

India's Role in South Asia – Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership?

By

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“The Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. And the seventh, that is India, will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful.”- Bhabani Sen Gupta.¹

The enabling and constraining capabilities of India with regard to promoting regional cooperation in South Asia had been discussed even before the conceptual journey of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) began in 1983. India occupies a unique position in the South Asian region. By the virtue of its size, location and economic potential, India assumes a natural leadership role in the region. But the over-bearing presence of a neighbour with aspirations for global leadership has also been a source of apprehensions for the other South Asian countries. Consequently, cooperative efforts of the South Asian countries are hijacked by the dilemma of comprehending

India's perceived and actual role as a stepping stone or a stumbling bloc for the regional efforts. India claims a leadership position for herself, while her South Asian neighbours accuse her of exercising hegemony. For a rational understanding of India's position and role in the region the concepts of leadership and hegemony will have to be unravelled and India's policies and neighbour's perceptions examined in the light of subsequent deductions. The present paper focuses on the regional interactions through and beyond the SAARC forum for ascertaining the degree of leadership or hegemony manifest in the policies of India and perceptions of other South Asian states.

I

Power, Perceptions, Leadership and Hegemony: Conceptual Clarifications

The analysis of India's policies and her neighbour's expectations often turn out to be biased depending on which country is making the analysis. Advice is viewed as interference; assistance is viewed as instigation; guidance is viewed as domination. The manner in which policies are projected and interpreted by the South Asian states clearly demonstrates a lack of understanding of the concepts of power, leadership, hegemony and formation of perceptions. Issues like relativity of power, perceptual biases, responsibilities of leadership and challenges to hegemonism need to be examined for a better understanding of the South Asian affairs. This section seeks to examine the concepts of power, perceptions, hegemony and leadership.

Power

In the words of Michel Foucault "The question of power remains a total enigma".² From theories of Thomas Hobbes tracing the origin of power in human nature to Hans

Morgenthau's realism defining national interest in terms of power, the various dimensions of intra and inter state relations are de-coded and comprehended through different power relation approaches. Taking inspiration from the works of Foucault the present study seeks to examine how power is exercised, by what means, what are the effects of the exercise of power rather than what is power and where does it come from.³ The power that a state possesses in a community of nations is measured either by a quantification of the elements of national power or an assessment of the state's relations with other units in the system. The resources of power in the first approach include tangible elements like national population, GDP, military expenditure, technological capabilities and intangible elements like national morale and quality of leadership. The policies that a state designs on the basis of these resources determine the relational aspect of power. Simply stated, the resources depict latent or potential power, which is converted into actual power through the policies of the state. Actual power is the degree of influence exercised by the state in accomplishing a desired objective. Robert Gilpin subscribes to the second approach in defining power as an actor's ability to impose his or her will despite resistance.⁴ Bertrand Russell defined power as 'the production of intended effects', while Max Weber and C. Wright Mills connect power with the realization of the will of the powerful.⁵

The relational approach to power emphasizes that maximization of power resources is contingent upon state policies. The central argument of the paper is based on this relational aspect of power. States with weak resources of power have pursued aggressive policies, while states with impressive elements of power have adopted consensual policies. Hegemony and leadership emerge from the same sources of power elements, but essentially differ in the mode of power projection and reception creating different models of inter-state relations.

Perceptions

Whereas power refers to the economic, military and related capabilities of a state, prestige refers primarily to the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's capabilities and its ability and willingness to exercise power.⁶ A combined discourse on

power and prestige needs to be reasserted for a holistic analysis of power. The relationship between perceptions and power find reference in several theories. Neoclassical realism incorporates unit – level factors like personalities and perceptions of statesmen, state-society relationship and state interests in the analysis of power. Gideon Rose explains that ‘foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being’⁷. According to Ole Holsti, “Decision makers act upon their definition of the situation and their images of states-others as well as their own. These images are in turn dependent upon the decision-makers belief system and these may not be accurate representations of reality”⁸. Traditionally the role of perceptions in power is examined through the decision-making theory. Rather than making the present study simply a variant of the decision-making theory, an attempt is made to analyze the general process of policy implementation and perception formation and its subsequent impact on the exercise of power.

Perceptions arise not only from interactions but involve interpretations given to these impressions by the states. Perception is psychologically rooted in what and how of the others behaviour in international interaction. It is conditioned to circumstances, duration of time and historical experience. An important component of perception is combining and arranging the separate events into a whole so that a meaningful picture can emerge.⁹ The process of combination and arrangement can be rational or biased depending on the orientation of the states, which in the process also impacts the analysis of power.

Perception can be misperception due to numerous perceptual modifications. Perceptual variants can either be simple exaggerations or more stubborn prejudices. Not every overblown generalization is a prejudice. Some are simply misconceptions wherein wrong information is organized. It is important to distinguish between ordinary errors of pre-judgment and prejudice. Pre-judgments become prejudices only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge. A prejudice, unlike a simple misconception, is actively resistant to all evidence that would unseat it. Another common mode of perceiving the reality is complimentary projection. We might define complimentary projection simply as

the process of explaining and justifying our own state of mind by reference to the imagined intentions and behaviour of others. This process of complimentary projection is inspired by and in turn reinforces the mote-beam mechanism, which is a kind of ‘perceptual accentuation’- perceiving more than what really exists.

In examining the power-perception interface the theory of the Gestalt School¹⁰ proves convincing. The main theme of the Gestalt School is that patterns are formed for the convenience of perception, and any new variable is interpreted to fit within the existing design. Gestalt psychology is a theory of the mind and brain that proposes that the operational principle of the brain is holistic, parallel and analogue, with self organizing tendencies; or that the whole is greater than the some of its parts. Characteristics of the Gestalt School which are important in explaining how perceptions of hegemony and leadership emerge in inter-state politics are listed in Table 1.

Properties	Gestalt School	Perception-Power relationship
Emergence	a perceptual phenomenon where the whole is first identified and the parts are inferred	the hegemony/leadership of a state is first identified and then its preceding and ensuing policies are explained in a way to derive support for the initial conclusion drawn
Reification	is the constructive aspect of perception, by which the experienced precept contains more explicit spatial information than the sensory stimulus on which it was based	the receiver tends to give preference to its experiences over the policies of the power wielder in defining the

		nature of power used
Multistability	is the tendency of ambiguous perceptual experience to pop back and forth unstably between two or more alternative interpretations	even though the exercise of power may benefit the receiver, the instances of power abuse by the wielder elsewhere results in skepticism
Invariance	is the property of perception whereby simple geometrical objects are recognized independent of rotation, translation, and scale; as well as other variations such as elastic deformations, different lighting	power may be exercised through explicit or implicit means; soft or hard resources, but is always perceived as imposing and unjustified on the part of the receiver

Table: 1 – Perception-power analysis through the Gestalt perspective (Prepared by the Author)

The principles of the Gestalt School demonstrate that receivers have a distinct process of de-coding the applied power, which may or may not be consistent with the policy purposes of the power wielder. Strategies and goals of power filter through the perceptions of the receivers to be categorized as hegemony or leadership. Hence perceiving leadership or hegemony is as important as exercising hegemony or leadership, especially in the South Asian context. Most conflicts in the region emerge from this contradiction in perception and exercise of power.

Perceiving Hegemony and Leadership

The basic hiatus between what India claims and what her South Asian neighbours perceive can be explained through the distinction between the Greek concepts of *hegemonia* and *arche*. For the fifth and fourth century Greeks, *hegemonia*, was a form of legitimate authority associated with *tim* (honor and office), which in this sense meant the 'office' to which one was accordingly entitled. Hegemonia is a honourific status conferred by others in recognition of the benefits an actor has provided for the community as a whole. Material capabilities come into the picture in so far as they provide the raw materials that facilitate the attainment of excellence and honor. Arche is based upon *kratos* (material capabilities) and, of necessity, sustains itself through *dunamis* (displays of power) and is always hierarchical characterized by a downward flow of authority. Arche is similar to the classical imperial theory and would last as long as material capabilities can sustain the requisite level of rewards, threats and punishments. India expects to hold the position of hegemonia (conferred headship) in the region, while her neighbours view it as arche (asserted headship). In perceiving the exercise of power as hegemonia (hegemony) or arche (leadership) certain distinguishable traits are identifiable.

Leadership

Leadership perception is defined in terms of the match between perceiver prototypes (India's South Asian neighbours) and the characteristics of the potential leaders (India). According to this view leadership perception was a dyadic level of processes that involved both perceiver and leader effects.¹¹ Leadership lies in defining a positive direction and moving other partners towards more ambitious goals through unilateral action whenever possible.¹² Leadership role can be understood to provide a more coherent and systematic worldview, which would serve as a principle of organization for social and economic institutions in the region. Leadership does not reflect only one country's national interest; it reflects the common interest of a group of states in the global order. The core in such instances is interested in creating a regulated system in

which an area of consent is fully expanded and political conflict is diminished.¹³ Power is perceived as leadership when its exercise is characterized by the following:

- i) encourage maximum involvement and participation
- ii) diffusion of responsibility
- iii) reinforcing inter-personal contacts
- iv) initiation of new ideas
- v) defending and advancing common group interest

Hegemony

When power is distributed unevenly, political leaders and theorists use terms such as empire and hegemony. A mere power differential does not imply hegemony; it is more a behavioural trait than just structural attributes. If the power implementation is associated with egoistic, self serving goals, which overlooks the interests of those over whom it is exercised it is considered as hegemony. Hegemony is used to refer to different behaviours and degrees of control. For example, Charles Doran cites aggressive military power, while Robert Keohane looks at preponderance in economic resources as a source of hegemony. Joshua Goldstein defines hegemony as 'being able to dictate, or at least dominate, the rules and arrangements by which international relations, political and economic, are conducted...Economic hegemony implies the ability to centre the world economy around itself. Political hegemony means being able to dominate the world militarily.¹⁴ The exercise of power is perceived as hegemonic behaviour when characterized by the following:

- i) changing the rules rather than adapting to policies to the existing rules
- ii) enjoying special rights for advancing hegemonic interests
- iii) voluntary responsibility for group development is assumed, with focus on individual development
- iv) group goals and strategies are defined by the hegemon which may or may not promote group interests
- v) code of conduct is framed for directing and regulating behaviour of

individual states.

Leadership and hegemony is thus the interplay of power potential, policies and respective perceptions of the states involved. The next segment seeks to identify the traits of hegemony and leadership in India's regional interactions based on her policies and neighbour's perceptions. An attempt is made to examine the regional interactions, bilateral and multi-lateral, for locating the sources India's perceived leadership and alleged hegemony in the region.

II

Attributes of India's power in South Asia

Following the discussion in segment I the attributes of India's power in the region are examined in terms of the national power variables possessed by India, regional policies pursued and the perceptions of her South Asian neighbours.

The structural approach to power concedes an advantaged position to India in South Asia. The India shares borders with all South Asian countries, making it the vital physical link in the region. 72 percent of the land surface in South Asia is occupied by India, 77 percent of the region's population resides in India. India accounts for 75 percent of the regional economic output. The economic potential and military capabilities of India have made the country a primary regional force in South Asia. L. Kadirgamar has used the analogy of a wheel to depict centrality of India in South Asian affairs. According to him at the hub of the wheel lies regionally preponderant India. Radiating as spokes are India's neighbours with each of whom India shares land or maritime boundaries, but no two others are thus joined without at the same time touching India also. Binding those spokes to that hub are the physical barriers.¹⁵

The structural attributes of India's power have been impressive enough to endow the country with added responsibilities. The South Asian nations in particular and global powers in general regard India to assume additional responsibility for ensuing regional development and cohesion. Statements of Heads of State at the inaugural Summit of SAARC reflect the degree of 'power' entrusted on the largest South Asian state – India. India was expected to “by deeds and words create the confidence among us so necessary to make a beginning”.¹⁶ India was referred to as the “key to the development and progress of SAARC”.¹⁷ India's responsibility in shaping and directing the cooperation drive was recognized by extra-regional powers. “The size and position of India give it a special role of leadership in South Asian and world affairs. They confer on it at the same time the special responsibility for accommodation and restraint that strength entails.”¹⁸ The overall changes in international politics after the end of the Cold War further reinforced the primacy of the India factor in the region. According to Mohammed Ayoob the changing nature of Superpower relations has opened up prospects for regionally pre-eminent powers to adopt more overt managerial roles in their respective regions.¹⁹ Many countries consider India as “a factor for the stability and protection of democracies and human rights in the South Asian region”.²⁰

Power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists.²¹ The context of India's 'power' in the region is shaped by a mix of historical experiences, national priorities, regional compulsions and ingrained perceptions. Exploring the counters of this context would reveal the true nature of India's leadership and hegemony in the region. Having assessed the structural attributes of India's centrality to South Asian affairs it is imperative to evaluate the regional policies and perceptions to ascertain the kind and degree of power-projection resorted to by India. Rather than elaborating the historical details of the regional events, the impact of these events on the formation of regional perceptions will be emphasized in the present study.

India as a regional hegemon: Policies and Perceptions

A mere variation in the degree and kind of power variables does not lead to hegemony. Hegemony is the privileged exercise of power in complete disregard to the interests of other states. India's policies and regional perceptions are examined in this section to ascertain the validity of characterising India as a hegemon.

Indian policies with regard to the liberation movement in Bangladesh in 1971, the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the attempted military coup in Maldives in 1988 are cited as illustrations of India's hegemonic authority in region. Even diplomatic statements, like the Indian Government's comment on the deteriorating conditions in Balochistan and also the advice for Pakistan Government to exercise restraint has been interpreted as interference by India. India has defended its Bangladesh policy on the grounds that India intervened only after her requests to the U.N. to act against Pakistan failed to yield results. *The Guardian* had described the Pakistani troops' atrocities as an arrogant crime against humanity and human aspirations.²² Given the compulsions of national security coupled with the humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan, India sought to provide military assistance that led to the emergence of Bangladesh. The military involvement by India is further defended by referring to the request for the same by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh. Despite all justifications, the role played by India in the emergence of Bangladesh is viewed even today as a vindication of the regional apprehensions. The most important result of the 1971 crisis on regional perceptions has been the demonstrated ability of India to alter the geo-political landscape of South Asia. Though 1971 can be claimed by India to be an exceptional case, it exists as a tangible evidence of India's over-bearing presence in the region.

India is accused of using the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 to assert its military potential in the region. The accord allowed India's diplomatic involvement in resolving the confrontation between the Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and the option of military assistance was expected to be contingency clause, which few expected would be utilized. The deterioration of the security situation in Sri Lanka and the fickle policies of

President Premadasa forced India to get militarily involved in the Island politics. The professions of caution and restraint provided by India have done little to address the regional fear psychosis generated in response to the episode. The fallout of India's gaffe in Sri Lanka was so immense that even the ministerial level meetings for launching SAARC were adversely affected.

In November 1988 the Indian military in response to a request by the de jure government of Maldives helped to crush an attempted coup on the island. The Maldives episode, as an individual case study would have perhaps not invited much attention, but the fact that it took place barely a year after India's military involvement in Sri Lanka sought to reinforce the negative perceptions about India. The importance of the Maldivian episode lies in the kind of the reinforcements it provided for the apprehensions about India's politico-military clout in South Asia.

India's relations with her South Asian neighbours is characterised by numerous bilateral contentions. India favours a bilateral dialogue for addressing these concerns, while the neighbours demand a multilateral regional approach. India fears that the neighbours would gang-up against her and demand unrealistic concessions in a multi-lateral milieu, while the neighbours suspect that India seeks to take undue advantage of the weak bargaining capacity of each state in a bilateral dialogue. Neighbours view Indian bilateralism as an instrument of coercive diplomacy, while India considers the demand of multilateralism as an unnecessary burden of the nascent and fragile process of SAARC. Inter-state interaction is a multi-dimensional process involving bilateral, regional and other forms of multilateral relations. In South Asia the disagreement over the most preferred strategy emerges from and further reinforces the perceptual divergence among regional states. The psychological predispositions have come to be so shaped that any reference of bilateralism translates into possibilities of Indian hegemony and any assertion of multilateralism is deciphered as a pressure generating tactic, irrespective of the actual merits of either approaches.

The most obvious example cited as a justification of India's hegemonic aspirations is the Indira Doctrine. The origins of the Doctrine are traced to the Sri Lankan crisis of 1988 and laid down that India would consider the presence or influence of an external power in the region as adverse to its interests. India's justification for the policy was an attempt to insulate the region from the adverse effects of the Cold War, but the neighbours viewed it as a policy to abolish any challenge to India's regional position. In the recent years India has not only allowed but in fact aligned with extra-regional powers to address regional issues, but the regional perceptions fail to take cognizance of these developments. The 1997 Pakistan National Elections were observed by the Commonwealth Secretary General, the EU Election Observation Mission participated in the 2002 General Elections in Pakistan. The 2001 General Elections in Bangladesh was attended by the UN Electoral Assistance Secretariat and the EU Election Observation Mission. There was 'outstanding cooperation' between US and Indian ambassadors to try and get Nepal back to multiparty democracy.²³

The Gujral Doctrine, India's policy of providing unilateral concession to South Asian neighbours without seeking reciprocity, proved to be too mild in the face of the impregnable perceptual framework of India's neighbours. Altaf Gauhar, leading Pakistani columnist commented that, "The Gujral Doctrine is not a doctrine of good neighborly relations but a Bharti Plan to seize the neighbour peacefully".²⁴

Regional economic cooperation is viewed by regional states as a mechanism of ensuring the economic empowerment of India at the expense of her South Asian neighbours. The South Asian countries were not enthusiastic about South Asian Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA) because they felt that the impact of their unfavourable trade balance with India would be accentuated if liberalization is encouraged in regional context. Countries in the region also fear that if market forces are allowed to guide the intra-regional trade India would emerge as the dominating factor leading to the political dependence of these states on India. Sadar Assef Ali, Foreign Minister of Pakistan and Mr. Mustafizur Rahman, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh clearly stated that despite their obligations under the Marrakesh and WTO arrangement they would not be able to

respond to India under those obligations till political issues like Kashmir and Farakka are resolved.²⁵ Pakistan refuses to grant India MFN status. Political perceptions have come to cloud economic rationality in the region. The Bangladeshi Government has rejected the proposal of an American Company to supply gas from Sylhet to New Delhi through pipelines. Despite being aware of the obvious economic advantages of the proposal, Bangladesh has rejected this World Bank recommended project on grounds that it is not in the interest of Bangladesh. The fear rather than the existence of Indian hegemon makes the South Asian states apathetic to pursuing mutually beneficial economic policies.

Contrary to regional expectations, expansion of economic relations with India has benefited the regional economies and India has granted numerous economic concessions. In the case of Nepal, for instance, the constraint of the value-added component imposed on Nepali products for duty-free entry into the Indian market was reduced from 80 percent to 50 percent, and now even this has been completely removed. In relation to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, India agrees in principle to reduce their adverse trade balances but the modalities have still to be worked out.²⁶ Following the Gujral Doctrine India announced at the 1997 Male Summit to unilaterally withdraw restraints to entry to India of all exports from within the South Asian region, including Pakistan. Indian companies had invested US\$83 million in 140 ventures till 1999 in four SMCs. In addition Indian companies have extended US\$ 3.5 million worth of loans and credits and guarantees worth \$16.5 million to their affiliates in the SAARC region.²⁷ As a major positive development for regional cooperation India's preferential imports as compared to 1996, became more diversified in 2000.²⁸ India already has a free trading arrangement with Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka and negotiations are underway for a free trade agreement with Bangladesh. India has adopted a preferential policy towards investment in SAARC countries. A fast track channel for processing investment proposals has been created to expedite projects. The ceiling for processing investments under the fast track channel had been increased from an initial US \$4 million to US \$ 15 million and further to US \$30 million in May 1999, in case of member countries of SAARC other than Nepal and Bhutan.²⁹ The trade deficit of Nepal vis-à-vis India has declined sharply and has turned into surplus in 2002. Since the implementation of Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement

(ISFTA) there has been a phenomenal increase in India-Sri Lanka trade. Since the ISFTA became operational in March 2000, bilateral trade between the two countries has increased by 195 percent. Under international conventions India is obliged to provide only one transit route to facilitate Nepal's trade with third countries, but India has provided 15 transit points. Readymade Garments Sector (RMG) is included in India's sensitive list, but India has granted Bangladesh the opportunity to export six million pieces of RMG products to India, provided the entire fabric for the purpose is imported from India. India is Bhutan's largest trade partner. During the year 2001-2002, inclusive of electricity, Bhutan's exports to India totalled Rs.4.91 billion and constituted 94.5 percent of its total exports.

According to Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema the most important impediment on the road to collective self reliance is not the incumbent asymmetry and the overwhelming stature of India but how other members perceive India's intentions with reservations and apprehensions.³⁰ India's regional policies can be criticised for being short-sighted and errant on certain counts, but the perceptions of regional states have interpreted these as policies of domination. This does not imply that India has never pursued dominating policies but these cannot be likened to the designs of imperial hegemony. India's policies of demanding certain concessions can be classified as arrogant but not outright hegemonic. India's policies in the region are subject to the above discussed mote-beam mechanism- perceiving more than what really exists. At the same time India's neighbours acting under the compulsions of the Gestalt phenomenon are unable to distinguish between the guidance and domination traits of India's policies. Realization of these diplomatic and perceptual limitations by the South Asian states could put an end to the blame-game being played out in the region.

India as a regional leader: Policies and Perceptions

It is axiomatic that India's size and level of development enjoins on it the responsibility of being the natural fulcrum in the process of South Asian development.³¹ In dealing with

regional concerns India claims to perform its leadership role by pursuing policies to further the common interest of regional states. But the hesitant and cautious policies pursued by India contradict the qualities of dynamic leadership. On the pretext of countering regional apprehensions, India has on many occasions abandoned the leadership mantle. Ironically such policies have fuelled allegations of lack of interest on India's part for regional concerns. Hence India's policies of avoiding leadership have led to perceptions of abandonment of regional responsibilities.

Dynamism is the most basic quality of leadership, which has not been demonstrated by India. India has shown reluctance for updating the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 and the Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of 1972 despite repeated demands by the two states. The Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949 was updated only recently in 2007. Diplomatic dynamism implies making the right move when time is opportune; a characteristic missing in India's regional manoeuvres. The insistence by India for signing a five year agreement with Bangladesh allowing it to transport goods to the North-East of India at the sidelines of the SAARC Summit in Sri Lanka in early August 2008 reflects the political naiveté of India. Without getting an assurance from Bangladesh on the issue, a public statement by the India's Ministry of External Affairs on the possibility of signing an agreement only contributed in straining bilateral relations. Moreover expecting the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh to decide on such a sensitive issue demonstrates how distanced is India's approach from the regional realities.

In dealing with national political crisis, the South Asian states expect India to play a determining role. Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, Vice President, Maldivian Democratic Party, expected India to play a more active role in ensuring that true democracy is ushered in Maldives, rather than strengthening the hands of the dictatorial regime through defence packages.³² Former Nepalese Minister for Industries and senior leader of Communist Party of Nepal, Keshab Badal told *The Hindu*, "We urge the Indian Government not to lend support to the Nepal government that could end up with the latter turning even more repressive towards the movement for democracy in Nepal. We seek the sympathy of the

Indian Government in our endeavours to replace the monarchy in Nepal with a democratic republic.”³³ By officially disassociating herself from such regional pleas, India makes a phoney attempt to emerge as a neutral variable in the intra-national and intra-regional politics. The Sri Lankan crisis of the late 1980s has led India to adopt an over-cautious policy with regard to the problems of the Island state. The Indian government has refused to respond to the requests for arms supplies, allowing the Sri Lankan government to procure similar supplies from Pakistan and China. India has not even formally responded to the report that US Marine Corps are assisting Bangladesh in surveying and managing the Indo-Bangladesh border ostensibly with the objective of avoiding a direct confrontation on the issue with Bangladesh or the US. India has ignored the repeated requests by Nepal for assisting in the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees. By adopting a policy of passive dissociation rather than diplomatic innovativeness with regard to the crisis in the regional states India has surrendered its leadership role in the region.

The neighbour's perceptions could be cited as reasons for abandoning leadership on political issues but the regional economic concerns are essentially a victim of India's lack of insight and innovativeness. India remains uninterested in opening its market to the neighbours. Instead of leading the charge towards a rapid reintegration of the South Asian economic space, India remains hesitant in its approach. Security arguments are cited to prevent economic cooperation. India has not evolved a positive approach to deal with the issue of labour migration from Nepal and Bangladesh. The policy of erecting barbed wires to deal with labour migration negates the leadership potential of India in the region. India continues to ignore the regional realities by emphasizing on duty free trade, while the real constraints to intra-regional trade are to be found in tariff and para-tariff barriers. Bangladeshi products like ceramic, melamine products, garments, fruit juice, electrical wire, leather and footwear, edible oil, hilsha fish and traditional jute are in huge demand in India, but bilateral trade is hampered due to tariff barriers. India imposed additional duties on four major export items of Bangladesh-hilsha fish, sari, medicine and porcelain, while SAFTA was about to take effect. Mandatory testing requirements are applicable on India's imports in areas such as food items, textiles and leather. The samples of

Bangladeshi textile and leather products are sent to Lucknow and Chennai for testing which takes significant time. Obtaining licenses for meeting the Indian mandatory standards on a number of export interest items such as cement, electrical appliances, drinking water appliances etc. also involves considerable amount of time. India has neither taken the initiative to liberalise the license issuing procedure nor attempted to set up testing laboratories closer to the border area.

India has been using rhetoric to undo the harm caused by her policies in the region. Gujral Doctrine best illustrates this reality. It is important to note that the Gujral Doctrine is not an innovative Indian policy to allay fears of neighbours. It is a standard practice in international relations for the bigger states to grant concessions to the smaller countries. Voicing this concern J.N. Dixit has stated that such gestures of generosity (Gujral Doctrine) 'smacks of a certain incipient big brotherly hegemonistic attitude.'³⁴ India has not genuinely applied the Doctrine on ground. For example, trade concessions to Bangladesh for a long time were made contingent on their giving transit rights. The discrepancy between India's rhetoric and action is evident from the example below. India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha had stated that India is seeking to "institutionalizing positive asymmetry in favour of our neighbours."³⁵ This magnanimous statement of India needs to be contrasted with its policy of banning the broadcast of four Pakistani television channels in India-administered Kashmir in April 2008. Through such policies India's regional credentials are gaining negative weightage.

The shortcomings in India's regional policies do not imply a complete absence of the leadership spirit. Some examples of political and economic initiative are highlighted above in the discussion on India's perceived hegemonism. There are other examples of India's sporadic leadership efforts in the region as well. India responded promptly to the Tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean islands, particularly SAARC member state Sri Lanka in December 2006. The Indian Navy deployed thirty two naval ships, seven aircraft and twenty helicopters in support of five rescue, relief and reconstruction missions as part of 'Operation Madad' (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu coast), 'Operation Sea Waves'

(Andaman & Nicobar Islands), 'Operation Castor' (Maldives), 'Operation Rainbow' (Sri Lanka) and 'Operation Gambhir' (Indonesia).³⁶ India rushed relief supplies to Pakistan after a powerful earthquake hit Jammu and Kashmir in October 2005. India has put forth proposals for the free movement of media persons and media products in South Asia and the establishment of cultural sub centres under the main SAARC Cultural Centre in Kandy. At the 14th SAARC Summit held in 2007, India offered unilateral concessions in the form of allowing duty free access to goods from the least developed countries of South Asia. India also initiated discussions on establishing a South Asia University and working towards creating a common currency for the region.

India's regional role does not fully correspond to the traditional leadership qualities. India tends to support or endorse rather than initiate and facilitate new regional ventures; India rarely champions the group interest at the international forums; rather than promoting group behaviour and diluting group differences within SAARC, India tends to disassociate issues and manage them at the bilateral level; regional goal setting and formulation of collective strategies are not explicitly pursued by India. Leadership demands the ability to take initiative and criticism with diplomatic deftness; a policy which India has not been able to evolve in her interactions with South Asian countries. India's regional policies do not exhibit the ability to make short-term concessions for securing long term goals. In the face of negative perceptions India is exercising the option of restrained leadership, which needs to be replaced by a more pro-active leadership role for countering the adverse perceptual mould in the region.

III

An examination of India's policies and regional perceptions demonstrate that India's role in South Asia neither confirms to the indices of traditional leadership nor genuine

hegemony. The mismanagement of the power variables and complexity of perceptual constructs has resulted in a situation where India fears to exercise its leadership and neighbours strive to counter its hegemony. Consequently, India in South Asia is “powerful enough to be feared but not powerful enough to be respected”.³⁷

In the definitions of hegemony as discussed above, the most vital feature of a hegemonic power is the ability to induce change in the policies of the target group so that the interest of the dominant nation is served. Neither have India’s power variables nor its policies have succeeded in inducing desirable changes in South Asia. Instances of territorial annexation and economic exploitation associated with hegemonic authority have not characterized India’s regional interactions. All statistics indicate an absolutely asymmetrical South Asia. But the asymmetry tends to mask some absolute indicators. For example Bangladesh and Pakistan are seventh and sixth largest nations in the world in terms of population. By the virtue of its size Pakistan would be in its own right a regional power in any other part of the world. Nepal and Sri Lanka are by world standards, middle – sized countries.³⁸

At a conference on the security of small nations in South Asia in Dhaka in January 1987, Pakistani delegate, Lt. General A.I. Akram said, “Every neighbor fears its possible hegemony- fears which India’s professions of peace will not eliminate.”³⁹ This sentiment clearly demonstrates the rigidity of perceptions with regard to India’s regional image. Experience has demonstrated that neighbour’s tend to exaggerate the threats from India for addressing certain domestic compulsions. While assessing India’s coercive capability (i.e. its ability to coerce other states, by the virtue of its resources and power) and coercive policies (i.e. policy instruments directed at altering behavior of other states for its advantage) the degree of authoritarianism enjoyed by India is modest.⁴⁰

Though India’s role in South Asia cannot be likened to a hegemonic power, India has also fallen short of the traditional leadership role in the region. India’s policies reflect supervisory postures rather than a more favourable participatory leadership character. India has failed to provide political advice and economic guidance to neighbours without

appearing domineering. Rather than pursuing a consistent policy aimed at addressing the perceptual fears of the regional states, India tends to abdicate its pro-active role. India's policy in the region is not consistent in terms of what it avoids and what it pursues and hence it fails to qualify as pure hegemony or positive leadership.

Notions of hegemony and leadership are shaped by policies and sustained by perceptions. In an atmosphere of antagonism and distrust misperceptions often take precedence over pragmatism and rationality. The kind of the perceptual default prevalent in South Asia is not one of confrontation, but that of divergence. Lessons from the regional events discussed above highlight that most of the disagreements emerge from 'vision variance' rather than 'factual discord'. In addressing this vision variance all regional states have to accept equal responsibility; India needs to pursue policies which would actively confront the negative perceptual notions of her neighbours and the neighbours will have to acknowledge India's efforts and emerge from their historical shells. The most viable meeting point for India's policies and regional perceptions will be the Gramscian definition of hegemony - a mix of coercion and consent in which consent is dominant element. India's regional role will be clearly defined only when this essential feature of Gramscian hegemony is incorporated in the regional policies of all South Asian countries.

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⁹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 35

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