</sup>. Indonesia, which initially after its independence experimented with constitutional democracy but subsequently succumbed to Sukarno's Guided Democracy, also reveals the general pattern of concentration of power under Suharto's New Order. While NASAKOM represented the Indonesian version of checks and balances, the army's "dvifunktsi" and GOLKAR reflect today a decisively tilted balance<sup>7)</sup>.

All this is taking place, not only in Southern Asia but all over the Third World, because, to quote Rupert Emerson: "... the struggle to accumulate capital from a base of poverty is a difficult task under any conditions, and to try to do it by democratic means may be asking more than human nature can stand."<sup>8)</sup>

### III.

What went wrong with the basically benevolent and sincere U.S. efforts to control the poverty-stricken "weak" system of Southern Asia? Here lies the crux of the problem. It shows, firstly, that political power conceived in terms of a means to control environment has its definite limits. In Karl Deutsch's revealing analogy, an elephant can smash down a large obstacle but cannot thread a needle<sup>9)</sup>. Flexing of military might in Southern Asia as well as attempts to "sell" ideas like individual liberty and free enterprise were mostly irrelevant to the basic dynamics of the system. Large-scale pumping of economic aid might have worked in Europe under the Marshall Plan where the prerequisites of utilizing such aid were already in existence; it has been conspicuous in Southern Asia by its failure to significantly influence the system's basic dynamics.

In broad terms, the multistructured component states are characterized at grass-roots level by demographic explosion (with the Schwerpunkt lying in South Asia), a blurred sense of values resulting from conflicting pulls of tradition and modernity, and illiteracy and attitudes antithetical to socio-economic progress. Imposed upon this level of massive inertia is a complex structure of modernized elite and bureaucracy, thoroughly corrupt and self-seeking. Modern communication channels like the educational establishments, newspapers, radio and TV help create an ever-expanding stratum of the educated with modern outlook. This stratum, a most prominent group of which is constituted by the students, is affected by the revolution of rising expectations. Frustration accelerates with the discovery that "success" escalators are few and far between, and that channels of upward mobility are open, in practice, to a few privileged. This, coupled with widespread problems of food and agriculture, trade imbalances and industrial deficiencies and other attendant problems of development generate massive pressures on the government. The problems pile up over the years, through the decades. The state is seen as the outstanding force, the only conscious agency, which is at all in a position to cope with them. Hence, the state gets right at the outset the lion's share of the responsibilities - and power - to mould a modern nation out of traditional society.

Not only has there been no tradition of Western-type democracy in the Southern Asian system, there is a positive suspicion on the part of the ruling elite that much of the evil of imperialism and colonialism is to be attributed to the profit-hungry capitalist system which goes hand in glove with Western democracy<sup>10)</sup>.

Over and above this, a peculiar feature of the Southern Asian system is the quality of the bureaucratic machinery with which the state is supposed to implement and enforce its regulations in trying to ease some of the pressures that threaten to go out of hand. Since large portions of the



bureaucracy - particularly its lower echelons although the higher ones are by no means exempt - are made up of the stuff that also makes up the overwhelming majority of the population (and which is, therefore, at the receiving end of supposedly enlightened bureaucratic action), high entropy is the end result. Decisions made at the highest levels rarely see intact implementation at the output end. Consequently, the problems generating the pressures are evaded, circumvented or, at the most, camouflaged. But these are not the same as solving or mitigating them. The net result is the creation of even more problems. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that a parallel economy of "black" money has been in operation in India, or that the deposed President Lon Nol of Cambodia could entertain the idea of retiring to a million-dollar estate in Hawaii, to cite but a few known examples. In sum, the Southern Asian system's capability level is characterized by low extractive, hence low distributive, hence low responsive, and hence high regulative behaviour<sup>11)</sup>. The objective trends point in the direction of priority need for economic justice, reduced corruption, greater efficiency and a new work ethic. These presuppose painstaking and honest efforts at overcoming age-old inertia<sup>12)</sup>.

#### IV.

Against such a background the chief thrusts of U.S. foreign policy in the direction of preservation of liberty and stability from outside seems to have been utterly misplaced. The U.S.S.R., on the other hand, has since Stalin's death been able to modify her ideology to trap some of the major dynamics of the Third World. It fully backs elites who call for enlarged state sector, nationalization and the like, even though they may not want to call themselves communists. Upto this point the U.S.S.R. is often able to influence the Southern Asian environment with its economic and other forms of assistance to state sector projects, thereby weakening the West's hold and reinforcing the posi-

tions of the "revolutionary democrats". However, Soviet ideology indicates the belief in accordance with its eschatology that out of the congeries of "petty bourgeois" brands of socialism and allied doctrines there will emerge - ultimately - "genuine" Marxist socialism (the Soviet-approved variety)<sup>13</sup>).

There seems, however, to be little ground for such contention. Strengthening the domestic base of the "revolutionary democrats" only helps to entrench them firmly; the latter seem to be in no mood for moving towards a "proletarian dictatorship" even though they often flirt with indigenous communists. Further, even assuming that most of the Southern Asian system were to evolve in the foreseeable future from a mosaic of authoritarianism to "proletarian dictatorship", that would by no means connote an automatic success for the U.S.S.R. and a corresponding loss for the U.S.A. Indeed, Vietnam might never have taken place had the U.S.A. not failed in making this intellectual distinction. For world communism today is a highly fragmented phenomenon; like Yugoslavia, Albania, China or Cambodia communism in Southern Asia will probably tend to strike out its own path independent of Moscow.

Indeed, too little appreciation has been shown hitherto for the strength of indigenous nationalism in the Third World. The U.S.A.'s obsession with stability has contributed to its under-appreciation despite numerous instances to the contrary: Suez (1956), Cuba (1961), Vietnam, and the OPEC.

A genuine U.S. withdrawal in power-political terms from Southern Asia would clearly throw into relief the limits of Soviet foreign policy as a control system for the region. While Moscow might be able to meet growing demands for state sector projects in the region, it will not be able to help overcome some of their built-in technical and organizational defects from which it has no immunity either<sup>14</sup>). Hence, the U.S.S.R. would hardly be able to "capture" the economic realms of Southern Asia following a U.S.



withdrawal, especially as the criteria of efficiency, high technology and quality production are bound to assume increasing importance. Soviet ideology would also fail to benefit significantly from a U.S. absence from the region; it has already lost much of its revolutionary lustre and intellectual appeal and is faced with stiff competition from its Chinese counterpart.

The U.S.A. will have to face up to the fact that the Southern Asian system will keep moving in authoritarian directions in search of its stability according to its felt needs, aspirations and political culture. Exogenous control factors like U.S. foreign policy can play only a peripheral role in this process<sup>15)</sup>. U.S. awareness of periphery is necessary because it seems to be unable to free itself of a large residuum of power-realist thought. Despite its Vietnam experience, for instance, the U.S.A. was said to be "tilting" in favour of Pakistan during the December 1971 Indo-Pak war over the emergence of Bangladesh. Ordering the prestigious nuclear-carrier Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal at the time of the crisis only revealed the low "learning"<sup>16)</sup> capacity of U.S. foreign policy Tsars. The case was a classic illustration of the obsession with the mechanistic concepts of the balance-of-power and stability when far more elemental issues were at stake (the East Pak refugee problem, Bengali nationalism, etc.).

The building of a naval base in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean is another indicator of U.S. power complex. The base has been explained away as a countermove to Soviet strategy<sup>17)</sup>. Little attention has been paid to the sensibilities of the littoral states, most of which have made clear that they do not desire to see superpower strategic rivalry begin at their doorstep.<sup>18)</sup>

#### V.

A number of U.S. thinkers still talk in terms of U.S. policing of Southern Asian seas<sup>19)</sup> as if this were the most

pressing problem of the region. In fact, the region has never been of vital interest to the U.S.A. Of the total book value of direct U.S. investments abroad which amounted to some \$ 86 billion in 1971, Canada, Europe and Latin America accounted for about \$ 67.4 billion, while Southern Asia accounted for a fraction of the remaining \$ 18.5 billion<sup>20)</sup>. And yet, despite Nixon's Guam Doctrine, the U.S.-Southern Asian action system does little to weaken the U.S. image of neo-colonialism as perceived by indigenous elites and as reinforced by skillful communist propaganda.

A genuine low profile policy should be pursued by the U.S.A. in the Southern Asian environment (as distinct from, for instance, an activist role in the oil world of West Asia) entailing decreased role of the Seventh Fleet in the region, dismantling of the remaining military bases, greatly reduced arms aid, etc. This would hardly be a novelty but in continuation of powerful trends like the demise of the S.E.A.T.O. and U.S. bases in Thailand. On the economic plane, too, the U.S.A. should reinforce its tendency to drastically reduce bilateral aid. This would act as an incentive to the system of states in the region to find their own means of survival and would also take the stigma of neo-colonialism out of the popular image of the U.S.A. W.W.Rostow, for instance, strikes a similar note and stresses that the developing states ought to become more regionally oriented so as to better cope with problems of regional peacemaking and economic cooperation<sup>21)</sup>.

This new orientation towards Southern Asia would also correspond to the classical tenet of capitalism, viz., (market) equilibrium results from unhampered operation of interacting forces. It has been a paradox that the U.S.A., professing to owe allegiance to such "free play" philosophy, should have tried so hard to control the global environment in the realm of foreign policy.

In the final analysis, however, the U.S.A. will create its own realistic "market" in the Southern Asian state sys-



tem by the sheer force of its reduced presence. Despite all the surplus of slogans and popular identification of imperialism and neo-colonialism with the U.S.A. and her multinational corporations, powerful economic forces are accelerating today to complete the transition from the age of politics to an age of economics.

In today's technetronic age there is in operation a basic logic of technological development which has to be met in its own terms irrespective of political slogans and labels. A good example is the Soviet hunger for Western technology. To the extent that this tendency is reinforced, Southern Asia, irrespective of its domestic set-up, will have to adhere to it, since halting in the race for technology and economic development connotes today decay and disintegration. There is real and potential need in Southern Asia of U.S. markets as well as U.S. technological and organizational skills. Once the Southern Asian system achieves stability in its own way, economics will dominate the scene. The U.S.A., which is the world's leading technetronic and future-oriented society, can make a real contribution in economic engineering of these deficient states on a business-like basis. There is no room for doubting that creative economic participation of the U.S. will be actively sought<sup>22)</sup>, as the COMECON is seeking it now. Such a role would suit the U.S.A. better than the one of global homeostat. The Japanese record of a similar role may provide insights, and the domestic set-up of the states concerned should as little deter U.S. business-like attitude as does that of Indonesia<sup>23)</sup> or the communist bloc now.

#### Footnotes

- 1) See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Amerind Publishing Co., New Delhi 1972 (Indian ed.), Chapter I.
- 2) The term Southern Asia has been used to designate both South and Southeast Asia.
- 3) See Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff (eds.), *The Air War in Indochina*, (revised ed.), Beacon Press, Boston, 1972, p.v.

- 4) The 44th. amendment to the constitution of India introduced 59 changes in the latter document. Statesman, Calcutta, Sept. 2, 1976.
- 5) Karl E. Weber, "Serendipity Missed: Report on the Parliamentary Elections in Thailand 1975", in: Internationales Asienforum, Munich, 3 (1975), 302-322, p.322. The military has stayed a comeback in fall 1976.
- 6) The winding down of U.S. military presence in Thailand is a case in point. For the Philippines, see Tillman Durdin, "Philippine Communism", in: Problems of Communism, 3 (1976), Washington, D.C., 40-48.
- 7) See Herbert Feith, The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1962; for more recent developments, F. Renair, "Auf dem Weg zum Einparteiensstaat. Versuch einer Standortbestimmung des indonesischen politischen Systems", in: Internationales Asienforum, 1 (1973), 4-11, Peter Christian Hauswedell, "Sukarno's Foreign Policy Reassessed", ibid., 12-30, and Ulf Sundhausen, "The New Order of General Suharto", ibid., 52-66.
- 8) Rupert Emerson, From Empire to Nation, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta (Indian ed.), 1970, p.370.
- 9) Karl W. Deutsch, "On the Concepts of Politics and Power", in: James N. Rosenau (ed.), International Politics and Foreign Policy, The Free Press, New York, 1969, 255-260, p.260.
- 10) A good example of this is presented by Indonesia, which, despite its economic collaboration with the West, is not at all free from such suspicion towards the latter. See Sundhausen (footnote 7), p.57.
- 11) For an exposition of these concepts, see Almond, Gabriel A., and Powell, G. Bingham, Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach, Little, Brown & Co., Boston 1966, Chapter VIII.
- 12) See also Gunnar Myrdal, Asian Drama, Pelican 1968, Vol. I for his "institutional approach".
- 13) See, for instance, Vi Li, "Social Movements in Developing Countries", in: International Affairs, Moscow, 6 (1974), 12-18.
- 14) See repeated complaints of Brezhnev in this regard: 23rd. Congress of the CPSU, 1966, Novosti, Moscow, p.68, Brezhnev's report to the 24th. CPSU Congress, March 30, 1972, Information Bulletin, Nos. 7-8 (188-189), Vol. 9, Prague, 1972, p.74.
- 15) Even the concept of political development itself has



come under doubt. Some scholars doubt today the notion that developing societies are to move inevitably towards greater perfection with the passage of time. See report on the international seminar at Jaipur, India, held in February 1973, in: Internationales Asienforum, 1 (1973), 106-110.

- 16) In a cybernetic sense.
- 17) Statesman, 18 December, 1971.
- 18) See report on international conference from 14-17 November, 1974 in New Delhi on the Indian Ocean, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16 November 1974.
- 19) See, for instance, Ralph N. Clough, "East Asia", in: Henry Owen (ed.), The Next Phase in Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1973.
- 20) Multinational Corporations. Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Trade of the Committee on Finance. U.S. Senate, 93rd. Congress, Feb-March 1973, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., p.439 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce data).
- 21) W.W. Rostow, "The Role of the President in a World of Diffusing Power", reprinted with special permission from the author and the SAIS Review by the U.S. Information Service, Calcutta 1973 (mimeographed).
- 22) In fact, its ideology and bitterness left by war has not prevented Hanoi from evincing interest in U.S. technology and capital. However, the U.S.A. has not lifted its embargo on trade between the two countries. See Ellen J. Hammer, "Indochina: Communist but Nonaligned", in: Problems of Communism, 3 (1976), 1-17, p.17. The U.S.A. also unwisely blocks Vietnam's entry into the U.N., in: Statesman, 14 September 1976.
- 23) The U.S.A. leads foreign investors with 35 % share of all foreign investments in Indonesia. See F. Renair (footnote 7), p.10.