Post-nuclear South Asia

Toward an Alternative Concept of Power Politics for Bangladesh

by Khurshid Hamid

The creation of an interdependence matrix of economic and commercial relations through substantially increased cooperation and the quantification of the long-term interests for India of maintaining her economic relationship with Bangladesh and the damaging effects of even a temporary suspension of the relationship would serve as a foundation for our bargaining power with our overweening neighbour.

ONE has earlier written at some length on the definition and meaning of power politics and its dire implications in nuclearized South Asia. Bangladesh, already flood prone, is threatened with a veritable mudslide and deluge from the interplay of power politics in our back-, front-, no surrounding yard in South Asia. One should therefore now attempt to put posers towards developing an alternative philosophy of power politics, theoretically underpinning our policy of national security and equanimity in the radical scenario of nuclear weaponized South Asia.

One should at the outset make it abundantly clear that against the inculcation of the mainstream scholars and pundits one does not personally believe in power politics as a basis for the study of international relations today and that in the politics among nations the power of a nation or of a cluster of nations is the main determining factor when the chips are down. Hitler long ago had succinctly stated, "My great political opportunity lies in my deliberate use of power at a time when there are still illusions abroad as to the forces that mould history." Yet one chooses to flounder in the morass of obfuscation as to the ineluctable forces that drive mankind towards its unfulfilled destiny. One shall now try to elaborate on an alternative concept of power politics, which is or should be closer to realpolitik today and thereby more effective than traditional power politics in the present complex, fluid and interdependent world.

Professor Okonogi Keigo of Japan, whom one had conjured up in an earlier writing, has posited the thesis more than a decade ago that the international situation is in a transitional stage with the traditional Westphalian international order of military preparedness gradually advancing towards Immanuel Kant's ideal of a world order marked by perpetual peace through the establishment of a general collective security system. In the fleeting years since, the Soviet Union has broken up into a number of nation-states as obtained before the Bolshevik putsch of 1917 and the forward march in Central Asia in the late 1930's and the early 40's demonstrating that a) the aggrandizement of nations through brute power politics prove to be evanescing Cheshire cats in the medium run, and b) the accretion of superpower military prowess to practice power politics entails an intolerable suicidal burden and is thereby self-defeating in its ends. The rock-hard Soviet bloc of the Cold War era has also been pulverized, and the constituent countries are queuing up with alacrity and a glint in their eyes to join a much more enlarged general collective security system of the NATO. Whither then the traditional power politics in much of the first world and the less heard of second world?

Another giant leap forward for the global civil society has been taken in July this year with the almost consensus of the community of nation-states over the vehement opposition of the United States towards the establishment of the International Court of Crimes, appropriately in the country of my abode for the past more than four years, Italy, the epitome of the Renaissance half a millenium ago and thus the harbinger of modern Western civilization and culture predominant in the world today. The Court shall have inherent supranational powers among the signatory nation-states to try war crimes (with an initial seven-year moratorium to opt out), crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression , and to bring the culpable parties to the dock and pass binding sentences on them. Unfortunately nuclear weaponry and its use has been left out of the Court's purview. Nonetheless for the first time in mankind's long conflict-ridden history an international court will have the policing and incarceration clout of national municipal courts, and the long-felt uncivil gap betwixt the two has been narrowed. Will not this Court, once ratified it is likely to be activist, dampen somewhat the predilection of traditional power politics practitioners to indulge in prurient misadventures and wars with their neighbours?

One has written earlier that in today's moratorium world of nuclear deterrence and economic interdependence, international politics is shifting from a one-dimensional power game to a multi-dimensional game of strength and influence. Bargaining power in such an environment is most effective when it remains in latent form. Power by its inherent nature entails a burden as well a promise. The more power is realized in visible, concrete form, the more the burden grows in relation to potential placing restraints on freedom of action.

The People's China is a salient example of embedding the self-evident truth that power as potential provides the greatest bargaining power, remaining an anachronistically armed, moderate economic power for much of the hey-day of the Cold War, and yet reaping rich dividends in her negotiations with the then Soviet Union, the United States and the rest of the world, and she has come a long, long way forward since.

In this context Bangladesh must consciously realize that the source of her true strength lay in exploiting this principle of bargaining power in its latent or potential form by maintaining her inconsistency of status as militarily a lightly armed power despite her large population. If at any point of history India's political and military pressures on Bangladesh were to overreach the limits of tolerance, public opinion in our country would be aroused and once again fused to a crisis consensus (and our fellow countrymen seem to be singularly adept at only this form of consensus), leading to the mobilization of the nation's vast potential of manpower to conduct a prolonged faceless war of guerilla attrition against our enemy. The awareness held by India of this potential threat deters her from exerting undue pressure on Bangladesh.

One has also said that bargaining power today depends largely on having the ability to integrate the special interests scattered among the various spheres in a nation-state and raise the country's degree of governability. A political leadership that can integrate the different domestic special interests within Bangladesh and thereby pursue a more effective diplomacy is of vital interest for our future security. Only Government leadership can fully take into account the deep complexity of international relations today, adopt a long-term perspective, and provide a sense of direction and coordination worthy of a national interest. Given the traditional bureaucracy very adaptable and amenable to the country's political culture, it should be quite possible to build up Bangladesh's bargaining power and establish a credible security policy through inter-Ministry coordination within the framework of a cogent political system.

Finally, and this one has not written about earlier, in this economically globalized world, the more fungible a nation-state's strength is the better it serves as a basis for flexible bargaining. Power, unlike the purchasing power of money, lacks fungibility and adaptability. The effectiveness of power thus lies precisely in flexible reactions arrived at through the political and contextual analysis of a particular time and circumstance, that is , who is influencing whom on what issues. For this reason, and this is especially true of big brother nation-states, technological know-how and economic power, the latter includes external purchasing power and foreign aid, which are highly fungible, have proved to be devastatingly effective in international power politics. Witness in this regard the sharp, no-nonsense and sudden-death manner in which the United States debunked , demystified and dismantled the erstwhile Soviet Union and put final 'paid' to the Cold War.

For Bangladesh in this context the top priority should be an in-depth contextual analysis of her asymmetric political relationship with India. That is to say we should minutely scrutinize all straws in the wind with regard to the political aims and intentions of India's policy towards her neighbours and in the region, including Bangladesh, and attempt to exert an influence on such intentions to veer in a direction favourable to Bangladesh.

Furthermore, especially in this economically interdependent world, it is not unlikely that not only the use of arms but even economic sanctions, if applied with genuine political will and true grit, will prove cankerously damaging to long-term national interests. In the present-day world of nuclear standoff and potentially brisk proliferation, with India and Pakistan having arrived and pointing the way, it is imperative for the major powers to make detailed contextual analyses of their asymmetric relationships with other countries with regard to economic interdependence. For in the futuristic power politics the really painful pressures are likely to be brought to bear on deviating nation-states not through non-nuclear or nuclear arms threats, but through the possibility of a snapping of economic relations through I-mean-business sanctions or other means.

In Bangladesh's foreign policy perspective India looms large with cinerama effect. Hence the creation of an interdependence matrix of economic and commercial relations through substantially increased cooperation and the quantification of the long-term interests for India of maintaining her economic relationship with Bangladesh and the damaging effects of even a temporary suspension of the relationship would serve as a foundation for our bargaining power with our overweening neighbour.

In conclusion, one has trepidation that one has perhaps gone off on a tangent and dilated upon a utopian futurist concept of power politics not anchored on geopolitical realities. The only justifications one can muster are that all new philosophies of man striving to be born have an aura of utopia about them, and to quote the following evocative lines from Robert Frost:

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to Italy and Switzerland

Water Resources Management

People's Participation — a *Sine Qua Non*

by Jahir Uddin Chowdhury

Nearly one-fourth of the country i.e. about 60 per cent of the flood prone area is under the benefited area of flood control and drainage projects. However, flood control project itself suffers from flood damage and cost of damage to flood control embankments outweighs the damage to crops. Failure of flood control embankments during floods causes severe hazard in the protected area. Attention should be given to better management of existing projects.

BANGLADESH being a floodplain country located on the delta of three of the world's major rivers, has a long history of water management practices. Water conservation schemes like excavation of ponds for irrigation and drinking water supply existed since pre-Mughal period. During Mughal period, there was an institutional set-up which was responsible for construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and embankments, and re-excavation of canals, and water management with people's participation. This is actually the essence of integrated management, a concept advocated in modern water management practice. The Bangla Calendar is a reflection of harmonious adjustment of the production system with the annual water cycle. In fact, the water resources has played the key role in shaping the economy, society and culture of this riverine country.

But now, demand for water has grown many-fold because of rapid population growth and have increasingly come into conflict with sources due to lack of overall co-ordination. The widening gap between demand and supply of water is bringing severe socio-economic and environmental implications. On the other hand development is not possible without considerable exploitation of water resources. As a result water resources management in Bangladesh has become a challenging task.

Water Uses

In our country, agricultural sector is the dominant consumptive user. Both surface and groundwaters are used for crop agriculture. Presently about one-third of the net cultivated area is under irrigation. The projected irrigation demand for 20 years from now is 14,290 million cubic meters to provide irrigation to 6.90 million hectares out of 7.56 million hectares of irrigable land. Other important consumptive users are public health and industrial sectors. Drinking water supplies are mostly met from groundwater. The projected demand when expressed as percentage of total requirement, is 58 per cent for irrigation, less than 1 per cent for domestic and industrial water supply and 41 per cent for non-consumptive uses.

The important non-consumptive uses are for fisheries, navigation, ecology and salinity management. In Bangladesh, fish provides 50 per cent of caloric intake and 80 per cent of animal protein intake. Improvement in fish production requires an adequate supply of water. Internal water transport, which is an affordable means of transport, is dependent on minimum depth of water in the rivers. Adequate flow of water through streams are necessary for maintaining ecology and keeping salinity to an acceptable level. It has been estimated that 60 per cent of the dry season flow is needed for such non-consumptive uses.

Water Resources

Bangladesh is endowed with fair amount of water resources. Main sources of water are rainfall, river flow and groundwater. Availability varies with season. The minimum dry period availability of surface water in 1990 was 3,710 million cubic meters in the month of February and the maximum availability was 111,250 million cubic meters in the month of August. The available groundwater recharge was 21,088 million cubic meters. There is a big gap between demand and supply during dry season and water supply situation often turns critical. Utilization of water from the main rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, is only 5 per cent of the trans-boundary flow during March when water demand is maximum.

It is estimated that current yearly water use in Bangladesh is 20 per cent of its available water. Countries which have a ratio of water use of water availability exceeding 20 per cent are usually considered as those with highest potential for water crisis. Moreover, quality of water is rapidly becoming an important issue. Alarming situation due to arsenic contamination in groundwater can be cited as an example. Due to a particular use, water quality is often degraded to such an extent that it becomes unfit for any subsequent other uses no matter how much water is available. It is high time that we prepare ourselves with an appropriate water management plan encompassing both quantity and quality aspects of water, in order to safeguard our present and future.

Past Water Management Plans

Major institutional efforts for water resources development plan dates back to 1964 when a Master Plan comprising 58 large-scale flood control, drainage and irrigation projects was prepared. The objective of the plan was to increase agricultural (mainly rice) production to satisfy increasing national demand. The plan did not look into the needs of other water-use sectors and the potential impacts on the environment. Most of the Master Plan projects were implemented between the mid-1960s and late 1980s. A reorientation of water management policy occurred as per recommendation of the World Bank's 1972 Land and Water Sector Study. Accordingly, small scale projects such as low lift pump irrigation, local drainage improvement schemes and tubewell irrigation spread rapidly through the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1983, a National Water Plan (NWP) project was initiated by setting up a Master Plan Organization (MPO). The Phase I of NWP project was completed in 1986 and the Phase II in 1991. The objective of the NWP that covered a 20-year period from 1991 to 2010, was to maximize agricultural growth and production and contribute to achieving food-grain self-sufficiency while meeting the basic water needs of other users. In 1991, the MPO was restructured as the Water Resources Planning Organization (WARPO) with the objective to upgrade the NWP with an inter-sectoral focus and inter-disciplinary approach, particularly emphasizing environmental issues and people's participation. In the mean time Flood Action Plan (FAP) study, involving a set of 26 studies and pilot projects, was undertaken in 1989 and completed in 1995. A separate organization called Flood Plan Coordination Organization was also created which existed for the period 1989 to 1995. The FAP sparked off unprecedented public debate arising mainly out of the concern that the environmental impacts of structural solutions were not given the consideration. The decision to undertake FAP study ignoring the NWP, and subsequently another decision in 1995 to take a new study to integrate FAP and NWP, indicates the lack of proper direction for water management.

In March 1998, a National Water Management Plan (NWMP) project has started. It is a three-year project under the WARPO. The goal of the NWMP that covers a 25 year period from the year 2001, is to contribute to national economic development through rational development of water resources while protecting the natural environment and improving the quality of life of the citizens. Gradual changes from the narrow objective of the 1964 Master Plan to the wider objective of NWP and ultimately to the broad objective of NWMP reflects the recognition of growing concern for the protection of environment and sustainable development. Still, the NWMP project has started without a National Water Policy to provide guidance for the development of a comprehensive plan that would contribute to the achievement of national goals. This is like sailing a ship without a destination.

Overflowing waterbody in monsoon flood — Star file photo

Need for National Water Policy

National water policy is a prerequisite for the success of a water resource management plan. National water policies should aim at the implementation of the water development and management activities of Agenda 21 of Rio declaration in 1992. Thus the following aspects including many others not mentioned here need to be considered in the national policies :

- recommendation of actions towards conservation of quantity and quality of water resources in order to achieve sustainable water resources development;
- definition of water use rights and setting principles for allocation of available water resources in an environmentally sound, economically efficient and equitable manner in order to satisfy the present and future demands of the society;
- outline of the institutional responsibilities among sectoral agencies and organizations that deal with water resources and/or interfere with water regime, in order to achieve effective coordination for the integrated management of water resources; and
- guidance for peoples participation in order to establish transparency and accountability in planning, implementation and operation of water resources projects.

Uncertainty in Trans-boundary River Flow

There are 54 trans-boundary rivers. A major uncertainty in the management of river water in Bangladesh is the increasing upstream withdrawal during low flow when the demand for water is also very high. Consequently Bangladesh is facing severe socio-economic and environmental problems. It is extremely difficult to draw an effective water management plan when the quantity of trans-boundary river flow remains unknown. Cooperation among the co-basin countries to harness the waters of common rivers in an optimal way has become imperative. The opportunity cost of delay, both in terms of the potential benefits being foregone, and also in terms of the compounding environmental deterioration, indicates the urgency for agreement on water sharing and integrated watershed management. Experiences show that the problem can be resolved at the political level. The recent agreement on the sharing of Ganges water has brought a major change in the scenario.

Threat of Sea-level Rise

Sea-level rise poses a threat to the coastal regions and islands of Bangladesh. Estuarine circulation, mangrove forest ecosystem, saline intrusion into aquifers, storm surges, morphological processes and many other processes could be affected by sea-level rise. Better understanding and quantification of threats of sea-level rise are essential so that response strategies and mitigation measures can be developed and initiated.

Importance of Floodplain Processes and Functions

An important physiographic feature of Bangladesh is that except Chittagong region, rest of the area mainly consists of alluvial floodplain. One of the reasons for poor performance of water development projects and degradation of environment is the lack of understanding of floodplain processes and functions and their relationship with the rivers.

The annual hydrologic cycle of alluvial floodplain has some delicate temporal and spatial features. Important among them are strong interrelationship between surface water and groundwater and sensitive interdependence between land use and water use. The floodplain wetlands provide habitats for open water fisheries and many ecologically important flora and fauna species. The alluvial floodplain has beneficial hydraulic functions such as storage of flood water and attenuation of peak flood, augmentation of post-monsoon flow, recharge of groundwater aquifer, etc.

Experiences show that construction and operation of water development projects have often been hampered due to geomorphologic and socio-economic conditions that prevail in the alluvial floodplain. Natural processes such as river erosion, sedimentation, etc. have hindered intended functioning of interventions. On the other hand, it has been seen that physical interventions by interfering with the floodplain processes have created social tensions among different sections of the floodplain dwellers compromising the project performances. These experiences clearly show the need for maintaining harmony with the floodplain processes to the extent possible.

River bank erosion and shifting is a part of alluvial floodplain process. Poorer section of the society suffers most from the river bank erosion. It makes them root-less which is a major socio-economic problem in Bangladesh. They can not move away well ahead of the impending attack by the meandering river. This is because they do not have resources for such action. Measures should be taken to reduce economic vulnerability of this group of the society to river erosion hazard. Attention should be given to development of prediction tools and provision for assistance to the people.

Management of Flood and Drought Hazard

River flood is an annual phenomenon in Bangladesh. It is the most dominant component in the hydrologic cycle of the floodplain. Occasional large floods bring immense misery to the people. Rainfall is also very high during flood season. However, rainfall during monsoon has high temporal variability and sometimes a long dry spell causes drought.

Disruption of water supply because of excessive fall in the stream flow or groundwater level, also cause drought. Crops are subject to severe stress due to deficiency in soil moisture during droughts causing drastic reduction in the yield ranging from 20 to 70 per cent. Agricultural loss from droughts is likely to be more severe than that from floods.

Nearly one-fourth of the country i.e. about 60 per cent of the flood prone area is under the benefited area of flood control and drainage projects. However, flood control project itself suffers from flood damage and cost of damage to flood control embankments outweighs the damage to crops. Failure of flood control embankments during floods causes severe hazard in the protected area. Attention should be given to better management of existing projects. Vulnerability of the society to floods can be reduced by making communication lines, essential utility services and other infrastructures and properties flood proof. Flood forecasting and warning process should be made more useful and meaningful to the people.

Provision for supplementary irrigation reduces drought damage to crops. Development of reliable forecasting tools are necessary for better management of droughts. Risk based zoning of drought prone area would be helpful to workout strategies for drought management.

Management of Dry Season Water Demand

The dry season in Bangladesh, which occurs normally during November to April, is characterised by drastic reduction in the river flow and fall in the groundwater level when the demand for irrigation water is also quite high. Domestic water supply from groundwater and in-stream uses for navigation and ecology are subject to stress due to uncoordinated withdrawal of surface and groundwater. Conjunctive use of surface water and groundwater is essential for optimum utilisation of water resources. Measures should be directed to utilise water resources of the main rivers. Given that water resource is finite, strategies should be developed for influencing water demand and increasing water use efficiency rather than providing more water.

People's Participation

We begin by quoting from the report of a Committee of Parliament Members in 1964: "... we are sure that some very unhappy and untoward incident could have been avoided, if the local people and the intelligentsia had been taken into confidence by the East Pakistan WAPDA before formulating the schemes". WAPDA was created for the unified, coordinated development and utilisation of the water and power resources of the country. It is seen that the importance of people's participation was voiced by politicians more than three decades ago. We would continue to be delighted to get such guidance from our honourable Parliament Members. Because of lack of understanding of local indigenous production system and failure to take into account of social relationship and roles of culture, many water development projects have failed to show intended performance. People's participation and the associated consultation process should be a key feature in the water management. We like to emphasize that obtaining consent from the elected Local Government at the District Level should be a part of feasibility stage of water resources planning process.

In this age of open market economy, water is being considered as economic goods. Its price has to be fixed and cost of providing water has to be recovered from the beneficiaries. Water is also public goods. Right to enjoy the benefit of this environmental resource can not be denied, but at the same time unwise use of this scarce resource should be discouraged. Cost recovery rate is very poor in public sector irrigation water projects. Evidences show that people are willing to pay if required water supply is ensured at the time of need. Therefore pragmatic cost recovery policies can be effective means for water demand management. One of the reasons of poor recovery is that people were not involved at the planning stage of different water projects and their place in the operation and management of the projects were never defined.

Integration of Environmental Considerations into Decision Making

The nature of a water resources project is such that it brings benefits to a certain section of population at the cost of another section, it may give benefit to one sector at the expense of other sectors, and more importantly it causes a degree of impact on the ecology. Social and environmental impacts can hardly be translated into monetary units. Calculation of economic return therefore can not be the only guide in decision making. There should be equity in the distribution of social costs and benefits among the stakeholders. The FAP studies followed a multi-criteria analysis which brought costs, benefits, and social and environmental impacts in a single framework. Such multi-criteria approach is an improvement in the decision making process over the past practices. Weights for various quantifiable and non-quantifiable impacts should be established by rigorous public consultation process.

Integrated Water Management

Water and land use activities in one sector affect the programmes of other sectors and the overall environment. Here are some examples. Flood control interventions have caused extensive adverse impacts upon open water fisheries resources of the floodplain. The flood control polders in the south-west region have caused serious water logging problem. The 1989 Master Plan of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport finds the coastal embankment project of Bangladesh Water Development Board as the main cause of deterioration of water ways in southern regions. The situation analysis report on water supply and sanitation for the Directorate of Public Health Engineering in 1994, observes that increasing number of drinking water supply tubewells became inoperative for two to three months a year towards the end of dry season due to expansion of mechanized tubewells for irrigation by groundwater. Large scale extraction of groundwater is being blamed for arsenic contamination. Construction of roads by Local Government Engineering Department and Roads and Highways Department has brought changes in the water regime. Pollution due to domestic and industrial waste disposal and uncontrolled use of agro-chemicals is a serious issue for water quality.

It is seen that use of water at a location for one purpose has implications for uses elsewhere for other purpose. Therefore management of water resources need to take an integrated, comprehensive view of the hydrologic cycle and man's interactions with it. This requires integration of measures for the protection and conservation of all potential sources of water, integration of all aspects of supply and demand within and across sectors, optimization of water resources allocations for all water using sectors and agencies, and establishment of independent mechanism for regulation and monitoring of water quantity and quality. For integrated management of water resources, development of comprehensive system analysis model including economy-wide model that can incorporate water sector investment plans and its macro-economic linkage, is required.

Institutional Capability

Integrated management of water resources requires an institution that is capable of dealing with a job which is multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional in nature. It should have capability for implementation of public participation and effective coordination among different sectoral agencies so that integration of land and water use management can be achieved. WARPO is responsible for development of national water management plan. Multi-disciplinary structure of WARPO is essential. It should have adequate resources so that monitoring and evaluations can be carried out. It should be equipped with a versatile data base so that continuous assessment of water resources and ecological systems can be made.

Several national water planning exercises have been carried out during last four decades with the assistance of foreign experts. But the capability for preparing national water management plan is yet to be developed. The heart of the problem is the absence of an effective institutional set-up and the absence of national water policy as well.

The writer is Professor, Institute of Flood Control and Drainage Research, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka.