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SPEAKERS at an international seminar in Dhaka held on 18 January opined that South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) couldn't fulfil the peoples' expectation because the leaders of the region lack political commitment. What was more important at the seminar is that the speakers demanded a "visa-free South Asia" where peoples from the entire region would move freely as citizens of a union the South Asian Union.

Well, no-one would deny the fact that SAARC is still far away from realizing the dreams that the peoples of the eight countries nurture. However, the demand for a "visa-free South Asia" isn't an old demand. The regional activists as well as members of the civil society have been putting this demand forward for quite some time. This demand would certainly be supported by any citizen of South Asian countries, but the questions would arise: is it a proper time to seek visa-free movement among the member-states? Would the political leaders of these countries even consider this demand?

The reason why this demand may not at all be considered because SAARC as a regional body has for years grappled with inter-state, intra-state and regional conflicts. Inter-state conflicts and the bilateral interests of member-states have a decisive influence on the achievements of SAARC. The lack of trust among member states has often manifested itself in the ineffective administration of several of the initiatives taken by the SAARC. Moreover, the regional body has also been influenced by external players and other regional organizations.

Apart from the continuing India-Pakistan conflict, a concern that has often come up at SAARC forums is the dominant position of bigger states, particularly India, in the regional set-up. The discrepancy of size and power between India, a

nation of over 1 billion people, and all its neighbours, leads to natural concerns among the latter about India's dominance in the region and potential interference in their affairs. At different times this has been a significant strand in the policy thinking of states such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and has led them to seek security assistance first and foremost from outside South Asia when they need it.

If we look at Kashmir, it has been a dispute which has resulted in two major wars in the region. Years of conflict over Kashmir issue have created an atmosphere of deep mistrust between the two countries. Given the current situation, if India and Pakistan don't change their mind set and reduce and forget the animosity that has existed for several decades, these two countries would not be ready for visa-free movement.

Then there's Siachen issue between them. Siachen Glacier region is the highest battleground on earth, where India and Pakistan have fought intermittently since April 1984. Both countries maintain permanent military presence in the region at a height of over 6,000 metres. The site is one of the most eminent examples of mountain warfare.

Both the countries have wished to disengage from the costly military outposts. However, after the Pakistani incursions during the Kargil war in 1999, India abandoned plans to withdraw from Siachen unless there's an official recognition of the current line of control by Pakistan, wary of further Pakistani incursions if they vacate the Siachen Glacier posts without such recognition.

At Sir Creek, the dispute lies in the interpretation of the maritime boundary line between Kutch and Sindh. Before India's independence, the provincial region was a part of Bombay Presidency of British India. After '47, Sindh became a part of Pakistan while Kutch remained a part of India. Pakistan lays claim to the entire creek. Obviously, India

Visa-free South Asia?

says the opposite.

Both Islamabad and Delhi are having dialogue regarding the Baglihar dam being built over River Chenab in Indian-administered Kashmir.

They are tangled in a bigger conflict at present. On several occasions

tries will have issues against each other regarding terrorism.

Now, if you have a look at the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the Afghan government doesn't recognize the Durand Line as the official border between the two states, claiming that the Durand Line



What seems more important among the SAARC countries is "conflict resolution"

there have been blames from both sides - India and Pakistan - on each other for carrying out terrorist activities or supporting such acts in their countries. As long as the global war on terror continues, these two coun-

Agreement has been void in the past due to violations by Pakistan as well as other reasons. Pakistan, on the other side, issued a warning to Afghanistan that it would not "tolerate any violations of its borders".

Then again, Pakistan has decided to shut down refugee camps under increasing pressure to crack down on crossborder militancy.

On the India-Bangladesh, Dhaka wants a fair share of Ganga river by opposing the construction of Farrakha Barrage in India. The alleged illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into India has been an objection from the Indian side for a long time. If the illegal migration is a fact, New Delhi would never agree to a visa-free region. And when one looks at the barbed-wire fence around Bangladesh, one should not ever dream of a visa-free South Asia. India has not raised the fence for allowing "movements"; it wants to prevent movements.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it has recently lodged a protest against Indian border guards' shooting down innocent Bangladeshis. Indian border force routinely gun down civilians crossing the border with Bangladesh despite negligible evidence of any crime. Over 900 Bangladeshi nationals have been killed by the BSF over the last decade, many of them when they crossed into Indian territory for cattle rustling or other smuggling activities. Bangladesh may have shown very soft attitude while lodging the protest, the voices against border killings is likely to gain strength in Bangladesh. And this may become an irritant in Dhaka-Delhi ties.

In northern South Asia, Nepal and Bhutan have been locked in diplomatic brawl over repatriation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. And due to the open border between India and Nepal, thousands of them have entered India. These refugees represent different Nepalese ethnic and caste groups, but it does not mean that they have directly migrated to Bhutan from Nepal. Lots of them have migrated from different parts of eastern and north-eastern India as well. Nearly 100,000 Bhutanese refugees are resettled in the camps

in Jhapa and Morang districts. Though they live in the closed camps with barbed-wire fencing, their movements outside are not restricted, and they are also able to cross the fence easily. This has affected the natural, social and economic environment of the surrounding areas, because they are engaged in illegal cutting of trees in Indian government forests, are engaged in business and work as cheap labour thereby affecting the business and employment of the local community. It is also alleged that a lot of Bhutanese refugees have been able to secure Nepalese citizenship through illegal means.

It is not known when the Bhutanese refugee problem will be solved.

Now, the above issues are just a few conflicts and disputes that are working as stumbling blocks for South Asia to prosper as a region. And as long as these problems persist among the member-states, a "visa-free" South Asia would only be a dream. The real visa-free region is, in fact, is long way off. Therefore, it would be an immensely futile effort on part of regional activists to demand a visa-free region.

What seems more important among the SAARC countries is "conflict resolution". Apart from the conflicts between member-states, there is also disagreement among them on the need for a South Asian conflict resolution mechanism to deal with bilateral disputes. India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are not in favour of conflict resolution as a domain of the SAARC. However, the SAARC has shown potential for emerging as a forum for dialogue, negotiation, preventive diplomacy and confidence and peace-building.

The urgent task would be to promote peace-building through conflict resolution. Any activism in the region without resolving conflicts would be a waste of time.

The writer is a journalist.

Egypt braces for mass protests as army holds back

EGYPTIANS plan mass marches on Tuesday in their campaign to oust President Hosni Mubarak, reassured by the all-powerful army, which has said their demands are legitimate and that it will not fire on them.

As Mubarak announced a new cabinet that saw the demise of a widely feared interior minister, and the newly appointed vice president offered talks with the opposition, protesters pushed ahead with a singular goal of forcing the president from office.

They announced an indefinite general strike and called for a "march of a million" in the capital on Tuesday, the eighth day of an uprising that has claimed at least 125 lives in clashes between demonstrators and police.

Another million-strong march was planned in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria, as national train services were cancelled in an apparent bid to stymie protests.

The new demonstrations will come as the hated police have returned to the street after a mysterious two-day absence that protesters said was a ploy to sow a sense of insecurity.

But while it remains unknown what posture police will adopt in the face of the strike and marches, the army stated clearly that it would not confront the demonstrators.

"To the great people of Egypt, your armed forces, acknowledging the legitimate rights of the people," stress that "they have not and will not use force against the Egyptian people," the military said in a statement.

Tens of thousands of protesters had carpeted Cairo's Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the epicentre of demands for an end to the corruption, deprivation and police oppression indelibly associated with Mubarak's 30-year rule.

"We will stay in the square, until the coward leaves," the crowd chanted...

Source: defencetalk.com



Rumours over the fall of US

SIFAT UDDIN

When I come to study what has been, at different times and epochs of history among different peoples, the effective reason why ruling classes have been ruined, I note the various events and men and accidental and superficial causes, but believe me, the real cause, the effective one, that makes men lose power is that they have become unworthy to exercise it.

-Alexis de Tocqueville. (A french historian, 1805-1859)

SINCE the last decade there had been a buzz regarding the fall of the US. The buzz got momentum especially after the Twine Tower had crushed down by some outsiders, evading (or ignoring) world's most smart national security system. And during last global economic crisis which was mainly American by origin, the buzz was getting louder. President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia called the 2008 financial crisis a sign that the United States' global leadership is coming to an end. And thus since then Fukuyama's future is becoming bleak to bleaker regarding his thesis on 'end of history' declaring the unprecedented triumphal march of capitalism or American capitalism while Paul Kennedy, a British historian on International Relations, becoming bright to brighter regarding his thesis on 'rise and fall of great powers' (of course with some reservations).

For last a few days I have been going through some world's leading dailies and monthlies including journals on security and foreign policy and what I have found is an ambidexterer Joseph S. Nye, writing restlessly about future of American power or rise of

China along with some skeptics or optimists including Thomas M. Nichols and others. All these developments certainly placed me in a situation where I couldn't but write on this topic- location of the US in global power politics; whether the US is on the verge of fall from an apex position of hierarchical international system. To explain I shall try to use a framework by using the concepts given by Paul Kennedy in his book 'The Rise and Fall Of Great Powers'.

Paul Kennedy and great powers

'The Rise and Fall Of Great Powers' by Paul Kennedy, first published in 1987, with analyses on economic changes and military conflicts from 1500 to 2000, explores the politics and economics of the great powers from 1500 to 1980 and the reason for their decline. Kennedy then forecasted the positions of China, Japan, the European Economic Community (EEC) (present EU), the Soviet Union and the United States through the end of the 20th century. Kennedy measures strength of great powers in the 20th century using population size, urbanization rates, per capita levels of industrialization, iron and steel production, energy consumption and total industrial output as standard.

He compares the Great Powers at the close of the 20th century and predicts the decline of the Soviet Union (sudden Soviet collapse in 1990s was not predicted by Kennedy), the rise of China and Japan, the struggles and potential for the EEC, and the relative decline of the United States. He highlights the precedence of the "four modernizations" in Deng Xiaoping's plans for China-

agriculture, industry, science and military-deemphasizing military while the United States and the Soviet Union were emphasizing it. He predicts that continued deficit spending, especially on military build-up, will be the single most important reason for decline of any Great Power. Paul Kennedy made a good chronological description with historical evidences to explain the international system and changes of global order in consequence of rise and fall great powers.

Explaining US with Paul Kennedy

Kennedy is supposed to be a realist thinker. His analyses are mainly state and its traditional power (political/military) centric. Thus Kennedy's measuring standards are economic and military by virtue when he categorizes states. Present US is still the number one economy in the world with far better military capability-quality-applicability and thus positioned at the acme of international system. The US do not spend deficit budget for military purpose- which is an important criterion to keep the power position intact, according to Kennedy. But the problem can be traced in the trends of the economy- it is now more downward, problem is with unemployment rate (9.5% (2010)), less industrial production (-1.5% (2009), -9.5% (2008)), less GDP rate (2.6% (2010)). If it continues to maintain present military spending without upward economic wheel then certainly the US will face the fall. Last year the US senate cut the defense budget to reduce the burden from its economy.

All these information do not prove that the fall of US is near. Infact, Kennedy had been criticized since just after the

end of twentieth century regarding his miscalculation on predictions. Among them Nau's criticism is mention-worthy. Kennedy did not consider the normative power of a state while analyzing the causes behind the fall of great powers. Moreover, now in this twenty first century soft powers are not less powerful than hard powers. On the other hand, already there is a debate over the effectivity of military power ("Is Military Power Becoming Obsolete?" The Korea Times, Joseph S. Nye). And now no more the world is greatpower



centered, like it was in Kennedy's time; now we live in the era of Super Power; the US centric unipolar world where the US is sometimes termed as 'hyperpower'. So all these new developments may make the Kennedy's theory obsolete. But still it is the best theory to analyze the fall of powerful states and in consequence the changes of global orders.

Future of US power

According to Kennedy usually a great power's life span consists three phases - hegemony, challenge and decline. With two different but complementary sceneries, downward trend of US economy and rise of China as a global power, we may

deem the US as running through its last phase. Now the US is facing challenges from both sides- home and abroad. Its military spending in 761 US military bases across the planet (156 Countries with US bases) becoming a burden over its wounded economy. Within the territory the popular support upon the government is reducing over issues like Afghan and Iraq. So the normative power of US is also at risk. The more risks are at the rise of China. The more US getting weaker, the

more China getting stronger. That's why people are speculating the fall of the US. The fear is more speculated in terms of China's rise not in terms of the downward trend of the US. That's the problem in our understanding. We should know that the US is still number one economy and still can excel anyone with its military superiority. Only by 2027 China will reach the same height of US economy. So it is too early to predict the fall of the US now. But we can say that the traits of weakness are apparent- as per as Kennedy's theory is concerned.

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