

# South Asia2...And Let Sky Be the Limit

By Ekram Kabir

HAS South Asia as a whole performed better in 2000? Has it become a safer place for its citizens? There may be only one answer: 'no'. But can't we reverse the situation?

Just look at ourselves! Without a shred of doubt South Asia is now one of the riskiest trouble spots in the world, primarily due to the enmity between India and Pakistan. The Indian ambition for a major-power role in the region and Pakistan's frantic search for parity with India not only contributed to the involvement of extra-regional powers in South Asia, but also fuelled an arms race. The fallout of this deadly phenomenon is also being reflected in the behaviour among the smaller nations. In almost all countries civil and ethnic strife have been raging for years together with little hope of immediate solution.

In India outlawed guerrilla groups are active in its north-eastern region. They are fighting for long for what they call their independent homelands in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Islamic militants are creating havoc in Kashmir through what India claims as direct support from Pakistan. Under ground Naxalites together with various other insurgent groups are active in some other states as well, particularly in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The rise of the *Hindutva* and waning of the influence of secular forces have already caused spine-chilling sense of insecurity among the minority religious groups - particularly the Muslims and the Christians. In Sri Lanka, ethnic strife between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, now in its 18th year, reached new heights in the year 2000. In Nepal, the Maoist guerrillas are gradually spreading their tentacles and posing to be a threat for the government within barely four years of their launching of the People's War. In Bhutan, the Nepalese settlers are becoming restive due to discriminatory treatment, being meted by the authority and indigenous ruling elite. In Pakistan, strife between different Muslim sects (Sunni-Shia-Quadani) as well as between MQM are causing consternation.

No wonder the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) and US State Department have termed 'South Asia as the hotbed of tension'!

## Arsenals of the Region

JAPANESE Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori visited India and Pakistan to build pressure on them to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Given Japan's commitment to the objective of nuclear non-proliferation, it was quite expected. The nuclear tests conducted by India on May 11 and 13, 1998, drew condemnation from Japan. It also imposed economic sanctions against India. Japan tried to stop Pakistan from following suit, offering economic incentives and waning of serious consequences in case Pakistan went ahead. Clearly, Pakistan didn't listen. When it tested on May 28 and 30, 1998, Japan condemned the action and imposed sanctions. The sanctions have caused more damage in Pakistan's economy than it did to India. Over the past two years, while the nuclear dialogues with India and Pakistan has been conducted by the US, Japan had assigned a special role to itself, on account of the fact that it is the largest source of economic aid for these two countries. As the economies of the two countries were affected by the withholding of Japanese assistance, with Pakistan facing greater difficulties, Japan has been urging them to sign the CTBT.

There has been extensive debate on the CTBT and NPT, but both India and Pakistan have their own versions on arms control. Pakistanis think that there is no fundamental contradiction or conflict between Pakistan's nuclear capability and the objectives of non-proliferation. Islamabad's nuclear policies, argue pro-nuclear lobby in Islamabad, have been consistent with the key provisions of the treaty. Withholding signatory of the NPT, Islamabad has been fulfilling its obligations, they say. On non-proliferation

matters, Islamabad has also been willing to sign legally binding agreements if *New Delhi also does so*. But it's time for both India and Pakistan to ask themselves some key questions: who benefits from their nuclearisation programmes? Who will they use these weapons against? Why are they making this subcontinent a hot bed of extreme rivalry?

## Controlled Democracy in Pakistan

The military takeover was challenged at the Supreme Court Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has said he will abide by a court ruling to restore democracy within three years. It is the first time the General gave a timetable for the return of civilian rule, since he overthrew the government of Nawaz Sharif. Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled that the 12 October coup, which brought General Musharraf to power, was justified, but set a timetable for a return to democracy. "We accept the Supreme Court verdict in the right spirit, it is a balanced judgement," said General Musharraf. General Musharraf said that when he had taken over in Pakistan, he had been faced by a sea of problems.

Musharraf has been evasive about setting a date for a process which would lead to the handing of power over to a democratically-elected government. He in August unveiled a comprehensive devolution plan for the country, aimed at transferring substantial power to hundreds of elected district and town committees. The first election for these local bodies was held in December and it would continue till August 2001. The main issues he is currently facing are tough and organised ones after a year the General is at the helms. While Musharraf, during his visits to friendly countries, encountered only restrained emphasis on restoration of democracy or on the need for calibrating the accountability process to keep it short of vengefulness, the liberal democracies of the West kept a normative pressure for return to democracy according a conditional and somewhat limited acceptance of the ground realities in Pakistan. The most crucial factor, namely the support of the US, however, confronted Pakistan with a comprehensive agenda that others share but Washington pursued in a totally explicit manner. At the end of the year, Musharraf defended his decision to allow former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to go into exile in Saudi Arabia, saying: "I have made the decision to exile Nawaz Sharif, rising above my own personal interest. I am not for sale." He said he believed that it marked a "new era" in Pakistan's national politics, ending the domination of domestic scene by Sharif and Benazir Bhutto - another former prime minister who is currently in self-imposed exile. He called on the people of Pakistan to consider the situation objectively and not to panic. The announcement of Sharif's exile provoked surprise and criticism. Some people thought it was a sign the military government was reneging on its commitments to stamp out corruption. But the General said that world leaders had voiced approval for his "bold" decision which was based on "tolerance and moderation".

## Red Alert in Nepal

AS the ruling Nepali Congress was engaged in its never-ending internal feud, Maoist rebels mounted their deadly attack at different places of Nepal - the recent being at Dunai, the headquarters of remote northern district of Dolpa, bordering Tibet (on September 25) killing 14 policemen and injuring nearly 40 and abducting 12 others. The Maoist attacks exposed not only the vulnerability of the ill-equipped and non-motivated police force, it also laid bare deep mistrust and lack of coordination among security agencies in Nepal. The scathing government was reneging on its commitments to stamp out corruption. Minister did not help to bridge the crisis of confidence between the home administration and the army - which has traditionally been loyal to the monarchy. As a result the dissident leaders within the ruling party asked resignation of Prime Minister Girija

Prasad Koirala. Though the premier posed a tough posture, he swiftly controlled the damage.

Some time back, the rebels had asked the government to create a 'minimum environment' for dialogue but had later withdrawn their proposal saying that they will not hold dialogue with the 'repressive' Koirala government.

As the domestic and international pressure is mounting against the government as well as the rebels to start peace initiative, both the parties seemed to be trying to put themselves on a strong position from where they could bargain hard, if they sat across the table of negotiations. The government has initiated process to set up a 15,000-strong 'armed police force' under the Home Ministry to combat insurgent activities within the country. The rebels, in have started recruiting more guerrillas in their strongholds to take on the government forces.

All this indicated toward possibi-



ties of more bloodshed in future. According to official figures, nearly 1500 people have lost their lives since February 1996 when the Maoist party launched its 'people's war' in mid-western hills. The militant outfit has already lured hundreds of poor and unemployed youth into its fold. Prime Minister Koirala has said the government will launch a package of administrative, political, economic and development activities to counter the insurgency. Whether the 'package' will achieve desired results remains to be seen.

## Hope in Lanka

A PALL of gloom engulfed the Indian Ocean island-republic. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's 84-year-old mother Srimawapo Bandernaike, the world's first woman prime Minister, died of heart attack in the early hours on October 10 - the polling day in Sri Lanka. The poll was a setback for Kumaratunga, rudely shattering her dream of ending the 18-year ethnic insurgency in the north-eastern region of the country. Neither the ruling seven-party People's Alliance of Kumaratunga nor the opposition United National Party (UNP) of former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe secured absolute and convincing majority. However, Kumaratunga didn't get the required majority she needed her proposed constitutional amendment regarding the devolution plan.

However, at the end of the year Colombo suddenly found itself the focus of frenzied diplomatic activity. British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Peter Hain, breezed through Colombo talking of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Irish-type solution to Sri Lanka's long ethnic strife. Then came US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Karl Inderfurth. In the meantime, the Norwegian peace

envoy, Erik Solheim, has been in Sri Lanka for quite some time, mediating peace between the government and the LTTE. So, it's not merely Norway but the US, the UK and also India are actively interested in forging a solution to Sri Lanka's problem and are willing to shoulder part of the burden of negotiation and facilitation.

There is no question that the core of the ethnic conflict has to be resolved through peace talks on substantive political issues. This is a position that the government has been insisting upon. The continuation of the war, with its fluctuating fortunes for the two sides, is destroying the country and causing poverty and suffering to its people. The LTTE's cease-fires offer was a unilateral one and has been expressed as a precondition for such political talks. But the government can turn the issue of the cease-fires itself into an issue that requires bilateral talks, and perhaps even multilateral ones which involve the Norwegian facilitators.



A genuine peace process would require that the two sides would seek to work together to resolve their problems. They would not act unilaterally to embarrass, corner or force the other's hand. This is what the government did when it came out with its devolution package in 1996. The government described this set of constitutional reforms as a 'peace package'. But since it was a unilateral construct, without the LTTE's input, the devolution package was rejected by the LTTE. The LTTE described the devolution package as an instrument in the government's two-pronged military and political strategy to corner and marginalise them.

Sri Lanka has come a long way, and this opportunity to sit across the table should not be missed.

## Breaking the Ice in Kashmir

FIRST a ceasefire announcement by a prominent pro-Pakistan militant group in Kashmir, then India's announcement to talk. The hope for peace loomed after a sea of bloodshed for an unusually long time. Even like this had not happened in many years in the trouble-torn region. But the situation seemed to have gone back to square one, when the Hizbul Mujahideen, much to Kashmiri people's dismay, called off its ceasefire and directed its field commanders to resume fighting against Indian forces in Kashmir.

The old Indo-Pak bitterness was back again, overshadowing the prospect for peace. New Delhi and Islamabad have blamed each other for the breakdown of ceasefire. The group called off its ceasefire after India refused to enter three-way peace talks which involve Pakistan. The Pakistani government, on the other hand, accused the Indian authorities of negative and insincere responses, which it said had destroyed the possi-

bility of a peace process. For its part, India said Pakistan had derailed 'the process by putting pressure on Hizbul Mujahideen - whose leaders are based in Pakistan - to end the ceasefire.'

There were true scope for dialogue. The Hizb members, who declared their unilateral ceasefire on July 24, said they were grateful that India government had not set any preconditions for the dialogue. But the meeting was overshadowed by a wave of separatist violence, which claimed more than 100 civilian lives. Visiting the sites of the killings, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee described the deaths as a "conspiracy by Pakistan". He accused Pakistan-backed militants of carrying out the acts - a charge that has been denied by General Pervez Musharraf. Kashmiris who started praying and hoping for a complete stop of bloodshed again became frustrated. The endless violence has already taken its toll on the people of Kashmir. The historic meetings between government representatives and the leaders of the Hizbul Mujahadeen raised their hopes. But while some people were optimistic that dialogue would restart, others said the ceasefire negotiations are unlikely to lead to lasting progress.

The bilateral aspect of Indo-Pak relations for India's preconditions for resuming a dialogue with Pakistan on the latter ending cross-border terrorism. This is vital for any trust to be established, but is inexorably linked to internal violence ending. This is where a political dialogue between all political parties is required. Several forums have begun this process, but more needs to be done to end the cult of the gun.

As the mood was in favour of peace, when Indian Prime Minister again declared ceasefire, and the Kashmiris wanted a solution which would be lasting. Both Indian government and the All Party Hurriyat Conference announced steps to take the peace process to a logical conclusion. The Hurriyat decided to send a delegation to Pakistan to talk to militant leaders and the government in Pakistan. As efforts are under way, the coming months may see the ice breaking on the Kashmir tangle and the year 2000 will be remembered as the one in which the search for peace genuinely began.

## Blessed by Uncle Sam

US PRESIDENT Bill Clinton's visit in March through the in the subcontinent left Bangladesh, India and Pakistan busy with their foreign policy issues. After winning a big hearts in Dhaka, the US President's days in India and a brief stopover in Islamabad were certainly meaningful in South Asia's troubled context. The visit has also stirred up many minds to predicate the US factor in South Asia, especially amid perennial Indo-Pak rivalry. In exploring ties with America, both India and Pakistan seemed serious about their relations with the world's lone superpower and initiated their diplomatic manoeuvres, although in separate ways, to gain confidence of Washington.

After the visit, a certain tendency in the United States to look at South Asia through the prism of India-Pakistan problems has lessened, but changed the direction. US President's visit gave rise to some questions: How much more India has succeeded to align itself with the US? Given the present situation, what are the avenues through which Pakistan can again gain confidence of the US? What are the significant 'future' aspects on Indo-US 'multidimensional' relationship? Is the US approach towards C T B T v i s - à - vis India and Pakistan different or discriminatory? Given the present situation in South Asia, how even-handed is the US approach as far as India and Pakistan are concerned? And how close the two rivals have come in holding talks in mitigating the tension between them?

Besides promising increased US assistance to Bangladesh, he announced \$97 million for food aid and

\$8.6 million towards reducing child labour. This certainly seems a reward for Bangladesh for being a moderate Islamic nation, and an indicator of the economic compulsions of US foreign policy. But this ongoing diplomatic *bonhomie* was unthinkable 30 years ago in 1971 is in stark contrast to the time when the US was regarded by many Bangladeshis as an incarnation of evil.

## The Ultimate Dream

SOUTH Asian entrepreneurs, an optimistic bunch, want to see more often than not a half-empty glass as a glass half-filled with water. With barely adequate education facilities, a very great percentage of doctor and engineers in the world come from South Asia. If 21 per cent of all Microsoft's engineers are Indians, at least 6 per cent are Pakistani, making 27 per cent from these two countries of South Asia alone. On the other end of the spectrum, most cab drivers in New York are from South Asia. The oil-rich Middle East being mostly built on the strength of the sweat of South Asian labourers. South India is well advanced in information technology, Bangalore becoming the second computer software city to Silicon valley. One can take an even bet that within two years Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan will play catch up. The downside is that 35-40 per cent of the population of South Asia is well below the poverty line. Adding the one billion plus population of India with the 130-140 million each of Pakistan and Bangladesh, with about another 40 million making up the rest of South Asia, percentage-wise a cool 500 million plus are thus living in sub-human conditions. Only about a 300 million (give or take 10 million) enjoy more than reasonable comfort, the lower middle class lives on a fail-safe line between poverty and comfort, prone to both human and natural disasters. We must turn adversity in South Asia into prosperity, fully exploiting the potential of the people and resources of this region so as to benefit all the population. Can it be done? One feels it can be done, rather it needs to be done if we are to avoid economic and political apocalypse, what to talk of the nuclear Sword of Damocles that hangs over our head. South Asia is already an economic juggernaut, but the India-Pakistan confrontation and because the economic resources are not coordinated, we do not have a place on the pedestal. The West is only eyeing th region with dollar signs in its eyes because of the vast potential to exploit for their manufactured goods. So why are we not exploring mutually beneficial opportunities, particularly when proximity gives us a distinct advantage in freight costs? If Pakistan's farmers know that their surplus wheat will sell in India and Bangladesh, they will produce many millions of tons more than the 500,000 meant for export this year. In return Indian coal and iron ore is far more economically feasible for us than from Australia and other places. Why should we go outside South Asia for tea? And so on. As a vast market that gives a tremendous economy of scale for mass production, South Asia is bigger than what China is and look where China has gone from a standing start only two decades ago.

What we need is serious intellectual inter-action, not snide remarks. South Asia has tremendous potential, our raw material resources are yet to be fully tapped. As a vast internal market, we have the economy of scale with a distinct freight advantage to become a colossal economic juggernaut. That should be the vision for the future, together to be an economic power to surpass what China has now become. Look at the problems, not as Indians or Pakistanis, or Bangladeshis or Sri Lankans, but as South Asians. We can solve the Kashmir problem in the South Asian context. If that should happen, for the peoples of South Asia the sky is the limit. If this is not a happy augury, what is?

# Local Foes and Foreign Friends

Harun ur Rashid writes from Canberra

FOREIGN POLICY BANGLADESH, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka share many common history and heritage and all except Nepal (Nepal was under the British security umbrella) shared a common colonial experience under the British until all the seven became sovereign independent countries. The region covers about 3.3 per cent of the surface area of the world while it is inhabited by 21 per cent of the world's population.

Since foreign policy is largely embedded on economic and military strength, a few vital statistics of the South Asian nations are worth mentioning. All the seven countries are in their bottom of their national indicators compared to the countries in South East Asia. The combined GDP of South East Asian

countries are about \$800 billion while the total GDP of all seven South Asian countries is around \$500 million (India alone is about \$370 billion) and constitutes 1.5 per cent of world's GDP.

In the global context, 32 rich individuals in industrialised countries are reported to have assets exceeding the total GDP of all South Asian nations. According to UN Human Development report 50 per cent of the world's poor live in the region although it consists of 25 per cent of the global population. More than 50 per cent of the world's illiterates live in the region and more than 50 million children are unschooled.

There are examples where regional countries came together and co-ordinate their foreign policy, such as the 15-nation European Union had set a common goal when it waged a war with Yugoslavia. Initially Asean group of countries

was united by a shared fear of communism and their policies in this regard were common. Given the poverty in South Asia, it was expected that the major direction of the foreign policy of the South Asian nations would be targeted to the maintenance of peace and a common goal of poverty alleviation. The real enemy in the region is poverty but hostility between the India and Pakistan had clouded the perception of national security and as a result the people suffer.

The foreign policy of South Asian nations should have ideally set a common goal, such as an emphasis on economic diplomacy with a view to attracting foreign direct investment, settlement of bilateral disputes peacefully and not to pose a threat to each other. But the reality is otherwise.

## Factors in formulation of foreign policy

Foreign policy of South Asian nations cannot be divorced from their national policy because foreign policy is the other side of the coin of domestic policy. Foreign policy appears to be merely the extension of the domestic policy and national interests. Since national interests differ from nation to nation, the foreign policy is bound not to conform to each other.

The formulation of foreign policy has primarily four broad underpinnings. First is the impact of domestic pressures on the policy. Domestic pressures

are often pressed to advance "national aspirations", the perceived will of the dominant majority of the populations.

Second the limitations of the external environment within which the nations have to pursue their policies. It is worthwhile to remember that besides big powers, international and regional organisations have great impact on national policies. The poorer the region is, the more vulnerable it becomes to such bodies because the region needs development assistance from such entities for their economic growth and progress.

Third, the stronger nations rule over the weaker ones. The adage 'might is right' appears to be the relevant in the 21st century as it was in the past. Gun-bout diplomacy has been replaced by missiles and nuclear bombs. The strategy remains the same only the method is now different.

Fourth, the perception of national security by each nation has a significant impact on its foreign policy. If the countries in the region have different understanding of their national security, the foreign policy would be vastly different. Each one will attempt to align with a major global power to keep the perceived threat at bay.

In the backdrop of the existing environment, the involvement of external powers in security strategy has further complicated the scene in the region. During the cold war the US and former Soviet Union had found their allies in India or Pakistan in the region. India concluded a Friendship Treaty in 1971 with the former Soviet Union while Pakistan was party to military alliances with the US from mid-50s.

Furthermore the security of South Asia seems to be intricately linked with China. (China's border is only 100 kilometres from Bangladesh in the north over the Himalayas). In regional security the shadow of China looms large, especially after the China-India war of 1962. Political analysts believe that India appears to take care to correct the asymmetry in power relationship and restore its strategic balance of power with China. If China acquires arms, it will invariably have a corresponding impact on India and in turn Pakistan will respond to India's action. It is a triangular reaction in which one action sets in motion the other in quick succession.

It is argued that external involvement in a bilateral dispute is objected to by India while Pakistan welcomes it in the region. It is also argued that India does not want the presence of a third power in the region without direct or indirect consent or involvement of India. In recent times it was reported that the

proposed long-term Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Bangladesh and the US was not to the liking of India. Bangladesh reportedly did not proceed further.

## Main planks of foreign policy of South Asian nations

India is the giant of all in the region. One may say that Indian nationalism and self-image are fundamentals in its foreign policy. It would not be incorrect to say that the desire by Indians as a great nation permeates their society. This perceived role by the Indians, it is argued, emanated from the vision contemplated by the first Prime Minister of India Jawahar Lal Nehru. Nehru in his book 'Discovery of India' (1944) classed India as one of the four countries (other three being America, Russia and China) on which the future of the world would depend.

The aspiration of India's dominant role has many regional ramifications. One of them appears to be that the other six countries in the region may take into account the strategic and security interests of India. To put bluntly, no country in the region should acquire arms and equipment from a third country that could be perceived a threat to India. Another corollary seems to be that no outside power should intervene or interfere on issues pertaining to the region without direct or indirect consent or involvement of India. The rejection by India of a peace-making role of any third power, even of the UN, in the Kashmir dispute, could be cited as an instance in point. India insists on resolution of disputes through bilateral negotiations. There is a view that in such situation India gains an advantage over the other party.

There is a view that India sees China as the mother of all its security concerns' from the Bay of Bengal to the Persian Gulf. China's modernisation of weapons programme and the presence of its troops in Tibet worry India's military community. It is further argued that China had taken advantage of Myanmar's isolation to spread its hold in the Indian Ocean region and to ensure the control of vital sea-lanes by drawing Myanmar tightly into its sphere of influence. This being the case, India's policy appears to keep strategic balance with China in the Asia Pacific region.

India, being wary of the growing military power of China, is expected to look increasingly to the West and for energy it will strengthen its ties with Persian Gulf states. India appears to believe that strength respects strength. India's pre-occupation with China and Pakistan as major threats to its security seems to be the major underpinnings of its foreign policy.

Pakistan, on the other hand, does not seem to accept India as a dominant power in the region. It believes in parity with India and Pakistan security policies appear to be linked to India's actions. It is the bitter rivalry between India and Pakistan that has seen both countries in a constant state of military preparedness.

The restoration of balance of power by Pakistan within the region was demonstrated by the for-tat nuclear test in May 1998 by Pakistan. On 29 May 1998 the former Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif sought to justify the nuclear tests and said that as a self-respecting nation we had no choice left to us. Our hand was forced by the present Indian leadership's reckless action."

Pakistan's continuing friendship with China is an important ingredient in its foreign policy because it wants to settle the score with India and to restore the strategic balance in the region. Pakistan's foreign aims of Pakistan with the Islamic countries is to gain influence so as to counter balance India's strength in the region. It appears that it is difficult to disentangle Pakistan's foreign policy from national prestige, domestic politics and perceived threat from India. The bottom line appears to be that Pakistan's policy is largely reactive to India's action.

The rest five countries, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka have been placed in difficult positions in their pursuit of foreign policy. There is a view that neither can they ignore nor annoy India. If any country ignores either by omission or commission basic strategic interests of India, it is alleged that India may unleash the forces of destabilisation within the 'recalcitrant' country. There is a view that in such situation, either India would attempt to stir social tensions by exploiting or inducing the dissident groups in that country or would keep key bilateral issues pending to the detriment of the interests of the other country. It is argued that the foreign policy of these countries may not overlook India's strategic interests. This appears to be a both geographical and political reality.

In foreign policy of these countries, one important element appears to be that they have to balance their relations between India and a major power, say China or the US. There is a view that if a country becomes too close with China, India may not be comfortable as China may unduly influence the policies of the other country to the detriment of India's interests. Often it is difficult for these countries to maintain a correct balance in their relationship between India and a major power. It seems almost

## FACES OF THE YEAR

