**Association of Eastern States of South Asia (Part VI)**

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If Bangladesh’s problems were confined to over-population and natural disasters that retard economic growth, it would have been bad enough, but the problem is that Bangladesh also has the world’s only predator nation, India, at its doorstep. Other nations do try and impose hegemony but India occupies territory by force of arms. Instead of helping alleviate the miseries of its poor neighbours, desperately keeping their heads (literally) above the rising waters, Indian machination in the countries on its periphery, particular in Bangladesh, knows no end. Despite the tremendous economic success, India’s undue interference has contributed to increasing the poverty and suffering of the people living adjacent to its borders. Five decades into existence as an independent nation, Bangladesh still finds itself insecure. Until and unless Indian designs of regional hegemony are frustrated, this Sword of Damocles will stay over the heads of 160 million people. Presently, Bangladesh is doing exceedingly well economically with a very great percentage of the labour workforce engaged. With the extensive socio-economic infrastructure in the works, one can say that the vision of “Sonar Bangla” can become a reality.

Bangladesh means land of the Bengalis-Muslims, Hindus and other minorities included. Given major ports of the region (including Calcutta in West Bengal, and Chalna and Chittagong in Bangladesh) this area can exist as an effervescent economic region by itself-without facing chronic shortages of food and other necessities. Looking at historical and ethnic realities in many nations of this region-West Bengal, Bangladesh, Gurkhaland, Sikkim, Bhutan, Meghalaya, Bodoland, Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, Tripura and Manipur to name some-all are fiercely independent in their outlook. Even the only Hindu Kingdom of Nepal would cease to be endlessly land-locked by India (geographically and economically) and be a willing member of an Association of Eastern States of South Asia (AESSA) economic alliance. These effective geographical and economic units can form a Common Market without anybody’s hegemony. Access to the ports of the Bay of Bengal would favour especially the landlocked territories, but an extension of the number and capacity of ports is in process and the interest of Bangladesh. Moreover, Bangladesh needs to solve the problem of Farakka Barrage and six other catchment dams, which have become a matter of discord with India over the years. Given the Indian track record, it will take more time than available to arrive at an equitable arrangement about water. Bangladesh will have to look elsewhere for help and helping oneself is perhaps the best (and only) way to do it. We must remember that this particular area has been a hub of agriculture, manufacturing and trade in the past as well.

AESSA is the acronym for Association of Eastern States of South Asia and the idea consists of the creation of an economic union or common market of the states that so far have suffered from geographical, political and economic isolation. Opening up this region by promoting internal trade relations between the countries and connecting it all to the new continental trade routes of BRI as well as to maritime trade routes centred around the Bay of Bengal is the gist of the idea. This idea was developed during the 1980s and published for the first time in March 1990. It did not create many waves then. But today, over 30 years later, we are looking at an entirely different world. Globalisation has matured and the post-WWII political power allocation has changed from a bipolar world caught in a vicious cold war scenario, moving towards a unipolar world with the US as the sole superpower that considered itself to be the global policeman. This rather short phase has come to an end with the rise of China to challenge the US on economic, military and conceptual turf by designing a new global political power system based on multipolarity.

I quote my article, “AESSA CONCEPT AND THE CONFEDERACY IDEA,” published on May 10, 1997,

“Association can never be successful between unequal partners. In its present size and with its aggressive defence posture, India is very much a persistent threat to its neighbours in the region, forums that it organises can only be at best shotgun marriages in the manner it has presently with Pakistan. By suggesting confederation and sub-regional groupings based on economic principles and geographical proximity justifying such moves, India has provided a window of opportunity for a more practical and comprehensive proposal for the entire region.”

The Gujral Doctrine, annunciated when IK Gujral was Foreign Minister in Indian PM Deve Gowda’s Cabinet, clubs together with the complementary economies with the geographical proximities of the Eastern States of South Asia ie. Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan with the other country in common to all the three, India. However, it is only the troubled eastern states of India which are involved. Because of a lack of adequate transit facilities through Bangladesh, Assam and the other Eastern States of India, these have to be served by road and rail around the periphery of Bangladesh. India has been neglecting this region economically, politically and socially, treating it as a source of raw material (mainly oil, timber and tea) more or less in the same way as during colonial times. To keep this neglect from boiling over, India has been using force for virtually the full 50 years of its independence. With as many as 18 full-fledged insurgencies to cope with because of perceived economic and political disparities, the Indian Army has been engaged in constant counter-guerrilla warfare to hold the country from disintegrating for nearly five decades. For some time after the creation of Bangladesh, these guerrilla movements suffered a setback, they are now back in full operation. The region is so cut off geographically that it was abandoned administratively even before the Chinese forces were in a threatening position to come down from the mountains during the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict (the Chinese made a unilateral stop at the base of the mountains at a place called Foothills). To have a more direct route, India has been pushing for the construction of a barge-bearing canal cutting across the width of Bangladesh but that would effectively divide Bangladesh into two halves despite the good feeling for India in the present ruling Awami League (AL) government they will never accept this let alone risk public opinion which in Bangladesh seems to be more anti-Indian than pro. The logic behind PM IK Gujral’s arguments is a natural cohesion rather than any artificial re-configuration, unless this arrangement is structured around independent states it would run counter to his theory. Nepal and Bhutan’s hydel possibilities would provide Bangladesh with access to cheap electricity, at the same time the landlocked eastern states of India, among them Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, etc would be best served by using the port cities of Chittagong and Chalna with direct road/rail access,” unquote.

The US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the region have left the door wide open to new alliances, especially of the economic type. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organisations includes plans for a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” referring to the Indo-Pacific Sea routes through Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. And that is where the AESSA regional concept fits in with Bangladesh as its centrepiece.

Historically, the Bay of Bengal was the trade route for what was the biggest economy of its time, centred in the area now comprising Bangladesh. The North-South Corridor can also be a South-North Corridor, which the western nations were once predators in the 15th century can now become trading partners in the real sense and invest in this region to bring economic emancipation to the most impoverished people on this earth. Not only this region but the States along the east coast of India and Burma would also benefit from the force-multiplied economic activities both ways. Therefore, it is important for the world not to look at AESSA as anything but a great boost for the people of this region, with the entire world benefitting from the multi-trade that it will bring about.

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