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**BANGLADESH'S PARTICIPATION IN ASEAN
REGIONAL FORUM (ARF): AN ASSESSMENT**

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Abstract

Bangladesh's accession to ARF, a multilateral security forum of the Asia-Pacific region, would enable the country to involve in dialogues and consultations on issues of non-traditional security. Additionally, by engaging in this forum, the country would possibly gain some economic dividends. Also, this association might enhance the country's reputation and prestige as ARF includes all the powerful nations of the world. The main purpose of this article is to find out the likely benefits that Bangladesh might achieve following its joining this security forum. It will also identify some motivational factors which could have influenced the country to become a part of ARF.

I. Introduction

Multilateralism provides the smaller nations an appropriate platform to voice their opinion and concerns, collectively and individually, giving an opportunity to deal with the most powerful counterparts. Thus, it can be regarded as a source of strength for small countries. Since 1972, Bangladesh has been devoting its diplomatic efforts¹ to become members of multilateral organizations.² Recently, it

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¹ Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech at Bangladesh Enterprise Institute on 23 August 2006 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm72.html accessed on 24 October 2006.

has become the twenty-sixth partner of a multilateral security forum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). This participation of Bangladesh is significant in that ARF has been considered as Asia's top security forum. A forum of diverse nations, ARF's aim is to maintain peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region through the process of dialogues and consultations.³ Bangladesh was officially admitted to this forum at the inaugural session of the thirteenth Annual Ministerial Meeting of ARF partners, held in Kuala Lumpur on 28 July 2006.⁴ The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, M Morshed Khan, who participated in the meeting, underlined that Bangladesh's engagement in this forum would further foster peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. He also assured Bangladesh's active participation in the future ARF deliberations.⁵

This paper has tried to address a couple of key questions, keeping in mind Bangladesh's non-traditional security issues, economic opportunities, and its commitment to global peace and security. What were the factors that motivated Bangladesh to join ARF? What will be the likely dividends for Bangladesh as it has become a partner of this forum? The paper has further argued that Bangladesh would be benefited in a number of ways from its participation in ARF. Also, it has tried to find out whether ARF can provide an impetus to SAARC. Section II of this paper gives an overview of ARF, which includes the emergence, mechanism, objectives, achievements, and limitations of this regional security forum. Bangladesh's motivations to join ARF have been identified in section III. The possible benefits following its entry to this forum have been presented in section IV. Section V will provide a discussion on ARF's role in relation to SAARC and Bangladesh. The paper's concluding remarks along with few recommendations for the Bangladesh government have been provided in section VI.

²Bangladesh's multilateral journey commenced with its membership in Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Commonwealth, Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), and the United Nations (UN).

³The official slogan of ARF is "Promoting peace and security through dialogue and cooperation".

⁴*The Daily Star*, 29 July 2006.

⁵Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech at the 13th ARF Ministerial Meeting, 28 July 2006 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm75.html accessed on 28 August 2006.

II. An Overview of ARF

ARF was created in 1994 under the auspices of ASEAN. During the twenty-sixth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the post ministerial conference held in Singapore on 23-25 July 1993, the ministers agreed to establish ARF.

Emergence of ARF

ARF is the culmination of a process that started in 1990.⁶ In fact, it is a product of post-Cold War era when there was no longer any direct ideological confrontation between the two superpowers, the USA and the former USSR. In that period, Canada and Australia later joined by the USA and Japan suggested that the states of Asia-Pacific region should create a multilateral security cooperation forum in order to address regional security issues. Initially, the ASEAN states were cold to this proposal as they felt that such a forum would not work in this region. However, they recognized that the unwillingness to establish such a security forum would have marginalized the ASEAN.⁷ In addition, in 1992 the USA closed its largest overseas base in the Philippines, which raised new concerns about the future of the US involvement in the region. At the same time, China, India, and Japan were becoming stronger and more assertive. As a result, strategic debates were dominated by fears of a possible power vacuum, and resulting competition and clashes among the regional powers. All these influenced the ASEAN states to recognize the need for a regional security forum.⁸ So, ASEAN shifted their stance and agreed to establish ARF. In July 1994, the first meeting of this forum was held.⁹

⁶Shaun Narine, "The Limits of the ASEAN Way", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 7, 1997, p. 963.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 962.

⁸G.V.C Naidu, "Multilateralism and Regional Security: Can the ASEAN Regional Forum Really make a Difference?", *East-West Centre*, No.45, 2000, pp. 3-7.

⁹It lasted only three hours and was attended by six ASEAN states and their dialogue partners. Also in attendance were China, Russia, Laos, Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam.

Members of ARF

The partners of ARF include all the ten ASEAN states, together with sixteen other nations that have a bearing on the security of Asia-Pacific region. In an age of unilateralism, it is a unique experiment in multilateralism and dialogue.¹⁰ ARF comprises great powers like the USA, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia, and Australia as well as weak powers like East Timor and Vietnam.

Mechanism of ARF

ARF formally approved a concept paper in its 1995 ministerial meeting. This provided it a clear action line, outlining a three-stage strategy. The first stage included confidence-building measures (CBMs), the second stage included preventive diplomacy (PD), and the third stage involved the evolution of technique for conflict management.¹¹ Efforts to develop the tools of preventive diplomacy¹² and conflict management are still at an early stage while this forum continues to focus on confidence-building measures.¹³ The ARF's Annual Ministerial Meeting is the high point of the ARF activities and becomes an important gathering for consultation on regional security, political issues, and global matters that have regional impact. In fact, ARF's existing mechanism is revolving around this meeting. The main outcome of it is not action, but the chairperson's statement, adopted by

¹⁰ Maj Gen Jamshed Ayaz Khan, "Pakistan's Perspective on East Asian Security", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2005, p.22.

¹¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia, Official website: www.dfat.gov.au accessed on 25 August 2006.

¹² Preventive diplomacy as a term was first used by the then UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld in 1960. It was meant to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace. The term had relevance to Cold War context. In the post Cold War scenario, the term means action to prevent disputes arising between the parties to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.

¹³ Confidence-building measures include aim to improve transparency; through steps such as publication of defence white papers, information, exchange on military exercise and arms purchases. Most CBMs involve seminars and workshops on specific topics.

consensus.¹⁴ Besides, ARF organizes senior officials meeting (SOM) and inter-sessional group meeting (ISG). Interactions at the ministerial and SOM level are referred as Track-I activities that include intercessional CBMs, management disaster, maritime cooperation, and training for peacekeeping operations. Apart from these, the forum aims at building confidence at Track II levels where non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, members of civil society of the partner countries provide ideas and share experiences with the forum.

Objectives of ARF

ARF's objectives were outlined in the first Chair's statement in 1994.¹⁵ They are as follows:

- a) To organize constructive, relevant dialogue, and consultation on political and security issues of common interests and concerns;
- b) To make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Achievements of ARF

ARF remains a vibrant organization that has generally averted dealing with significant security issues.¹⁶ But so far, ARF has proven to be an effective forum for consultation on a wide range of non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, natural disaster, disease, epidemics, maritime security, proliferation, and illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons, smuggling, and trafficking in person etc. The forum has also achieved considerable progress in increasing cooperation in the area of confidence-building measures. At the same time, it enables the weaker nations in this region to work with the major global powers. All these have led ARF to contribute to the maintenance of peace and security in the region, despite the great

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of New Zealand, Official Website: www.mfat.govt.nz accessed on 27 August 2006.

¹⁵ ASEAN Regional Forum, Official Website: www.aseanregionalforum.org accessed on 25 August 2006.

¹⁶ Satish Nambiar, "Developing a Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia", in Dipankar Banerjee and Gert W. Kueck, (eds.), *South Asia and the War on Terrorism: Analysing the Implications of 11 September*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Indian Research Press, 2003, p.168.

diversity of its membership. The main achievements of the forum are cited below:

- a) As mentioned earlier, ARF provides a useful platform for multilateral and bilateral dialogues, and consultation on non-traditional security affairs, among the partner countries. This type of activities is gradually building mutual confidence;
- b) This forum, in addition, has been promoting transparency through exchanging information related to defence policy and publishing defence white papers. However, the record of practical achievement in this area is quite patchy. Many partners of this forum do not publish defence white papers and those who do reveal, little is unknown.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the partners of ARF have developed a good network among security, defence, and military officials;
- c) It has put emphasis on the importance of working together in emergency relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction as well as prevention and mitigation efforts in addressing natural disasters;
- d) ARF always raises its concerns about global terror, which has become the topmost security threat all over the world. Recently, the forum has contributed to the region's counter terrorism work. At an ARF meeting in 2003, the partners and participants arrived at a consensus to strengthen the cooperation among them by combating terrorism.¹⁸ In July 2004, the Australian government released white papers on terrorism which outlined Australian and regional efforts to fight terrorism. Also, the twelfth Annual ARF Ministerial Meeting extended its support for the activities of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), and the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA). The discussions in the second meeting of the ARF ISG on CBM and PD were dominated by issue of countering terrorism;
- e) Asian Security Outlook (ASO), a regular publication of ARF, promotes understanding, confidence, and transparency among the

¹⁷ G.V.C Naidu, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *East Asian Strategic Review*, The National Institute for Defence Studies, Japan, 2003, p. 223.

participants of this forum. It is the compilation of the voluntary reports, provided by the ARF partner countries on their security outlook;

- f) ARF is becoming a meeting point for bilateral issues and it provides an opportunity for countries on different sides of the fence to dialogue and negotiate in privacy. For example, at this forum the European Union (EU) can speak directly to Myanmar about democracy and human rights;
- g) This forum is one of the few diplomatic gatherings where North Korea attends. ARF provides the big powers of this forum an opportunity to meet North Korea for discussing the issue of Korean peninsula;
- h) ARF emphasised on dealing the issue of maritime security threat within a cooperative framework. A workshop, organized by ARF in 2004, on this security threat, reached at a common consensus to take collective efforts for addressing maritime security threats.

Based on these achievements, it can be said that ARF has progressed well towards CBMs but its movement towards preventive diplomacy is still modest. Only during its twelfth Annual Ministerial Meeting, the partners were stressing on the importance of adopting the concept and principles of preventive diplomacy in guiding ARF in its action.

Limitations of ARF

ASEAN was at the core of ARF during its formation in 1994. In fact, ASEAN could take credit for transforming a group of conflict prone states into a viable security community through a method¹⁹ of interaction among its member states.²⁰ Many of its political leaders and observers suggested that ARF should adopt the ASEAN experience as model for approaching security issues in this region. The proponents of this approach believed that, if the ASEAN process of dialogue and consultation could successfully alleviate intra-ASEAN conflicts, then it

¹⁹ This method is referred as the 'ASEAN Way' which involves the use of extensive consultations and consensus building to develop intramural solidarity.

²⁰ Shaun Narine, *op. cit.*, p. 962.

would be able to produce similar effects in the larger Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the 'ASEAN Way' has some difficulties of being a good model for ARF, which includes²¹

- i. The political, economic, and strategic considerations that have made ASEAN a success within Southeast Asia, do not necessarily apply to the more powerful states of the Asia-Pacific region; and
- ii. Since the 'ASEAN Way' is not designed to resolve disputes and conflicting perceptions among the ASEAN states, it may not be applicable to ARF.²²

Moreover, ARF brings together twenty six states with very diverse political system, military strength, economic development, and strategic outlook.²³ It makes this forum difficult to form a possible defence alliance. Instead, ARF is working together within a framework of cooperative security through cooperation and peaceful coexistence not competition.²⁴

III. Bangladesh's Motivations to Join ARF

Bangladesh showed its interest for the first time to participate in ARF in 1998. The ASEAN states supported Bangladesh's interest to join the forum. But things could not move well for Bangladesh because of ARF's 'moratorium on new membership' and India's opposition to the admission of Pakistan in ARF. Eventually, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2003 decided to lift the 'moratorium on new membership' and adopted a 'case by case' approach to consider the application of new participants of ARF. The same meeting arrived at a consensus to accept Pakistan as the new ARF partner. It was the twelfth meeting of the ARF, held in Vietnam in July 2005, which agreed to accept Bangladesh as its participant. The Foreign Ministers who participated

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 963.

²² ASEAN actually, is not capable of resolving contentious issues among the members, but it is capable of moving such issues aside so that they do not prevent progress in other areas.

²³ Simon S C Tay and Obood Talib, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: Preparing for Preventive Diplomacy", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1997, p. 252.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

in the meeting agreed to ASEAN's consensus on the admission of Bangladesh. The country's South Asian neighbours India and Pakistan became the permanent partners of ARF in 1996 and 2004 respectively. East Timor was the twenty-fifth partner of ARF. Sri Lanka will formally be accepted as its twenty-seventh participant when it would be presented at the next ARF Annual Ministerial Meeting scheduled to be held in Manila in 2007. Meanwhile, France, Britain, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have also applied to join the security forum.

Why Bangladesh was keen to join this forum? Here the paper attempts to dig out a few factors, which might have motivated Bangladesh to become a part of ARF. The factors are as follows:

- Bangladesh's interest in ARF could be discerned from its commitment to global peace and security. The country always protests against any action that violates global peace and harmony and supports the major international instruments on disarmament. Bangladesh also, has extended its support to international efforts at curbing nuclear proliferation. This is evident from the nation's signing of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Also, it is the first South Asian signatory to UN Convention on Anti Personnel Landmine and Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). At the same time, Bangladesh recognizes the right of a nation to use nuclear power for peaceful purpose.
- An association with ARF is likely to help Bangladesh to implement the 'Look East Policy' which was introduced in its foreign policy agenda in 2002. By adopting this policy, it has made a constructive step in exploring its eastern horizon.²⁵ The 'Look East Policy' was aimed at the eastward trade expansion of Bangladesh. And this policy might have influenced Bangladesh to join ARF. So, the motivation of Bangladesh to engage in this forum could be traced in this policy.
- That Bangladesh has economic considerations cannot be ruled out. Traditionally, Bangladesh had very close commercial and other

²⁵ Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech on "The Look East Policy of the Government of Bangladesh" at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, 12 November 2003 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm7.html accessed on 27 August 2006.

links with most of the ASEAN states.²⁶ These contacts have been reinforced through its participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), and Asia Cooperative Dialogue (ACD). This helps one to assume that Bangladesh might accrue some economic benefits from its attachment with ARF which comprises all the Southeast Asian nations.

- In an age of cooperative security²⁷, it is difficult to attain a sustained growth²⁸ unless regional security is ensured.²⁹ India and Pakistan were already the partners of ARF. Policymakers of Bangladesh might have thought that if Bangladesh becomes a partner of ARF, it will brighten the prospect for a cooperative security arrangement in the South Asian region. Additionally, this may help to reduce conflicts in the South Asian region. Such considerations might have motivated Bangladesh to join a multilateral security forum like ARF.
- Perhaps no other issue has been as intensely debated in the contemporary world as the issue of international terrorism. Bangladesh's concern and view about terrorism might be better understood at home and abroad through its association with ARF.
- Psychology of the government might be identified as another factor. ARF is one of the most prestigious forums as it clubbed

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Cooperative security is a methodology to create conditions between hostile states for a sustained process of economic, cultural, communication, and defence cooperation. See, Moonis Ahmar, "Developing a Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia", in Dipankar Banerjee and Gert W. Kueck (eds.), *South Asia and the War on Terrorism: Analysing the Implications of 11 September, op.cit.*, p. 178.

²⁸ South Asia needs to attain a 7% to 9% sustained growth in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). See, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan's speech on "Thirteenth SAARC Summit and Future Outlook" at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies on 11 December 2005 available at www.mofa.gov.bd/statements/fm51.html accessed on 1 November 2006.

²⁹ Syeda Naushin Parnim, "New Dynamics of East Asia: Evolving Asia Plus Three and Challenges for Bangladesh", *SARID Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2005.

together almost all the regional heavyweights as well as global superpower (i.e., the USA). In addition, this forum fully endorses Australia and New Zealand - two economically developed countries. Therefore, policymakers of Bangladesh might have thought that it would be a matter of pride and prestige for the nation if it becomes an ARF partner. Moreover, two closest neighbours of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, as mentioned earlier, were already partners of ARF. Therefore, 'being left out' sort of perception could have influenced the mind of the government. Viewed thus, the government's psychology was to generate a 'sense of belongingness' to a region which offers a lot of economic promises to it. Furthermore, it will likely to offer Bangladesh an opportunity to initiate an inter-faith dialogue between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN to foster more regional cooperation.

- Bangladesh has some engagement in the security affairs of Southeast Asia. It is one of the nine courtiers that composed an Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) committee to monitor Moro issue of Philippines. Also, Bangladesh can help to augment the cooperation between Asia and the Middle East as the country is a member of the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED).

IV. Possible Dividends that Bangladesh might Derive from ARF

Bangladesh has always tried to continue the momentum towards strengthening the process of peace and democracy. According to its fundamental objectives³⁰ of foreign policy, the country is inclined to settle the contentious bilateral issues through dialogues and positive engagements, which can reform international order. So, the participation in ARF reflects Bangladesh's intention to ensure security

³⁰ The fundamental objectives of Bangladesh's foreign policy are: the preservation of our independence and sovereignty, ensuring economic progress, consolidation of our existence as a politically stable moderate democratic and responsible contributing member of the international community and protecting this image outside. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, Official Website: www.mofa.gov.bd accessed on 29 August 2006.

in a peaceful way. At the same time, the nation is likely to derive some benefits in terms of dealing issues of non-traditional security threats and trade related aspects, following its admission to the forum.

Bangladesh considers ARF as the primary forum in enhancing political and security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.³¹ The participation in ARF is likely to help Bangladesh to intensify cooperation and coordination with the East Asian nations on various issues bearing on international security and peace; such as to intensify coordination in fighting terrorism, the scourge of narcotic, disease, smuggling, and illegal trafficking, particularly in contrabands, small arms and human beings-specially women and children. Thus, the association with ARF shows Bangladesh's desire to play its role in ensuring regional security. This would enhance the reputation of the country in the outside world. Apart from these, ARF would provide Bangladesh an opportunity to exchange views with some of the developed nations of the world. In an age of increasing globalization and interdependence, such an exchange will likely to help the state to explore avenues for cooperation. Further to this, Bangladesh endorses the objectives, goals, and principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia at the inaugural session of ARF's thirteenth Annual Meeting. In the Asia-Pacific region, TAC can be a very effective code of conduct in determining inter-state relations and propagating cooperation, amity, and friendship within the Asia-Pacific region, and between the ASEAN and other ARF participants. It was decided that Bangladesh would sign the treaty at an early date.³² If it signs this treaty then Bangladesh might be able to champion the cause of peace, harmony, and stability in the region.³³

South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) was put into effect on 1 July 2006 to increase the intra-regional trade in South Asia. Then, it was assumed that Bangladesh could gain something considerable from this trade agreement. But a recent survey conducted by the European Commission showed that the possibility of Bangladesh's

³¹ Foreign Minister's speech on 12 November 2003, *op. cit.*

³² Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

³³ According to Article 2 (Chapter I) of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, no nation would interfere in the internal affairs of others, and disputes or differences among partner nations would be settled peacefully.

reaping much significant advantages from SAFTA was very slim.³⁴ Such fate of this regional free trade agreement might influence the government of Bangladesh to propose an FTA (Free Trade Area)³⁵ with the ASEAN states with which it has traditionally maintained a close commercial tie as mentioned in the preceding section. As a consequence, accession to ARF could be considered a gateway for Bangladesh into ASEAN and greater East Asia. Also, the country has been actively negotiating with Myanmar and Thailand for a direct road link to Thailand through Myanmar.³⁶ This link would help to increase the trade with Southeast Asian nations. So, a participation in ARF might provide Bangladesh a room to discuss this issue with the concerned nations in the coming days.

The rise of religious militancy and illicit trade of small arms and light weapons pose major security threats to South Asia and Southeast Asian countries. Recently, Bangladesh, itself has been suffering from the crimes committed by religious militants. Besides, illicit trade of small arms and light weapons has hampered the law and order situation of the nation. Now, being a partner of ARF, Bangladesh may involve in dialogues, seminars, workshops etc. on these affairs. This involvement might help Bangladesh to get some effective measures to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Moreover, it would enable the nation to share the best practice and experiences in coping with religious militancy. Most importantly, ARF would be an ideal forum for Bangladesh to raise its concern about terrorism in all its forms, as it has profoundly affected the subcontinent after 9/11 and become the major threat to security around the world. As a committed supporter of global war on terror, Bangladesh should have a voice in shaping the evolving strategy of this war. Thus, an association with ARF may facilitate Bangladesh to arrange or participate in inter-faith dialogues, seminars etc. on issues of countering terrorism or menace of terrorism, and identification of

³⁴ Most of Bangladesh's 145 exportable items are in the list of sensitive items of SAFTA's member states. See, *The Daily Janakantha*, 29 October 2006.

³⁵ Japan, China and South Korea have signed FTA agreement with ASEAN. Also, India has finalized such an agreement with ASEAN, Thailand and Singapore.

³⁶ Foreign Minister's speech on 12 November 2003, *op. cit.*

possible root causes of terrorism etc. This might give the country a scope to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region. In addition to this, together with the ARF countries Bangladesh can share and exchange intelligence information and documents in enhancing cooperation to combat terrorism and other transnational crimes.

It is mentioned elsewhere in this paper that ARF mechanism encourages dialogues and negotiations at the Track-II level or non-government level. Bureaucratic dilly-dallying can hamper dialogues organized at the Track-I level or government level. Also, Track-II level of interactions are likely to strengthen mutual understanding and create trust among people in the region. Therefore, various think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of Bangladesh in collaboration with the ARF partners, can organize seminars, workshops, and conferences on relevant security affairs. Outcomes and suggestions from these seminars could be forwarded to the government.

Armed forces of Bangladesh have been playing a leading role in peacekeeping and peace building operations around the world.³⁷ It has maintained a robust presence in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. In fact, Bangladesh has developed its own capacity building facility as a contribution to the field of peacekeeping through founding the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support, Operation and Training (BIPSOT), which trains the peacekeepers. This institute is also available for the ARF partners. As a result, Bangladesh might play a decisive role in the distant future, when ARF would eventually establish a peacekeeping centre following its commitment to the 1995 concept paper. Currently, Bangladesh would have the opportunity to engage in talks, workshops etc *vis-à-vis* experiences from the peacekeeping missions. Besides, at this confidence-building phase of ARF, the country, with its ARF partners can initiate meetings and high-level interactions among the military officials from the defence academies and colleges. This could build an element of transparency in the defence policies and would go a long way in building confidence and trust, and fostering mutual understanding between Bangladesh and

³⁷ Since 1988, Bangladesh has participated in 34 different peace keeping missions in 26 countries with a total of 51,501 troops. See, Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

other ARF nations. As a result, ARF is likely to provide the Bangladeshi defence personnel an opportunity to participate in continuous process of confidence-building within the region and beyond by exchanging of intelligence information, building capacity, arranging and attending training programme, and sharing experiences on the legal aspects of the role of the armed forces in dealing with non-traditional security threats. All these might assist Bangladesh to shape its security environment.

Bangladesh is a disaster-prone country. Nevertheless, it has made good progress in disaster management. The government has adopted '2005-2009 - A Framework for Action' which intends to shift emphasis on risk management framework from relief oriented activities. The UN International Disaster Reduction acknowledged this adopted framework as a best practice mode for other nations to follow.³⁸ It might enable Bangladesh to contribute to the regional mechanism on disaster reduction that the ARF partners have planned to establish. So, cooperation in the form of dissemination of knowledge³⁹ and the development of collaborative network for early warning system might help Bangladesh to further improve this adopted framework for action. At the same time, the attachment with this forum would certainly pave a way for Bangladesh to work with its ARF partners in emergency relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction as well as prevention and mitigation efforts in addressing natural disaster.

Maritime security is a major concern for Bangladesh. It has decided to join the ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia) agreement, which has been given importance in various ARF meetings. ReCAAP agreement would go a long way in enhancing maritime security for Bangladesh. Also, by taking part in the seminars and workshops on maritime security organized by ARF, Bangladesh might develop national and international standards on the safety of navigation and surveillance system for ensuring safe movement of people and goods through regional water. Furthermore, it would be able to

³⁸ Foreign Minister's speech on 28 July 2006, *op. cit.*

³⁹ In the twelfth meeting of ARF held on 29 July 2005 in Vietnam, the ministers had exchanged views on tsunami disaster and follow-up actions taken by the concerned nations.

cooperate with the ARF partners in operational solution to maritime safety and security, shipping and port security, and application of technology for maritime safety and security. Apart from these, Bangladesh can initiate joint maritime security exercise with ARF participants in the coming days.

As Bangladesh is moving into the age of information and communication technology, the risk of possible attacks by cyber terrorists could not be ignored. The thirteenth ARF Ministerial Meeting has decided to boost counter-cyber terrorism measures by announcing sweeping plans to prevent cyber attacks on critical infrastructure.⁴⁰ Thus, Bangladesh could develop an effective counter-cyber terrorism measure in the way of sharing intelligence, expertise, and skills on fighting cyber-crime.

V. ARF, SAARC, and Bangladesh

In spite of being an association of lots of promises, SAARC has not been able to grow, while other regional blocs are emerging as close-knit communities.⁴¹ Since its inception in the mid-eighties, SAARC has achieved very little in tangible terms. In fact, it is not yet a success so far, either in political or in economic terms.⁴² The inter-state rivalry between the two regional powers, India and Pakistan over Kashmir issue coupled with Indo-Bangladesh disputes, other bilateral disputes, terrorism, and mistrust amongst the members stand in the way of harmonising SAARC as an effective organization. It failed to deliver much to a region, which is still far away from making an economic breakthrough to achieve a sustainable cycle of rapid

⁴⁰ It is worth mentioning that cyber attacks are not very eminent in this region. The regional terrorist outfits are not yet capable of mounting a large cyber assault. But, it is alarming to find that the cyber terrorists are using internet to recruit members, raise funds, and coordinate attacks. See, ASEAN Regional Forum, Official website: www.aseanregionalforum.org/Default.aspx?tabid=50 accessed on 14 August 2006.

⁴¹ Atiur Rahman, "SAARC: Not Yet a Community", in Jim Rolfe (*ed.*), *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2004, p. 133.

⁴² Moudud Ahmed, *South Asia, Crisis of Development: The Case of Bangladesh*, The University Press Limited, 2002, p. 229.

growth.⁴³ As a result, South Asia remains a region of about 600 million people who earns less than one dollar a day.⁴⁴ While average per capita gross domestic product (PCGDP) for developing nations is US \$ 1280, the same is only US \$ 510 in South Asia. Only 1% of foreign direct investment (FDI) and 1% of global tourists come to this region.⁴⁵ Such socio-economic indicators leave South Asia as a region plagued by immense poverty, illiteracy, deprivation, and under-development. Bangladesh, being very much an integral part of South Asia, is feeling the heat as SAARC's passive role in an age of globalization frustrated to some extent the growth and development process of the nation. Moreover, in SAARC Bangladesh cannot discuss some outstanding conflicting issues like common resource management, border problems, terrorism with its closest and powerful neighbour, India. Now, Bangladesh's accession to ARF might stir up the mind of concerned ones with a few pertinent questions: Will Bangladesh able to discuss the contentious bilateral issues with India in ARF, when it has failed to do so in SAARC? Will this forum work as a substitute for SAARC?

It has been mentioned that due to India-Pakistan conflict and some other inter-state disputes, SAARC could not make much headway on functional front. So, it was perceived that on a forum like ARF in the presence of some big powers, both India and Pakistan could have made considerable progress towards confidence-building and ultimately adopted a mechanism to resolve conflict.⁴⁶ Actually, the ASEAN Head of external relations, Sundram Pushpanathan, expressed in an interview to AFP in 2004, that the inclusion of Pakistan in ARF would give this forum a chance to play its role in discussing a regional flash point, Kashmir.⁴⁷ But unfortunately, in near future it seems that ARF would not fully materialize this possibility because this forum itself needs to go a long way before adopting the technique for conflict management. Furthermore, before Pakistan's entrance to ARF, India was concerned

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁴ Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p.133.

⁴⁵ Foreign Minister's Speech on 11 December 2005, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Shahid Ilyas, "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): Its Role in Confidence Building and Conflict Resolution", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2004-05, p.43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

about its bringing controversial issues in front of ARF partners. The Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda also assured the Indian foreign ministry that ARF would not discuss contentious bilateral issue like Kashmir, after the admission of Pakistan to this forum.⁴⁸ This might lead one to predict that just like SAARC⁴⁹, ARF would not be able to play any role in calming down the hostile situation between the two nations. In this backdrop, it may be assumed that in ARF, Bangladesh also would not be successful in consulting with India regarding the issues of conflicting affairs. What Bangladesh can do is it might moot the idea of forming a multilateral security forum like ARF in South Asia. An introduction of such a forum would possibly initiate people-to-people cooperation and dialogues amongst the SAARC nations on controversial bilateral issues⁵⁰ and promote congenial atmosphere to this region. In addition to this, under the umbrella of this forum the academics, journalists, businesspersons, senior ex-army officials, and other prominent personalities of Track II approach together with diplomats and officials of Track I levels might come closer to work for developing a cooperative security framework in South Asia. But, on the other hand, one can argue that the nations of South Asia do not have to approach beyond SAARC for adopting a collaborative security framework. To have such an arrangement in this region within the framework of SAARC, countries, such as Afghanistan, Iran, China, and Myanmar could be endorsed as its members. The inclusions of the new nations in SAARC might negate the overwhelming size and status of India⁵¹. But, in the coming days if a new security forum is to be created in the mould of ARF in South Asia, then the nations of this region need to arrive at a consensus to formulate security, political, and economic ties on the basis of equality, notwithstanding their conflicts. In fact, it is a requirement for successful application of cooperative security in South Asia.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ The constitution of SAARC does not allow its members to discuss bilateral issues in this association.

⁵⁰ Diplomacy at the Track-II level *vis-à-vis* conventional state-to-state interactions is said to have better chance in building confidence in South Asia. See, Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵¹ Satish Nambiar, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁵² Moonis Ahmar, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

So, it is evident from the above discussion that at ARF, any possibility of Bangladesh's taking part in dialogues with India on disputed bilateral issue is very unlikely. This security forum would actually play no different role than SAARC *vis-à-vis* contentious bilateral affairs. All these have suggested that ARF right now, would not be able to complement SAARC. Neither could it be a substitute for SAARC. At best, Bangladesh might extract a lesson from ARF by taking initiative for creating a security forum in South Asia. But, an effective working of such forum is subject to the fulfilment of conditions as pointed out previously. Considered thus, Bangladesh needs to ensure that its association with ARF would not undermine the importance of its involvement in SAARC. Therefore, it should adopt a concerted effort for development through mutual co-operation within the framework of this South Asian regional body.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Currently, at the phase of confidence building ARF is only organizing seminars, workshops etc. The sixth volume of the ASO reflects this picture. This has led some critics of ARF to dub this forum as 'talk shop', which failed to deliver concrete output and where things moved very slowly.⁵³ To enhance credibility, ARF needs to utilize whatever opportunities available for cooperative actions.⁵⁴ However, in the East Timor crisis in 1999, ARF could not play any role. The forum viewed that crisis as an internal problem of a fellow partner. But ARF has to move, over a period of time, slowly and gradually from its current phase to the next phase i.e., preventive diplomacy, and ultimately it will adopt the mechanism for conflict resolution.⁵⁵

It is in this backdrop that Bangladesh is expected to remain engaged in dialogues and consultations by participating in seminars and workshops. Participation in ARF appears worthwhile since it gives Bangladesh an opportunity to raise its concerns about traditional and non-traditional security issues in presence of some powerful nations mentioned at the beginning. In addition, ARF would provide the country a scope to interact with the ARF partners. Furthermore, by

⁵³ Simon S C Tay and Obood Talib, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

⁵⁴ G.V.C Naidu, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁵⁵ Shahid Ilyas, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

associating itself with this forum, Bangladesh would likely to accrue economic benefits in the form of strengthening commercial ties with the ASEAN states. Seen thus, Bangladesh's participation in ARF can be regarded as a significant achievement for the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh. In fact, the involvement of Bangladesh in this forum is considered a milestone in its multilateral diplomacy.⁵⁶ However, to remain actively engaged in this forum, this paper recommends the following which the Bangladesh government may consider:

- To enhance cooperation among the ARF partners, the Bangladesh government can encourage dialogues at the Track-II level where the local think-tanks and NGOs will come up with ideas of organizing and participating in seminars, workshops etc. on issues of regional security;
- To make any decision in relation to security affairs, the government might consider relevant suggestions, output, and ideas generated from these Track-II levels of dialogue;
- To ensure the participation of the Bangladeshi delegations in the ARF deliberations in the coming days, the government should explore sources for funds.

⁵⁶ Foreign Minister's speech on 23 August, *op. cit.*

Sufia Khanom

TIPAIMUKH DAM: LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES FOR BANGLADESH

Abstract

Bangladesh is crisscrossed by rivers. However, the key realities in the water sector of Bangladesh are too much of water during the monsoon season causing floods and too little during the dry season. India, in violation of its commitment made in 36th Joint Rivers Commission meeting in Dhaka, has floated an international tender for the construction of a dam at Tipaimukh on Barak river. It will produce hydro-electricity and support Cachar plain irrigation project. But the dam authority overlooks the experts' warning of dire environmental consequences of such project in the area and that for the lower riparian, Bangladesh. The management of an international river basin is a matter of international concern because it is a trans-boundary environmental resource and environment is basically global. So, regional cooperation on the Tipaimukh dam project will be equitably beneficial for both India and Bangladesh.

I. Introduction

The key realities in the water sector of Bangladesh are too much of water during the monsoon season causing floods and too little or scarcity during the dry season. Being the lowest riparian in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river systems, this country bears the brunt of flood, discharging over 80 percent of the GBM basins wide runoff within the five months of rainy season and receives residual flows from the trans-boundary rivers during the lean season. Out of 57 rivers in the country, 54 flow from India and 3 from Myanmar. The severe environmental disruptions in both West Bengal in India and Bangladesh set in motion by the Farakka barrage on the Ganges are a bitter testimony to how devastating the consequences are for those

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whose livelihoods depend on the land and waters of the affected areas. One of the victims of river erosion in north-west Bangladesh has aptly called Farakka 'a devil delivered by Delhi'. The withdrawal of the Ganges water at Farakka has caused serious damage to the ecology and economy of south-western districts of Bangladesh, including the unique mangrove forests along the Bay of Bengal. India unilaterally diverts the flow of water during the dry season, depriving Bangladesh of its proper share, while during the rainy season, the swollen water gets unobstructed thereby abruptly flooding Bangladesh. In such a scenario, its impact on Bangladesh is disastrous and severe, both in immediate and long term.

India, in violation of its commitment made in the 36th Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) meeting in Dhaka, has floated an international tender for construction of a dam at the Tipaimukh on Barak river in the state of Manipur to produce hydro-electricity despite experts' warning of dire consequences of such project in the area and the lower riparian Bangladesh.

The proposed Tipaimukh dam is to be located 500 meters (m) downstream from the confluence of Barak and Tuivai rivers, and lies on the south-western corner of Manipur. It is a huge earth dam (rock-filled with central impervious core) having an altitude of about 180 m above the sea level with a maximum reservoir level of 178m and 136m as the MDDL (minimum draw down level). The dam was originally conceived to contain only the flood water in the Cachar plains of Assam but later on, emphasis has been placed on hydroelectric power generation, having an installation capacity of 1500 mega watt (MW) with only a firm generation of 412MW (less than 30% of installed capacity)⁵⁷.

The northeast region of India is one of the six major seismically active zones of the world that includes California, northeast India, Japan, Mexico, Taiwan and Turkey. Again one of the largest river systems in Bangladesh-Meghna with its distributaries is fully dependent on the waters rolling down from Surma and Kushiara. A massive construction on the Barak river will adversely affect the water

⁵⁷ Hydro Politics of Tipaimukh Dam, available at <http://www.e-pao.net>, accessed on 15 September 2006.

flows of the Meghna and its distributaries. India is planning to export the surplus power to Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia but not to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's case is strongly anchored on the principles of equity, fairness and no harm to any co-riparian in the context of interventions in common rivers, as enshrined in the 1996, Indo-Bangladesh Ganges (water sharing) Treaty. Regional cooperation on the Tipaimukh dam project will also be beneficial to India. Furthermore, this can lay GBM regional cooperation to flourish in all possible respects. So, this is vital for shaping a better future for all in the region. The paradox of abundant resources including water on one hand, and persisting high levels of ecological disaster in the region must be addressed through regional cooperation, on the other.

With such a perspective, the present paper is an attempt to analyze the likely environmental consequences of Tipaimukh dam on Bangladesh. The paper consists of five sections. The first section reviews the general information about Tipaimukh dam, like its location and main features of dam. The second section deals with the right of lower riparian state in view of international law and Ganges (water sharing) Treaty. The third and main thrust of the paper discusses the plausible environmental impacts/ consequences of Tipaimukh dam. The fourth section attempts to set a vision for integrated water resources management through regional cooperation. Finally, the last section draws conclusion of the paper.

2. An Overview of Tipaimukh Dam

2.1. Location

The proposed Tipaimukh dam will be constructed (24°14' north and 93°13' east approximately) at 500 m downstream from the confluence of the Barak and Tuivai rivers in the southwestern corner of Manipur⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ Dr. Benjamin Gangei, "Tipaimukh Dam: A *Cul-De-Sac*", available at <http://www.manipuronline.com>, accessed on 15 September 2006.



Source: <http://wanabehuman.blogspot.com>⁵⁹.

The Barak river is the second largest drainage system in northeast India. It starts from the Lai-Lyai village in the Senapati district of Manipur and meanders through the Senapati, Tamenglong Churachandpur districts and also through the Jiribam subdivision of Manipur. The upper Barak catchments area extends over almost the entire north, northwestern, western and southwestern portion of the state. The middle course lies in the plain areas of Cachar of Assam, while the lower, deltaic courses in Bangladesh.⁶⁰

The Barak enters Bangladesh through Zakigonj in Sylhet and flows in two directions- Surma and Kushiara. The Barak and its main distributaries (Surma and Kushiara) river fall within Meghna basin. Meghna basin is the smallest among the GBM basins but most unpredictable and chaotic in hydrologic means. Barak and then Surma, Kushiara river receive all the surface water originated in Meghna basin⁶¹, carry it down to the upper Meghna river and join with Padma

⁵⁹ Argha Mahmud, "Politics: Indian Dam Project Threatens Bangladesh, Indigenous and Ecology", available at <http://wanabehuman.blogspot.com>, accessed on 15 September 2006.

⁶⁰ Nava Thakuria, "India's Tribals Protest against Tipaimukh Project near Burma Border", available at <http://www.mizzima.com/ar>, accessed on 11 September 2006.

⁶¹ See for details, *Flood Action Plan 6 (FAP 6)*, available at <http://bict/wei/resources/nerp>, accessed on 01 October 2006. Flood Action Plan (FAP) is an initiative to study the causes and nature of flood in Bangladesh and to prepare guidelines for controlling it. FAP was based on several earlier studies by UNDP, a French Engineering consortium, USAID and JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). The FAP included 29 different components of which 11 were

river at further downstream. Combined flow of the two rivers then move further southward as Meghna river to Bay of Bengal. The proposed Tipaimukh dam will be constructed on Barak river by controlling the stream flow of it, creating a huge reservoir upstream of the dam to develop one of the largest hydroelectric power plants in eastern India. The dam site is located at around 100 kilometer (km) upstream from the diverging point of Barak river into two rivers⁶².

2.2. Main Features of Tipaimukh Dam

A **dam**⁶³ may be defined as an obstruction or a barrier built across a stream or river. At the back of this barrier, water gets collected, forming a pool of water. The side, on which water gets collected, is called the upstream side, and the other side of the barrier is called the downstream side. The lake of water which is formed upstream is often called reservoir.

It has been stated earlier that the main permanent canal, forming the primary part of a direct irrigation scheme, takes off from a diversion weir or a **barrage**⁶⁴. In general, the above purpose can be accomplished by constructing a barrier across the river, so as to raise the water level on the upstream side of the obstruction, and thus, to feed the main canals taking off from its upstream side, at one or both of its flanks. The ponding of water can be achieved either only by a permanent *pucca* raised crest across the river by or a raised crest supplemented by falling counter balanced gates, or shutters working over the crest. If the major part or entire ponding of water is achieved by a raised crest and smaller part or nil part of it is achieved by the shutters, then this barrier is known as a **weir**. On the other hand, if most of the ponding is done by gates and a small or nil part of it is done by the raised crest then the barrier is known as **barrage** or river

regional, with some pilot projects, and the rest were supporting studies on issues like Environment, Fisheries, Geographic Information System, Socio-economic studies, Topographic Mapping, River Survey, Flood Modelling, Flood Proofing, Flood Response, etc. The aim of the FAP is to set the foundation of a long-term programme for achieving a permanent and comprehensive solution to the flood problem.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁶³ S. K. Barg, *Irrigation Engineering and Hydraulic Structures*, Khanna Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p. 521.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.521.

regulator⁶⁵. At Tipaimukh, a dam will be built to produce hydroelectricity. A barrage is also proposed to be built in order to support Cachar plain irrigation project.

The Mechanism of Hydropower Generation

The actual process of converting water potential to commercial energy in the form of electricity in a hydropower station is fairly simple. Water is diverted from a river and conveyed to turbines in a power house. Different types of turbines, each designed to make optimum use of the available hydraulic energy for different types of rivers. After entering the turbines, water propels the shafts of the turbines and produce hydraulic energy. This energy is then transferred to the generator which in turn is converted to electricity. Hydropower plants can be placed in two broad categories depending on how water is used.

1. Run-of-river power plants utilize the natural flow in rivers without any storage or regulation. Without regulation, the amount of electricity that can be produced at given time is only as much as the amount of water in the river, and if there is more water than is needed at any moment, it can be stored for later use.
2. Reservoir-type power plants, on the other hand, draw water from large artificial storage lakes created by constructing huge dams across rivers. These reservoirs can store the surplus seasonal water which flows in streams during rainy periods for utilization during dry months.

The Tipaimukh dam is a reservoir type huge earth dam. The purposes of the dam according to Indian authority⁶⁶ are:

- a. The dam was originally designed to contain flood waters in the lower Barak valley i.e. Cachar plain.
- b. Hydropower generation was later incorporated into the project.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.521.

⁶⁶ Dr. Debabrata Roy Laifungbam and Dr. Soibam Ibotombi, "Tipaimukh Dam: A Geotechnical Blunder for International Dimension (part-I)", available at <http://www.kanglaonline.com/index.>, accessed on 13 September 2006.

- c. The project will have an installation capacity of 6X25 MW and a firm generation of 412 MW.

The total area required for construction including submergence area is 30,860 hectare (ha) of which forest land (20,797 ha), village land (1,195 ha), horticultural land (6,160 ha) and agricultural land (2,525 ha). As per estimates of the authorities themselves, the project will totally affect 311 sq. km and 8 villages, 1461 *Hmar* (tribal) families in Indian territory.

2.3. North Eastern Electric Power Company (NEEPCO) Limited and the History of Dam Proposal

The proposal for the Tipaimukh high dam was first mooted in 1955. It was to be constructed with Japanese aid at a cost of US\$* 244.198 million (now with NEEPCO at a cost of US\$1,234.755 million)⁶⁷. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) of India had given the final Techno-Economic Clearance (TEC) to NEEPCO to start the construction for the controversial 1500 MW Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project. The CEA accorded the final TEC for the 1,153.227 million US\$ projects to NEEPCO on July 2003 after getting the final clearance and No Objection Certificate from the Mizoram (a state of India) government on July 2003 itself. NEEPCO had started process for floating of international tender to undertake the Tipaimukh project. Contracts had been awarded by March 2004. The six phase project is slated to be completed by 2012. The first unit with capacity of generating 250 MW would be completed within 78 months of awarding the contracts. NEEPCO facilitated a 92 banks meet in Delhi on 11 June 2003 where bankers from France, Germany and India had shown interest in investing in the Tipaimukh project. The dam was designed by the Department of Earthquake Engineering of Rourkee University⁶⁸.

* Note: The Indian Rupee has been converted to US dollar at the rate that prevailed on November 22, 2006.

⁶⁷“Dam Gives Rise to Concern in India and Bangladesh”, available at <http://www.manipuronline.com/Monipur/monipur.htm>, accessed on 26 September 2006.

⁶⁸ See for details at <http://www.lists.resis.ca/pipermail/indegenouslyouth/2006>, accessed on 24 September 2006.

Indian government promised Bangladesh to provide with the Detailed Project Report (DPR) of Tipaimukh dam before its implementation at a JRC meeting in September 2005. But the NEEPCO, a public sector enterprise under the Indian ministry of power, had meanwhile completed the DPR and started sale of tender papers for construction of Tipaimukh project. According to NEEPCO's bid announcement, the last date for sale of tender documents was 15 February 2006 and that for submission of those was 3 April 2006. On completion of the tender process, India plans to complete its largest hydropower project by 2012.

3. International Law and Convention

The management of an international river basin is a matter of international concern because it is a trans-boundary environmental resource, and environment is basically global. The treaty practices of riparian states also bear evidence that result from the use of a common river in its territory. There is a large number of such treaties,⁶⁹ enumerating an obligation similar in form and substances. The Tipaimukh dam project was entirely developed and approved without informing the government of Bangladesh or involving its people in any meaningful exercise to assess the downstream impacts of dam. Tipaimukh is a multipurpose project and it includes irrigation component, as envisaged earlier. This is clearly a gross violation of co-riparian rights of Bangladesh.

⁶⁹ The Treaty between Russia and Lithuania of 12 July 1920; the Treaty of Riga between Russia and Latvia of 11 August 1920; the Franco-British Convention of 23 December 1920; the Treaty between Russia and Estonia of 2 February 1920; the Convention between Finland and the USSR of 28 October 1922; the Treaty between Hungary and Romania of 14 April 1924; the Treaty between Norway and Finland of 14 February 1925; the Treaty between France and Germany of 4 August 1925; the Protocol between France and the UK of 31 October 1931; the Frontier Agreement and the Exchange of Notes between Afghanistan and the USSR of 13 June 1946; the Treaty between Austria and Yugoslavia of 16 April 1954; for some more treaties with similar provisions, see M. Rafiqul Islam, "The Effects of the Farrakka Barrage on Bangladesh and International Law", *BISS Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1984, pp. 249-273.

3.1. Madrid Declaration and Others

Both the 1919 Madrid Declaration and the 1961 Salzburg Resolution adopted by the Institute of International Law prohibit all kinds of utilisation of an international river by riparian state in its territory which strongly affects the possibility of use of the same water by co-riparian states in their territories⁷⁰. Such a principle was considered by the Inter-American Bar Association as a part of existing law applicable in every international river. The International Law Association proscribes any use of international water by a riparian state that adversely affects the equitable utilization of the same water system by co-riparian states⁷¹. These statement of international lawyers, both inter-governmental and voluntary non-governmental, have contributed significantly to the formulation and systemisation of international legal principles regarding the utilization of waters of international rivers. They are the outcome of long, careful and intensive study and investigation by various committees on the uses of international river consisting of eminent and influential international legal experts. As such, their authority seems to be no less compelling.

The authorities referred to clearly corroborate the notion that it can never be the legal right of a riparian state to deprive another riparian state of its rightful share of the common water and cause injury there in. If it happens, by its location, to be in a position to control the supplies of water they share. On the other hand, it is genuine lawful right of riparian state, which by the reason of its location is placed in a disadvantageous position; to continue to enjoy its right on common water supplies. The land over which to pass first belongs, and is subject, to the territorial control of India. If India can and chooses to do so, it can use up all of the Barak water and leave the rest of the river in Bangladesh only a dry bed. The right of India to do so is unlimited. This means that there is no legal impediment to prevent India from exploiting the Barak water solely to its own benefit. Acknowledgment of such a right tantamount to legitimize the right of India to take away the Barak water in Bangladesh and to inflict serious damage therein.

⁷⁰ Article 1 and 2 of the Madrid Declaration, above note 17, Sevette, p. 261 and Article 4 of the Salzburg Resolution, *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 56, 1962, pp. 737-38.

⁷¹ The Helsinki Rules, *Report of the 52nd Conference*, 1966, p. 487.

Conceding such a right may turn the situation into a source of international friction. Such a situation is very much likely to be filled with the risk. The frustrated and deprived riparian state may have recourse to unilateral action outside the law, which may endanger peace and security of the region⁷². More importantly, the recognition of such a right indeed implies the disavowal of accepted norms of international law and the establishment of a new precedent contrary to international practice.

3.2. The United Nations (UN) Water Course Convention 1997

The 1997 UN Water Course Convention is the only convention of a universal character on the utilisation of the international watercourses. It was negotiated by almost every member of the international community including Bangladesh and was adopted by a very weighty majority of states. The convention sets forth the general principles and rules governing non-navigational users of international watercourses in the absence of specific agreements among the states concerned and provides guidelines for the negotiation of future agreements. India has even overlooked some major provisions of the 1997 UN Watercourse Convention⁷³ which are mentioned below:

Article 5(1) of the convention requires an international watercourse to be utilized in an 'equitable and reasonable' manner. The objectives are to attain 'optimal and sustainable utilization' as well as to ensure 'adequate protection of the watercourse'. While achieving these objectives, according to article 6(1), conservation, protection, development and economy of use of the water resources have to be taken into account. The incorporation of conservation aspects enjoins the watercourses states with greater responsibility, which the negotiating states consider appropriate in view of the recent development in international environmental law.

⁷² Pakistan talked of war when India cut off the Indus water supply for irrigation in Pakistan. The violent Arab-Israel dispute over the sharing of the Jordan river water may also be cited in the same vein.

⁷³ See for details, United Nations Press Release, GA/9248 available at <http://www.law.wits.ac.za/humanarts/index.html>, accessed on 13 November 2006.

While addressing the obligation of no harm and its relationship with equitable utilization, the 1997 Convention puts significant emphasis on relevant procedural duties. Article 7 of the convention requires a watercourse state to take all appropriate measures to prevent causing of significant harm to other watercourse states. If significant harm, however, is caused, article 7 requires the state causing such harm to give due regard to article 5 and 6 and to consult the affected state in order to eliminate or mitigate such harm and to discuss the question of compensation in appropriate cases.

Article 9 provides for regular exchange of data and information on the condition of a watercourse. The purpose is to ensure that the watercourse states will have the facts necessary to enable them to comply with their obligation under article 5, 6 and 7.⁷⁴

3.3. The World Bank Environmental Policy

The World Bank is going to approve fund for the Tipaimukh dam projects.⁷⁵ According to the World Bank environmental guidelines, the fund it uses in financing projects on international rivers needs to be considered in the form a sort of international protocol with certain guidelines. These guidelines require a country undertaking a project to notify other countries in the basin with the aim of ensuring that the project does not harm them. In the long term, a mechanism has to be evolved to enforce the rules for preventing/mitigating trans- boundary environmental damages in the international river basins, and the UN should have the mandate to perform such functions. The Indian lobby, inside the World Bank, is very strong and they are trying to collect funds for water resources projects in India.⁷⁶

But till now, the people of lower riparian country like Bangladesh have objection regarding Tipaimukh dam.

⁷⁴ *International Law Commission Report (ILC)*, 1994, p. 250.

⁷⁵ Tipaimukh Dam: A Different Perspective, available at <http://www.e-paonet/ep>, accessed on 20 December 2006.

⁷⁶ Reported in *ManabJamin*, Dhaka (a Bengali daily), 27 August, 2003.

3.4. Violation of Ganges Water Sharing Treaty

India has violated the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty that was signed between the two countries, India and Bangladesh, in 1996. Article IX of this Treaty describes....“the principles of equity, fairness and no harm to either party; both the Governments agree to conclude water sharing Treaties/Agreements with regard to other common rivers”. But Tipaimukh dam certainly causes damage to the lower riparian country. If India wanted to cooperate with Bangladesh, it would have shared information on the dam including the barrage. To the contrary, India completed the DPR and floated international tender for Tipaimukh dam.

4. Plausible Environmental Impacts on Bangladesh

Construction of large dams in South Asia has become a subject of debate involving the professionals, donors, potential beneficiaries and affected population, government agencies and other individuals. The idea of construction of dams and reservoirs received popularity in India immediately after the Partition in 1947. The primary objective was to ascertain water supply for the irrigated agriculture to meet the growing food demands. Out of the total 4,291 dams in India, 2,256 were constructed and commissioned during 1971-1990.⁷⁷ In the late 1950s, Bangladesh constructed the Kaptai and other dams and barrages for hydropower generation and water supply for irrigation. Nepal has few small dams for the same purposes. Bhutan's only dam was constructed and financed by India to export hydropower for Indian consumption.

Benefit analyses of most of these dams were carried out with incomplete information and unrealistic assumptions. All non-marketable environmental and social consequences and their costs were simply ignored either for the lack of foresight or because they were unquantifiable. Economic justifications also involved grace repayment periods, high discount rates, low-interest loans, and a transfer of costs to non-dam/reservoir parts of water developments. These dams (barrage) have generated benefits especially for the agriculture in South Asia. However, country specific information is only available for India. Irrigation is either the only or one of primary objectives in 95 percent of the 4,291 dams in India. India's irrigation

⁷⁷ *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh, 28 April 2000.

potential increased from 22.6 million ha in 1951 to about 89.6 million ha by 1997. In the same period, food grain production in India increased from 51 million tonnes to 200 million tonnes. About 66 percent of the increased grains were contributed by the irrigated agriculture. Hydropower generation from the large dams seems less promising than agriculture. Hydropower received the least priority in India where only 4 percent of the dams have hydropower generation as one of the objectives. In India, hydropower constitutes about 25 percent share of the total installed capacity of 89,000 MW in early 1998. The share of hydropower in the hydrothermal mix drastically declined to 29 percent in 1998 from 50 percent in early 1960s. The ratio of hydropower from the reservoir and run-off river scheme is 2:1.⁷⁸

Furthermore, successes of the dams were not realized without prices. They displaced millions of people, inundated vast forest lands of invaluable ecological importance, wiped out many economically and ecologically valuable species and disrupted cultural values and heritage. Moreover, they introduced certain controlled environment at the cost of natural environment and beauty.

4.1. Tipaimukh Dam: A Geotectonic Blunder

Over a decade and half, the issue of Tipaimukh dam has created a lot of disappointment with regard to scientific, technical, economic and environmental feasibility of the dam. An attempt is, therefore, made here to provide a brief geological, structural and tectonic account of Tipaimukh and its adjoining region in terms of tectonic framework of Indo-Myanmar Ranges (IMR) in general and that of Bangladesh in particular. Such a consideration would reveal the nature and extent of the geotectonic risk being taken by constructing a mega dam at Tipaimukh.

Seismicity of northeast India is one of the highest earthquake potential area in the world due to its tectonic setting i.e. subduction as well as collision plate convergence.⁷⁹ Analysis of earthquake epicentres and magnitudes within 100-200 km radii of Tipaimukh dam

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Plate convergence means the two lithospheric plates in which one plate descends below the other.

site reveals hundreds of earthquakes having magnitude (M) 5 and above on the Richter scale in the last 100-200 years (See annex 1). It is found that within the 100 km radius of Tipaimukh, 2 earthquakes of +7M have taken place in the last 150 years and the last one having occurred in the year 1957 at an aerial distance of about 75 km from the dam site in the eastern northeast direction.

Beside the frequency of such large earthquakes within 100km radius, it is also further observed that a number of epicentral points align in the form of a linear array parallel to regional strike northern northeast-southern south west or north-south revealing how this Barak-Makru thrust zone is seismically active. Another important aspect of seismic activity is that shallow earthquakes are far more disastrous than the deeper ones even if magnitude is relatively low since destructive surface waves can be quickly and easily propagated from the focus/epicentre. And majority of the earthquakes that takes place on the western side of Manipur are shallow (50 km focal depth or less) which is due to the tectonic setting of the IMR

Under these circumstances, whether it will be a wise policy to construct a huge dam or not need to be thoroughly discussed and investigated. The trend of earthquakes shows that the regions which have experienced earthquakes in the past are more prone to it; the magnitude of future earthquakes may be uniform to the past ones; and the earthquake occurrence, geological data and tectonic history all have close correlation. The Tipaimukh dam site has been chosen at the highest risk seismically hazardous zone.

The dam proponent, NEEPCO claims that seismic hazards are being taken care of through consultations with Rourkee University in India. However, the government of India has requested NEEPCO to also consult with the Geological Survey of India.⁸⁰ Here it is pertinent to mention that extreme seismic hazards cannot be addressed adequately or satisfactorily through consultations with seismologists, as the risk inducing and impact factors are mechanical, geophysical, tectonic and socio-economic in nature.

⁸⁰ North Eastern Electric Power Cooperation Limited, available at <http://www.neepco.com/events.html>, accessed on 07 November 2006.

4.2. Tipaimukh Dam Failure and the Scenario for Bangladesh

Dam failure risk is, however, a significant issue relating to future environmental management of the northeast region water system of Bangladesh. A dam-break is a catastrophic failure of a dam which results in the sudden draining of the reservoir and a severe flood wave that causes destruction and in many cases death downstream. While such failures are rare and are not planned, they have happened to dams, large and small, from time to time. The scenario and consequences of a Tipaimukh dam-break has not been thoroughly studied. NEEPCO has yet to complete a basic scientifically sound environmental impact assessment even though it is geared up to start construction after having opened international bidding for engineering, procurement and construction⁸¹. Such a study has to be conducted by international as well as national dam-safety experts as the impacts of a dam-break will have both severe upstream and downstream effects.

However, the downstream effects of a Tipaimukh dam-break have been studied by the government of Bangladesh since 1992-94 under Flood Action Plan (FAP). In Flood Action Plan 6 (FAP 6) as part of the north eastern regional water management plan of Bangladesh, the scenario of a dam failure at Tipaimukh dam project was investigated by international hydraulic and environmental experts in the context of a comprehensive flood action plan for Sylhet district.⁸²

The International Commission on Large Dams has identified 164 major dam failures in the period from 1900 to 1965. With respect to the safety of the proposed Tipaimukh dam, hydraulic and environmental specialists opine that well-designed and constructed rock filled dams are, perhaps, the safest type for large heights (Tipaimukh would be among the largest of such dams in the world), but local circumstances may be much more important in this respect than dam type. Two examples illustrate the types of failures that have been reported. The most famous, the Teton dam in the United States

⁸¹ Dr. Debabrata Roy Laifungbam and Dr. Soibam Ibotombi, "Tipaimukh Dam: A Geotectonic Blunder for International Dimension (part-II)", available at <http://www.kanglaonline.com/index>, accessed on 13 September 2006.

⁸² See for details in www.inwent.org/v-ez/lis/banglade/fap.htm, accessed on 20 December 2006.

was a 90 m high earth-filled dam which failed in 1.25 hours (hr). The flood wave which was released had a peak discharge of 65,000 m³/second at the dam and a height of 20 m high in the downstream canyon. The Huaccoto dam in Peru was 170 m high, similar to the Tipaimukh dam; it failed over 48 hr due to a natural landslide in the reservoir⁸³.

Generally, a flood wave travels downstream at a rate in the order of 10 km/hr although velocities as high as 30 km/hr have been reported near failure sites. From these wave velocities, it would appear that the initial flood wave could travel the 200 km distance from Tipaimukh dam site to the eastern limit of Bangladesh within 24 hr having a height of perhaps 5 m. Peak flooding would occur some 24 to 48 hr later. High inflows would persist for ten days or longer and the flooded area would likely take several weeks to drain. The Tipaimukh reservoir is huge (15,000 million m³) compared with experience reported in the literature. In the event of a significant unplanned discharge, the river system in Bangladesh would respond (drain) rather slowly, as characterized by the outflow rate relative to the floodplain storage volume, such that most of the water released would remain ponded over the northeast region for some time. Assuming a release volume of 10 million m³ and a ponded area of 100 km², the depth of flooding would be an average of 1.0 m above the normal flood level⁸⁴. There will be first an imperative for Bangladesh and India to cooperate in formulating and implementing risk management measures if the Tipaimukh dam as presently designed should be constructed. A wide range of risk management measures are normally undertaken, including: regular inspections by independent engineering teams, instrumentation and plans for warning downstream populations of deteriorating conditions of a dam, evacuation plans, and so on. As and when India's plans proceed, there will be a clear need for Bangladesh to avail itself of expert technical assistance from dam safety specialists

⁸³ The International Commission on Large Dam (ICOLD), *High Dam Failure*, available at <http://www.icold-cigb.org.cn/icold2000/icold.htm>, accessed on 01 September 2006.

⁸⁴ See for details in Flood Action Plan 6, *North Eastern Regional Water Management Plan of Bangladesh*, available at <http://bicn.com/wei/resources/nerp/iee/index.htm>, accessed on 01 October 2006.

experienced with very large dam/reservoir systems and trans-border risk management.

For illustrative purposes only, the Bangladesh study modeled flood waves for a test case of an instantaneous failure, 50 m wide extending to 100 m below the crest of the dam. Discharge and water level hydrographs were presented for three locations: at the exit from the mountain valley (80 km), at Silchar (in the middle of the Cachar plain, 140 km) and at Amalshid (200 km). It was forecast that substantial attenuation of the flood wave would occur upstream of Amalshid and that the flood wave at Amalshid would be a long-duration event. Depending on the breach geometry and peak discharge, the flood peak would occur at Amalshid approximately 2 to 3 days after the dam break had occurred and flooding would continue for ten days or more. The flood levels at Amalshid would rise to approximately 25 m peak water discharge, which is at approximately 8 m above the floodplain level⁸⁵. This flood level depends on the boundary assumptions made and could vary depending on floodplain conveyance.

4.3. Water Resources Projects affected by Tipaimukh Dam

Four projects (upper Surma-Kushiara river project, Surma right bank project, Surma-Kushiara-Baulai basin project and Kushiara-Bijna interbasin project) would be affected by Tipaimukh dam. For phasing purposes, these projects are grouped together for implementation commencing in Year Four, to allow additional time for resolution of the Tipaimukh dam issue. If the Tipaimukh dam/Cachar plain project is delayed beyond this point (i.e. is neither implemented nor definitely dropped), then implementation of the south eastern development projects would be delayed further. This would significantly alter the nature of the impacts produced by several other initiatives. For example, if the upper Surma-Kushiara project and Surma-Kushiara-Baulai basin projects were not implemented, the Kalni-Kushiara river would likely experience a continuation of trends of increasing flood levels and sedimentation rates. Much greater maintenance dredging effort would be required to reverse these trends than is presently envisaged in the Kalni-Kushiara river improvement project.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 26.

Large magnitude spills (possibly increasing over time due to channel changes) would continue to occur into the central basin from both the Surma river and Kushiara river. This would significantly reduce the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Baulai river improvement project and Kushiara-Bijna interbasin project. In the case of extended delay in resolution of the Tipaimukh dam issue, one approach would be to proceed with key components of the upper Surma-Kushiara project and Surma-Kushiara-Baulai basin project which would be feasible to construct during the extended interim period. Such components of the upper Surma-Kushiara project involve regulation of spill channels and *khals* (canals) that divert water from the Surma river into the Kushiara river system. Key components of the Surma-Kushiara-Baulai basin project involve regulation of spill channels from the Surma river into the deeply flooded central basin, and re-excavation of important distributary channels which drain the inter-basin and discharge into the Baulai river. Components that might be postponed until after a final decision on the dam is reached includes raising and upgrading full flood control embankments on the upper Surma-Kushiara rivers and upgrading and construction of new submersible embankments on the lower Surma-Baulai river and Kushiara-Kalni river.

4.4. River Flow Diversion

The use of rivers is of two kinds: non-consumptive and consumptive. Non-consumptive use does not reduce the flow of water of the river, while consumptive use reduces it. For example, dam for hydro-electric power (Kaptai dam) may be called non-consumptive use, while diversion of water through barrage and feeder canal (Farakka barrage) is for consumptive use. Tipaimukh dam will reduce water and certainly change the traditional flow of water.

The change of river flow of water through construction of a dam would have many ramifications on the lower riparian country like Bangladesh. According to Dr. Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, “Bangladesh might get 17,000 cusecs less water than what it gets now after from the Barak river due to building of the dam”.⁸⁶ The Surma and the Kushiara

⁸⁶ *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh, 31 December, 2005.

pass through the vast *haor*⁸⁷ area growing only one rice crop annually. With the recession of monsoon, river level drops and allows drainage of the vast low lying areas, making the land available for *Boro* (one type of rice) cultivation. There is an intricate balance time-bound drainage for the land to be available for *Boro* cultivation. With the Tipaimukh dam being operational, the river level will be higher in the post monsoon period and will obstruct timely drainage of the *haors*. A vast area may thus go out of *Boro* cultivation.

Regulation of the Barak's flow by Tipaimukh dam would provide India with the opportunity to irrigate the Cachar plain i.e. dam with a barrage. So, India is planning for a major Cachar plain irrigation project downstream of the project. This means that the water released from the dam reservoir will be further diverted for the irrigation project planned in Cachar district, contrary to NEEPCO's recent claims. Since the Cachar plain irrigation plan involves the loss of water, it is a matter of great concern to Bangladesh particularly its north-eastern region as no statement is available how much water India intends to take from this scheme. For the purposes of the FAP 6 study it was assumed that the total depth of irrigation water to be applied is 1 m and that the water is diverted on a continuous basis during the six dry months (November through April). As a result, the implementation of the project would cause drastic decline in the flow of the river Meghna and its tributaries resulting in adverse effects on agriculture and its sub-sectors in 12 districts in Bangladesh. The rivers Surma and Kushiara are likely to suffer most, which might lead to desertification process of the whole of Sylhet region like the impacts of Farakka barrage.

4.5. Unexpected Flooding

Schedule of release from dam reservoir is important from another point of view. In order to maximize hydroelectric production, storage reservoirs will keep a certain amount of water. Besides this, additional water will be released from the reservoir for its safety. Late monsoon heavy rain, which is not rare in this area, may cause much more than

⁸⁷ *Haor* is a bowl-shaped large tectonic depression. It receives surface water by rivers and *khals*. In monsoon season, *haors* are filled with water and dry up mostly in the post monsoon period. In Bangladesh, *haors* are found mainly in greater Sylhet and Mymensingh region.

normal flood downstream in Bangladesh due to extra release from the reservoir. Bangladesh has experienced such floods a few years back when the districts of Kushtia and Satkhira were flooded due to late monsoon releases from reservoirs on the right bank tributaries of the Hoogly-Bhagirathi system in India. The same case may happen in the Sylhet area.

Average flood height during the monsoon may decrease but operational fault or operation of the dam, without taking downstream flooding into consideration is likely to cause higher flooding at times. Network of existing submersible flood dike in Bangladesh, to protect *Boro* crop from early spring flood, may need redesign and there could be other environmental effect may need some mitigation measure.

4.6. Water Pollution

Increased agricultural activity and development of agro-based industry in the Cachar plains may cause increased water pollution in the downstream flow due to increased use of fertilizer and pesticides and effluent from the industries.

4.7. Sediment-Free River Flow and Loss of Biodiversity

A very substantial part of sediment may be trapped upstream of the dam. Release of comparatively sediment-free flood flow may initiate riverbed and bank scouring as river will try to establish a new regime of reduced sediment discharge. But carried sediment enrich the wet land environment and increase the productivity of the *haor* areas. This sediment free, diverted river flow also affects the biodiversity. Sediments carry lots of nutrients with it and that is very much helpful for flourishing biodiversity. There will be a change in water quality and some of the aquatic life, will probably be eliminated because of the barrier effect of the dam, unless a provision for ladder is made.

4.8. Disruption of Fish Migration and Breeding Place

On large rivers, in late summer season, fish move from downstream to upstream to lay their eggs. These eggs are fertilized by male fish. The old fish may get exhausted and the new born fish again move downstream. They, after two to three years, return to their ancestral spawning place and may be dying after getting exhausted,

while the newborns move downstream. The cycle goes on for years.⁸⁸ When dam barrier is constructed on a river, these fish can not move upstream to lay their eggs; because it is impossible for these fish to overtop such a barrier.⁸⁹

4.9. Greenhouse Gas Emission from the Dam

Hydropower lobbyists are eager to promote dam as 'environmentally and climate friendly'. But a growing body of scientific evidence shows that hydropower is not as climate friendly as its proponents have assumed. Recent research indicates that dams and their associated reservoirs are globally significant sources of emissions of green house gases like Carbon dioxide (CO₂) and Methane (CH₄).⁹⁰ The greenhouse gases cause global warming and ultimately increase the rate of sea level rise. So, as the number of dams in South Asia is increasing, the threat for Bangladesh will eventually be increased.

5. New Vision for Integrated Water Resources Management

Water-related challenges are numerous, diverse and inevitable. Several compelling worldwide statistics compiled from the recent publications of the World Bank and the United Nations⁹¹ illustrate the issues:

- Human water use has increased more than 35-fold over the past three centuries.

⁸⁸ The fish which move to their ancestral spawning place (upstream) are called anadromous fish. Salmon and Hilsa are typical examples of such fish. These are commercially valuable fish and important industries are dependent on them.

⁸⁹ Huge money was spent in fish-ladder research. Improvements in design made the fish ladder more attractive to fish. Fish ladders are not always practicable from engineering stand point. In such cases, other steps have to be taken to protect the fish.

⁹⁰ For details, see P. McCully, "Flooding the Land, Warming the Earth: Greenhouse Gas Emission from Dams", *International Rivers Network 2002*, available at <http://www.irn.org/programs/greenhouse/pdf/2002ghreport.pdf>, accessed on 15 September 2006.

⁹¹ Dr. Aris P. Georgakakos, "Water Resource Management: Challenges and Opportunities", available at <http://gtresearchnews.gatech.edu/reshor/rh-spr96/rh-spr96-toc.htm>, accessed on 12 September 2006.

- Worldwide, 69 percent of water use is for agricultural purposes, 23 percent for industrial and 8 percent domestic.
- One third of the world's food crops are produced by irrigated agriculture.
- In the past 30 years, 50 percent of food supply growth was attributed to agricultural expansion, a rate which is no longer sustainable.
- Per capita water consumption in North and Central America is twice that of Europe, three times that of Asia, and seven times that of Africa.
- About one billion people in developing countries do not have access to potable water and approximately 1.7 billion have inadequate sanitation facilities.
- Unsafe water is implicated in the deaths of more than 3 million people annually and causes about 2.4 billion episodes of illness each year.
- The world's population, now 5 billion, is expected to increase to at least 8 billion by 2025 and 10 billion by 2050, which would dramatically raise the demand for water and food.
- According to United Nations' projections, by 2050 almost half of the world's population will live in 58 countries experiencing either water scarcity (less than 1,000 cubic meters of renewable water per capita per year) or water stress (between 1,000 and roughly 1,700 cubic meters).
- The financial requirements to meet future demands for irrigation, hydropower, water supply and sanitation investments in developing countries are estimated to be \$600 billion to \$800 billion over the next decade.

These daunting facts are evidence of a global water resources crisis with the potential for escalating conflicts. Examples can be cited for many river basin and countries such as the Nile basin, Amazon, Rhine, Euphrates, Jordan and almost every other major river system in the world. In the western United States, conflicts and litigations over water allocation have raged for many years. Recently, similar disputes have also emerged in the water-abundant southeast, where the Savannah,

Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint, and Alabama-Coosa-Tallapoosa rivers are at the center of a major multistate conflict.

At this point of time, Mekong River Commission (MRC) is an expression of international cooperation for Integrated Water Resources Management. It gives a new vision for international river basin management programme. Water is seen by many countries of the world as “the foreign policy issue of the 21st century”. The nations of Southeast Asia like China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Thailand which conceived and nurtured a Mekong Committee may prove to be a model for the world.

5.1. Mekong River Commission

The Mekong river (known in Tibet as *Dza-chu*, China as *Lancang Jiang* and Thailand as *Mae Nam Khong*), is a major river in southeastern Asia. It is the longest river in the region. From its source in China's Qinghai province near the border with Tibet, the Mekong flows generally southeast to the South China Sea, a distance of 4,200 km (2,610 mi)⁹². The Mekong crosses Yunnan province, China, and forms the border between Myanmar and Laos and most of the border between Laos and Thailand. It then flows across Cambodia and southern Vietnam into a rich delta before emptying into the South China Sea. In the upper course are steep descents and swift rapids, but the river is navigable south of Louangphrabang in Laos. (See Annex 2)

The MRC was established in 1995 by an agreement between the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam⁹³. The Agreement on the “Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin” came about as the four countries saw a common interest in jointly managing their shared water resources and developing the economic potential of the river. Signed on 5 April 1995, it set a new mandate for the organisation “to cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilisation, management and conservation of

⁹² See for details, “Mekong River Basin”, available at http://www.africanwater.org/rivers_regions.htm, accessed on 05 November 2006.

⁹³ “The Story of Mekong Cooperation”, available at http://www.mrcmekong.org/about_mrc.htm, accessed on 05 November 2006.

the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin". The agreement brought a change of identity for the organisation previously known as the Mekong Committee, which had been established in 1957 as the Committee for Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin - the Mekong Committee. Since the 1995 Agreement, the MRC has launched a process to ensure "reasonable and equitable use" of the Mekong river system, through a participatory process with "National Mekong Committees" in each country to develop procedures for water utilisation.

The MRC (structure of the MRC: annex 3) is supporting a joint basinwide planning process with the four countries, called the Basin Development Plan, which is the basis of its Integrated Water Resources Development Programme. The MRC is also involved in fisheries management, promotion of safe navigation, irrigated agriculture, watershed management, environment monitoring, flood management and exploring hydropower options. The two upper states of the Mekong river basin, the People's Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar, are dialogue partners to the MRC.

The MRC is funded by contributions from the four member countries and from aid donors. Formal consultation with the donor community is carried out through an annual Donor Consultative Group meeting. The programme focuses specifically on the development of water and related resources, which can be seen as complementary to the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Programme, promoted by the Asian Development Bank. The Mekong Programme is also enhanced by other regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

The GBM region is relatively resource poor, but it can boast about its abundant water resources. Snow and glacier melt provides the most significant runoff ranking third in the world.⁹⁴ Some of the heaviest rainfalls are experienced in the region which is also endowed with underground water. However, the availability of water is skewed geographically and seasonally.

⁹⁴ Abul Ahsan, *Management of International River Basins and Environmental Challenges*, Academic Publishers, Dhaka, 1994, p.16.

Regional cooperation can provide a unique opportunity to make optimum use of the water resources for the benefit of all concerned nations. Unfortunately, at the present time there is hardly any joint approach in the matter involving all the riparian states. Whatever co-operation is there, it is bilateral in nature between India on the one hand and Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal on the other.

6. Concluding Remarks

India raised the concept of Tipaimukh dam project in one of the Bangladesh-India meetings prior to the first agreement on the sharing of Ganges water. The project was introduced as one where both the countries can get the benefits.

India promised Bangladesh to provide the DPR of Tipaimukh before going its implementation to dispel the lower riparian neighbour's concern about possible diversion of water from Barak. But India has finally floated international tender for construction of Tipaimukh dam without the knowledge/consent of Bangladesh.

The construction of Tipaimukh dam cannot be isolated from the broader picture of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Currently, the state of bilateral relations is not at its best. India perceives Bangladesh non-cooperative and inward looking, while Bangladesh thinks India uninterested and obstructive. Pending bilateral issues, such as ensuring peaceful border fencing, illegal movement of people, non-implementation of the 1974 Mujib-Indira Agreement including the non-exchange of enclaves with each other, unresolved sea boundary, dispute over the ownership of South Talpatty island and huge trade deficit with India, cast a shadow on bilateral relations and the proposed dam would, in all likelihood, further complicate the state of bilateral relations between the two countries.

The proposed construction of dam without the input of Bangladesh seems to confirm the perception of India's gross insensitivity to the interests of Bangladesh. Perception of people matters most in bilateral relations. Bangladesh is disappointed with the unilateral construction of the Tipaimukh dam as it appears like twisting the arms of Bangladesh unnecessarily. Trust and mutual respect for each other constitute the structure of long term good relations. The relationship needs constant nurturing and care. The bottom line is while Bangladesh does not compete with India, it does not appreciate being pushed around by a big neighbour.

India should, therefore, sit with Bangladesh to settle these and other related problems and Bangladesh should also show her interest to share the benefits of the project. India is planning to export surplus power to Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. If India exports electricity to Bangladesh produced from Tipaimukh dam, it would be beneficial for both. India can save huge investment in power transmission cost while Bangladesh can get cheaper power. Through a joint study by India and Bangladesh, the adverse impacts of Tipaimukh dam project can be mitigated to an acceptable limit for Bangladesh. If properly planned, designed, implemented, and operated, the Tipaimukh dam project can bring great benefit to people of the area. India should, therefore, take the people of Bangladesh in confidence.

ANNEX-1

Table I: Major Earthquakes in North-East India in Recent Past

Sl No	Place	Year	Magnitude
1	Cachar	21-Mar-1869	7.8
2	Shillong Plateau	12-Jun-1897	8.7
3	Sibsagar	31-Aug-1906	7.0
4	Myanmar	12-Dec-1908	7.5
5	Srimangal	08-Jul-1918	7.6
6	SW Assam	09-Sep-1923	7.1
7	Dhubri	02-Jul-1930	7.1
8	Assam	27-Jan-1931	7.6
9	Nagaland	1932	7.0
10	NE Assam	23-Oct-1943	7.2
11	Arunachal	07-Jul-1947	7.5
12	Upper Assam	Upper Assam	7.6
13	Upper Assam	15-Aug-1950	8.7
14	Arunachal	1950	7.0
15	Manipur-Burma	1954	7.4
16	Darjeeling	1959	7.5
17	Indo-Cachar	11-Nov-1984	5.8
18	Indo-Myanmar	06-Aug-1988	7.5

Source: Dr Md Ali Akbar Mollick, "Status of Seismicity in North-East India: The Home of Tipaimukh Barrage" *International Tipaimukh Dam Conference 2005*, Dhaka Bangladesh.

ANNEX-2

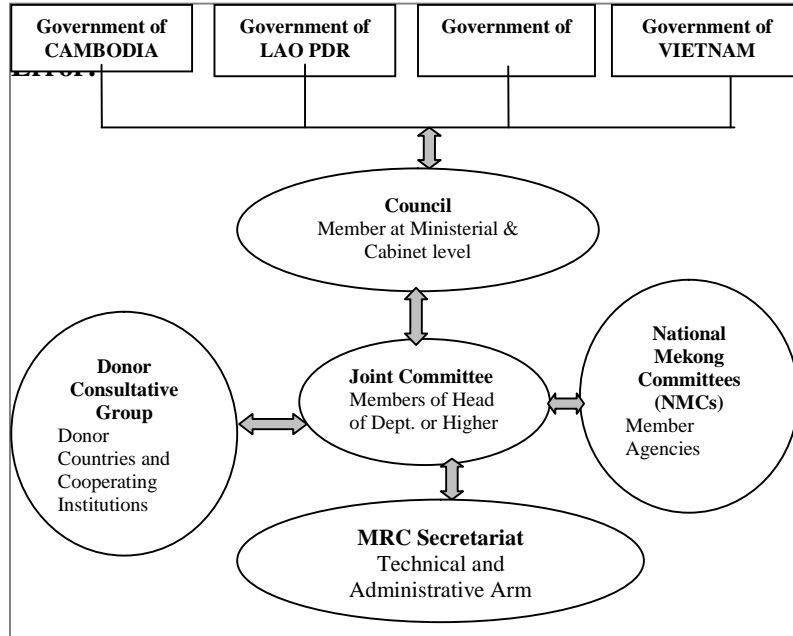
Table II: Approximate Distribution of Mekong River Basin Water Resources by Country and Province.

	Yunnan Province, PRC	Myanmar	Lao PDR	Thailand	Cambodia	Viet Nam	Mekong River Basin
Catchment area as % of MRB	22	3	25	223	19	8	100
Average flow (m ³ /sec) from area	2410	300	5270	2560	2860	1660	15,060
Average flow as % of total	16	2	35	18	18	11	100

Source: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/programmes/bdp.htm>, accessed on 05 November 2006.

ANNEX-3

Figure: Structure of the Mekong River Commission (MRC)



Mahfuz Kabir

**EXPANSION OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION
ORGANIZATION: IRAN'S HORIZONS AND
PERSPECTIVES**

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Abstract

The paper analyses the opportunities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with focus on Iran's horizons in garnering benefits from the organization to respond to changing regional and international posture. It explores the possibilities of Iran's membership in the SCO and its geo-strategic ramification for the region. The paper finds that although the organization is working to strengthen diverse areas of cooperation among its member states, the main thrust of cooperation has been on security and countering cross-border terrorism and extremism. There has been an impression that due to the country's one of the biggest oil reserve which is very lucrative for the member countries of the Organization and for its geo-strategic positioning, the SCO is going to be expanded by including Iran as its full member. Iran's comfortability with Russia may prove sufficient reason for China to lure Iran towards the SCO in order to balance Iran's regional inclines. The paper suggests that among others, cooperation in water and energy resources strongly needs relocation of investment and enhancement of technological and scientific measures in the SCO. New investment in Iran's oil and gas fields as well as trade agreements would enhance economic and energy security of the SCO members, particularly China. In addition, as a result of such expansion of the Organization, military and security set up is likely to be enhanced due to formal security ties among the members, in particular Russia and China. Finally, a regional structure that combines Central Asia and the Caucasus under

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the aegis of SCO, is expected to be a balancing factor in Central and South Asia and to an extent in the Middle East.

I. Introduction

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a comparatively new regional grouping in Asia comprising the countries of a relatively poor region along with two neighbouring great powers China and Russia, makes obvious its elevated potentials through its steady progress in activities within and between the member countries. Although the six countries came together with the promise of combating cross-border terrorism by establishing Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), the evolving areas of cooperation have been economic, political, strategic and cultural affairs. Beside joint military exercise between China and Russia, priority has also been given on the exploration of new hydrocarbon reserves, and joint use of water resources among the member countries. The region is important as being not only rich in natural resources and growing economic powerhouse, but it also has immense significance in terms of the western strategic interest in the middle of expanding North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the 'US-led anti-terrorist coalition forces' in Central Asia.⁹⁵ However, it was expected that Iran would become a member of the SCO soon along with other observer states of the Organization including two South Asian giants India and Pakistan. Although the 2006 Summit reveals that the member states are not strongly interested to welcome new members hastily, Iran is expected to get membership in the near future by virtue of its economic, regional and strategic importance despite western reservation on nuclear issue. Therefore 'new great game'⁹⁶, 'strategic reassertion of Russia in Central Asia'⁹⁷ or even

⁹⁵ See, S. F. Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4, 2005, pp.164-178; and also "The Alliance in Fighting for the Reconstruction Effort in Afghanistan", *The Economist Global Agenda*, 7 September 2006, available at: *The_Economist-global_agenda-admin@news.economist.com*, accessed on 10 September 2006.

⁹⁶ See, for details, K.A. Collins and W.C. Wohlforth, "Central Asia: Defying 'Great Game' Expectations", in *Strategic Asia 2003-04; Fragility and Crisis*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington, D.C., 2004. Also see,

America's new nightmare — whatever being marked, the SCO is gradually becoming a new geo-political and geo-strategic player. The grouping has immense economic significance within and beyond the region as the leaders are expecting to operationalize a free trade area among the member countries. The six countries that constitute the SCO cover an area of 30 million square kilometers — as high as 60 per cent of continental Europe and Asia and have a combined population of 1.5 billion — about one-quarter of the world⁹⁸, which indicates geo-strategic importance of the Organization.

Iran is currently an observer of the SCO. There has been an impression that due to the country's one of the biggest oil reserves which is very lucrative for the member countries of the Organization and for its geo-strategic positioning, the SCO is going to be expanded by including Iran as its full member. In this context, the paper tries to address the following analytical questions: To what extent Iran's membership in SCO will increase its bargaining power and influence? How can mutual benefits be derived from Iran's inclusion? What would be Iran's strategic outlook, future agenda and perspectives with respect to western position? To what extent the member countries will be benefited in economic, political, strategic and cultural arena by Iran's inclusion? Will there be any impact and changes in the strategic configuration to Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as bystander regions? Will SCO be part of the greater Asian regionalism? To address these issues, the paper has been organised as follows. After the introduction, a brief assessment of the existing regional cooperation in Central Asia region has been made in section II. Section III gauges whether and to what extent the SCO has brought about new impetus for the region beyond the security concerns of the member countries. Section IV examines if Iran is going to be a member of the Organization, and section V analytically investigates various

A. Rasizade, "The New "Great Game" in Central Asia after Afghanistan", *Alternatives*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer, 2002.

⁹⁷ R. Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 2, 2004, pp. 277-294.

⁹⁸ G. Austin, "European Union Policy Responses to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *BP 02/04*, European Institute for Asian Studies, Brussels, 2002.

dimensions of the possible impact of Iran *vis-à-vis* other members of the SCO. Section VI briefly assesses if there is any possibility of change in the strategic configuration as a result of such extension in Central Asia and the Middle East.

II. Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: SCO as New Impetus?

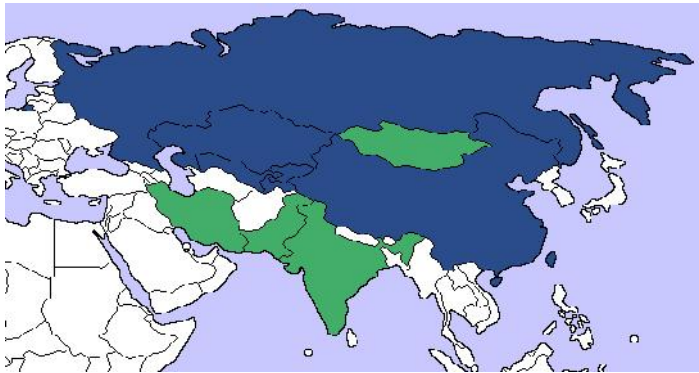
Development of new regionalism which began in the 1980s comprised the efforts by a number of regional or sub-regional units to create a security consensus in a given area without any backing of a major power. However, due to an array of reasons, the states of Central Asia found this goal very complicated to achieve — even if attaining limited kind of coordination of their security and defence policies as a well-defined Central Asian structure has been a mounting effort. However, security coordination under the influence of at least one major power has been more common in nature. Different regional and sub-regional entities have been emerged with a core group of Central Asian states, and some of these have had a clearly pronounced security agenda which have been diverse, usually uncoordinated, unconsolidated, and sometimes competitive one another. The main four constraints on security related regionalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus were⁹⁹

- domineering influence of Russia as a regional hegemon and its interest in promoting supranational powers which had been viewed as a constraint on regionalism than the role of the United States as global hegemon;
- a variety of intra-regional and state-level factors, little space for manoeuvre in decision-making, caught up in internal and regional conflicts, often with weaker or dependent economies, and characterized by strong nationalism and emphasis of sovereignty;
- regionalization in terms of active process of change towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity have not been obvious features of security policy interactions; and

⁹⁹ R. Allison, “Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 463-483.

- while there is an incentive to organize to avert threats of marginalization, the regional arrangements that develop are fragile and ineffective.

Map of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization



Note: Light shaded = observer countries, deep shaded = member states

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

The emergence of SCO from Shanghai Five has been marked as a major step towards stimulating regionalism in security although sceptics argue that it is a sign of weak form of growing regionalism. It is a macro-regional consultative framework with security dimension among the member countries: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁰⁰ Since its establishment right after 9/11, it has taken major steps in strengthening cooperation to combat terrorism, extremism, and trans-border organized crime with activities ranging from intelligence sharing and covert operations to the use of armed forces. The Organization has also been interpreted as a 'balancing mechanism' developed by China and Russia to counter the US hegemonic role in the region. Afterwards, it has enlarged its initial responsibility of involving China in military confidence-building measures and mutual demilitarization to cover coordination among member states on non-traditional security challenges emphasising

¹⁰⁰ S. L. Yom, "Power Politics in Central Asia", *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2002, pp. 48-54.

mainly on collective efforts to combat religious and separatist extremism and international illicit flow of drugs. The SCO has developed a focus on trans-border as well as intra-state security issues. So far, limited Chinese security and defence assistance has been provided to Central Asian countries bilaterally rather than within the SCO framework. Besides, it has failed to overcome its marginalization in the fallout of 9/11 when the Central Asian states chose to enter into bilateral agreements to join the US-led anti-terrorist operations in this region.

In October 2002, China and Kyrgyzstan initiated bilateral military counterterrorism manoeuvres in their border zone called “formal start-up of the SCO anti-terror mission”. This was followed by Cooperation 2003, a SCO joint command-post exercise combined with field manoeuvres. In the first stage of operation in Kazakhstan there were Russian, Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops, and in the second round in Xinjiang province of China, the troops were from China and Kyrgyzstan. These were to step up military cooperation and mutual trust among their armed forces and boost regional cooperation against terrorism. Although Uzbekistan has focused on internal security issues, it has not been keen to further large-scale SCO anti-terrorist military exercises in the region, perhaps because it does not wish to be caught up in future struggle to develop the SCO into a counterweight to the US military presence in Central Asia.

However, the Organization established not only as a security mechanism, it also has promise to enhance trade, investment, cultural, environmental, and technological relations between member states; the SCO would accordingly become the region’s authoritative voice. It is widely believed that if the SCO expands and encompasses not just security issues, but also effectively addresses economic and social concerns, it will be a powerful regional player indeed. Certainly, the rhetoric of the SCO is towards the future possibility of becoming an influential multilateral organization. Given the inter-state relationship, nature of political leadership and institutional set up, and positions of international bodies, the prospect that the Organization will flourish into a powerful regional bloc requires four assumptions: (i) each country would need to invest the necessary political will into the SCO framework; (ii) it has to develop its own autonomous agencies and capable leadership; (iii) the UN, US, and EU have to recognize it as a

credible international organization¹⁰¹; and (iv) the SCO have to operate as a legitimate vehicle for promoting collective interests of its members rather than as an organ dominated or directed by one or two states.

Since its formation, within many western policy and intelligence circles the Organization have been described as merely a synergistic tool of Russian and Chinese foreign policy, a vessel by which these two powers could court Central Asian states into steadily growing military and economic relations while simultaneously coordinating policies to curb internal threats like militant Islamist movements. Russia and China, by virtue of their large geographic size, economic strength, and military power, have dominated the group from the start by pressuring the leaders of their smaller neighbours to support their policies; indeed, the SCO began largely out of the directives of these two countries' leaders. This has allowed the foreign ministries of Russia and China to guide the SCO's stance on many issues, such as its general anti-US stance as well as its zero-tolerance approach to Islamist and separatist movements.¹⁰²

III. Areas of Cooperation: Much beyond the Security Concerns?

The SCO is primarily centered on security-related concerns of its member nations, often describing the main threats to confront terrorism, separatism and extremism. Starting in 2003, there was a joint counter-terrorism center built in Shanghai, China. The SCO agreed to form the RATS at the SCO summit held in Tashkent in June 2004. In April 2006, the SCO also decided to establish a new institute to fight cross-border drug crimes. Russia's permanent representative in the SCO Secretariat Grigory Logninov claimed in April 2006, that the SCO has no plans to become a military bloc; rather he argued in a different language that the increased threats of "terrorism, extremism and separatism" make necessary a full-scale involvement of armed forces.

¹⁰¹ A short period after establishment of the SCO, the EU prepared a policy response on the SCO. See for details, Austin, 2002, *op cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Yom, 2002, *op cit.* p. 53.

There have been a number of SCO joint military exercises. The first of these was held in 2003, with the first phase taking place in Kazakhstan and the second in China. On a larger scale but outside the SCO framework, the first ever joint military exercise between the China and Russia, called Peace Mission 2005, started in August 2005. Following the successful completion of the Sino-Russian military exercises, Russian officials have begun speaking of the SCO taking on a military role and of India also joining these exercises in the future.¹⁰³

The Organization has also declared its position in diverse areas of cooperation, broadly categorized in economic, political and cultural arena *vis-à-vis* military cooperation. As outlined in the Declaration of the Organization it has the goals, position and areas of cooperation among others in the following:¹⁰⁴

2. The purposes of the SCO are: strengthening mutual trust and good-neighbourly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.
7. The SCO adheres to the principle of non-alignment, does not target any other country or region, and is open to the outside. It is ready to develop various forms of dialogue, exchanges and cooperation with other countries, international and regional organisations. On the basis of consensus, it shall admit as its new members those countries which recognise the cooperation purposes and tasks within the framework of the organisation.

¹⁰³ The next joint military exercises are planned for 2007 in Russia, near the Ural Mountains and close to Central Asia, as was agreed upon in April 2006 at the SCO Defense Ministers' meeting. Air forces and precision-guided weapons are likely to be used. The next meeting of Defense Ministers is planned for 2007 in Kyrgyzstan.

¹⁰⁴ See <http://www.sectSCO.org>, accessed on 14 August 2006.

10. The SCO member states will strengthen their consultations and coordination of activities in regional and international affairs, support and cooperate with each other closely on major international and regional issues, and jointly promote and consolidate peace and stability of the region and the world. In the current international situation, it is of particular significance to preserve global strategic balance and stability.

A Framework Agreement to enhance economic cooperation was signed by the SCO member states in September 2003. At the same meeting, the Premier of China Wen Jiabao proposed a long-term objective to establish a free trade area among the member states, while other more immediate measures would be taken to improve the flow of goods in the region. A follow up plan with specific actions was signed in September 2004.¹⁰⁵ In the Moscow Summit of the SCO in October 2005, the Secretary General of the Organization said that the SCO would prioritize joint energy projects including the oil and gas sector, the exploration of new hydrocarbon reserves, and joint use of water resources. The creation of Inter-bank SCO Council was also agreed upon at that summit in order to fund future joint projects. The first meeting of the SCO Interbank Association was held in Beijing in February 2006.

Cultural cooperation has also occurred in the SCO framework. Culture ministers of the SCO met for the first time in Beijing in April 2002, signed a joint statement for continued cooperation. The third meeting of the Culture Ministers took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in April 2006. SCO Arts Festival and Exhibition was held for the first time during the Astana Summit of 2005. Kazakhstan has also suggested an SCO folk dance festival to be held in Astana, in 2008.

However, although the Organization is working to strengthen diverse areas of cooperation among its member states, the main thrust of cooperation has been on security and countering cross-border

¹⁰⁵ Earlier, the leaders of the Organization agreed to establish a free-trade zone among the member countries. See, L.R. Miller, "New Rules to the Old Great Game: An Assessment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Proposed Free Trade Zone", *Contemporary Asia Studies Series* No. 4, (175) 2003, University of Maryland.

terrorism and extremism. The other areas of cooperation are also unfolding, but these would take time to fully flourish. For example, in full operationalization of a free trade area the countries will have to undertake a number of activities including identification and gradual removal of trade and non-trade barriers, setting rules of origin, etc. On the other hand, cooperation in water and energy resources strongly needs relocation of investment and enhancement of technological and scientific measures. This will necessarily take more time and interest among the member states, particularly the two major players Russia and China, given the present structure of the Organization. Cultural cooperation is ancillary and ornamental to the Organization *vis-à-vis* other activities.

IV. Iran: Shortly a New Member?

Among other nations of the region, Mongolia became the first country to receive observer status at the 2004 Tashkent Summit. Pakistan, India and Iran received observer status at the SCO Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan in July 2005. However, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Li Hui once said that the SCO will not take in new members before its six members make serious studies. Russia's permanent representative in the SCO Secretariat Grigory Logninov has also claimed that the enlargement of the SCO is impeded by "an immature mechanism of admission of new members", while Secretary General Zhang Deguang argued that an overexpansion might hinder the intensification of the cooperation.¹⁰⁶ In a series of meetings in February

¹⁰⁶ About new membership to the Organization, an Indian newspaper *The Hindu* reported in 2005, "India will join the Shanghai regional security group together with Pakistan and Iran ..., as the group seeks to enhance its security role in Central Asia. ... China insisted on simultaneous admission of India and Pakistan, even though Delhi and Moscow were unhappy with this linkage. One Central Asian member of the Shanghai Group was opposed to Iran's membership. However, Russia said it would block any expansion unless Iran was included... Also, Pakistan's entry into SCO would hamper Washington's plan to set up a rival security organisation for Central Asia and the Caspian that would lock out Russia and China". See, J. Goldkorn, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands", June 6, 2005, available at: <http://www.heritage.org>, accessed on 25 August 2006.

2006 with Chinese officials and media, the President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf argued in favour of Pakistan's qualification to join the Organization as a full member. China said that it would convey Pakistan's desire to all the SCO members. In turn, President Musharraf was formally invited to the June 2006 Summit. However, the SCO has also encouraged India to join the Organization, saying that they would properly consider a membership application to join the group.

During a talk at a News Conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, on 5 May 2006 Iran's President expressed in favor of expanding the SCO and developing it into an organization that can actively counter interference in the region by western powers. He said, "We want this organization to develop into a powerful body influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, serving to counter threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries. We want this organization to develop into a powerful body influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, serving to block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries".¹⁰⁷

His speech certainly has specific significance for the US because it does not want Iran, China and Russia that could counter US influence in the Central Asia. President Ahmadinejad also offered oil as an incentive as he tried to win powerful friends in his long-standing dispute with the West. He put Iran's large oil reserves on the bargaining table, asking China, Russia and the other countries at the Summit to sign new energy agreements. He also expressed interest of hosting a meeting of Asian energy ministers to look at co-operation in exploration, exploitation and transportation of oil.¹⁰⁸ Although China and Russia are in a difficult position because they support the United Nations in its campaign to defuse Iran's nuclear enrichment, they do not want economic sanctions to Iran. Perhaps keeping all these in mind, the SCO did not make decision on Iran's inclusion as a full member in June 2006 meeting in China.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.cbc.ca>, accessed on 15 June 2006

¹⁰⁸ Iran is the fourth-largest exporter of oil in the world, and China is one of its most needy customers.

Iran, Russia and China have made numerous independent statements regarding their displeasure with what they perceive as US encroachment in Central Asia and the Middle East. Recently, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a bilateral statement titled, “World Order in the 21st Century” that warned against attempts by outside forces to dominate global affairs and opposition to attempts to impose models of social and political development from outside. Both leaders renewed their call for the development of a multipolar world calling on countries to renounce striving for monopoly and domination in international affairs and attempts to divide nations into leaders and those being led.

On the other hand, the SCO’s acceptance of new states is unlikely because if Pakistan, India and Iran were SCO members, there is an apprehension that it would further weaken the capacity of the Organization to find a common security language except in response to a few pan-regional concerns like counter-narcotics. That is, if SCO expands more and more as a macro regional structure, it will less likely have an operational role in security policy, or to correspond with the common concerns out of which a Central Asian security identity might emerge.¹⁰⁹

V. Iran’s Horizons and Perspectives *vis-à-vis* the SCO

As indicated earlier, the SCO has not made a decision perhaps due to its policy of non-confrontation with the other external power and groupings on Iran’s recent tension with the West on nuclear issue. However, due to its economic and geo-strategic importance Iran would become a new member of the Organization very soon. Now let us have a look into the possible ramifications of Iran’s membership in the SCO.

Will Iran’s Bargaining Power and Influence be Greatly Enhanced?

¹⁰⁹ R. Allison, “Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia”, *op cit.* p. 472.

For quite long time Iran has broad security relations with China and Russia. Despite over a decade of protests from the US, China continues to export nuclear technology and guided missiles to Iran. Indeed, China is one of Iran's top two weapon suppliers with Russia.¹¹⁰ Therefore, Iran's bargaining power in the international arena as well as regional influence will be greatly enhanced if it becomes member in the Organization. However, the present US Administration's anti-Iran policy under the rubric of "axis of evil" fuelled Iranian new insecurity argument after 9/11. Iran has made a number of foreign policy adjustments after 9/11 aiming to enhance national security and optimizing its gains from solidarities and alliances which include:¹¹¹

- a. forging closer ties with China and Russia,
- b. deepening cooperation with Europe (which is now seemingly a bit faded due to nuclear tension),
- c. improving Iran's role in international organizations (*e.g.*, inclusion as an observer in the SCO),
- d. fostering better relation with Arab world particularly in the Persian Gulf,
- e. stabilising relations with Turkey Pakistan, and
- f. exploring new security arrangements as well as upgrading military preparedness.

However, after 9/11 there was a new US-Russia partnership in war on terror which interestingly resulted in Russia's closer strategic partnership with Iran. This has grown partly because Russia has been dissatisfied with the pace of its inclusion in the NATO despite the new NATO-Russia Council, and like Iran, Russia has been alarmed by the realignments in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasus favourable to the US. Hence, in spite of some problems with Russia over the issue of the Caspian Sea's ownership, Tehran has welcomed what it perceives as the return of geopolitics in the mental map of Russia's leadership. This explains why Iran chose to set aside its apprehensions over the

¹¹⁰ J. Goldkorn, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands", June 6, 2005, available at <http://www.heritage.org>, accessed on 25 August 2006.

¹¹¹ K. Afrasiabi and A Maleki, "Iran's Foreign Policy after 11 September", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2003, pp. 255-265.

militarization of the Caspian Sea by sending an observer to the manoeuvre. From Iran's vantage point, however, the pros of Russia's new, and bolder, military-security stance in the Caspian region after 9/11 outweigh the potential confidence tricks on perceived Iran-Russia mutual interest to contain the US power. The open-ended US commitment to remain in the region and the various complexities of US-Russia relations have prompted the Iranian strategists to wonder about both the durability of goodwill between Iran and Russia and Russia's ability to withstand US pressure to scale down or even reverse its ties with Iran.

The West's, particularly the US's cushion of comfort, against a Russian sellout of Iran is based on their calculation with respect to Russia's own fear of undue US influence on its traditional turf requiring Iran and the role of interlocking economic, energy, and military relations with Russia. This includes Russian sale of peaceful nuclear technology and conventional arms to Iran, as well as joint ventures in the energy and transportation fields. Iran has invited the Russian oil companies to participate in operations on the giant South Parsian gas field shared with Qatar. This is part of more comprehensive, long-term energy cooperation likely to include Russia's involvement in the energy sector of Iran in the South Caspian.

For the moment, Iran is not a part of any regional security arrangement. Since 1996, Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged in a low-security bilateral agreement, invoking the "twin pillar" image of the pre-revolutionary years, and it is not far-fetched to think that Iran could gain observer status at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as it did shortly after the Kuwait crisis in 1990. In the absence of any immediate prospect for such a development, Iran has focused its attention for alternative security arrangements including the SCO. Iran's membership could compensate for the recent lapses in Iran-China relations, which have yet to fully recover from the setback caused by China's decision in mid-1990s to scrap a technology sale to Iran under US pressure. The United States' recent decision to impose sanctions on several Chinese companies for violating the US sanctions on Iran was perhaps geared to forestall any resumption of full-scale

Iran-China arms and non-arms associations.¹¹² Iran's comfortability with Russia may prove sufficient reason for China to lure Iran to the SCO in order to balance Iran's regional inclines.

How Mutual Benefits would be Derived?

Iran recognizes the need for regional cooperation in the field of trade, energy, transport and infrastructure not because of increasing level and intensity of interdependence among the regional neighbours, instead it is because of low level of regional interdependence. Iran is currently looking for markets for non-oil exportable for partners in energy development, for help in integrating into the global economic system, and for the infrastructure to allow the country to take opportunity of its strategic location between Turkey and the Arab states in the West and South Asia in the east, between the Caucasus, Caspian and Central Asia in the north and the Persian Gulf in the south. State-led trade promotion and infrastructure projects which are pivotal to the country's regional policy can provide impetus to development and regional integration. However, it is widely believed that developing interdependent economic, social, cultural relations with other countries in the region will contribute to peace and stability by generating shared interests, mutual understanding and trust. Nevertheless, there is difficulty in finding partners for the construction of roads, railways, pipelines and power grids to link its infrastructure with that of the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Some of the problems are recent US hard line about Iran; strategic positioning of the US and the west-led NATO in some countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus; and the politics of identity in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus is focused on nation building, not cultivating regional consciousness.

Realizing the importance of a strong Middle East ally in the SCO, both Russia and China have made Iran a high organizational priority. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian Ambassador to Russia Gholam-Reza Ansari met in July 2005 to discuss the importance of Iran's membership in the SCO. The Iranian Ambassador indicated that the SCO would manage to play an active role in setting

¹¹² S. N. Macfarlane, "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 447-462.

regional issues.¹¹³ However, Russia's priorities in the Organization are economic and security. They view SCO as a self-sufficient organization whose members have parallel and harmonious interests, and the Organization has not been formed as an alternative to or an instrument of opposing any other state or group.¹¹⁴

Becoming a member of the SCO will be beneficial for Iran is manifold. Iran should have strong allies to effectively (and immediately) defend its sovereign rights. As aforementioned, Iran does not have strong security ties with big powers like China and Russia which would be possible if it can become a member of the Organization. A common military and security platform will provide Iran formidable strength in other areas as well.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, Iran is China's third biggest supplier of crude oil. SCO membership will permit Iran to formulate a joint energy policy and cooperation framework which would serve as a tool for becoming free from the west-led UN's economic sanction.¹¹⁶

The SCO is a cooperation mechanism based on the two wheels of security and economy. The general trend of Central Asia is with gradual stability of the regional security environment, the demands for economic development of all the countries there will grow sharply, which is also the trend of the whole world. Economic cooperation has the greatest affinity and expansive force and is the most tight and most lasting adhesive linking interests of various countries. In the long run, economic cooperation will be the most important and active factor for pushing ahead the SCO and the most important factor for attracting its members, especially Central Asian countries. If the SCO can not timely and obviously increase its content of economic cooperation, its capacity of functional expansion will be restricted.

¹¹³ F.W. Stakelbeck, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Front Page Magazine*, 8 August, 2005, available at <http://www.frontpagemagazine.com>, accessed on 17 August 2006.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ <http://english.aljazeera.net>, accessed on 17 August 2006.

¹¹⁶ Centring on Tehran's "ambitious" nuclear power plans. See, for details, W.Q. Bowen and J. Kidd "The Iranian Nuclear Challenge", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 2, 2004, pp. 257-276.

In this context Iran's membership in the SCO would also open up new avenues for the member countries in trade, investment, and energy cooperation. Being one of the most affluent in energy resources it may gain a bargaining position and key player in global oil supply. New investment in Iran's oil and gas fields as well as trade agreements would enhance economic and energy security of the SCO members, particularly China. Therefore, China should re-think about the inclusion of Iran sooner than later.

What would be Iran's Strategic Outlook and Perspectives on the SCO with respect to Western Position?

Since the late 1980s, Iran has pledged regional relations and coalition building increasingly important in its foreign policy.¹¹⁷ The Middle East as a whole is generally seen as being exceptionally resistant to regionalism, and the few regionalism initiatives launched there generally exclude Iran. Therefore, studies on Middle Eastern regionalism often deal exclusively with Arab regionalism, or with attempts to link Arab states with Israel in the context of the Middle East peace process.

The prospects for Iran's engagement in multilateral regional cooperation with its new northern neighbours in the 1990s looked less promising. Iran's image in the eyes of post-Soviet elites of Central Asia and the Caucasus was more negative than its image in the Middle Eastern and western countries — none initially viewed Iran as a natural partner. Iran was automatically excluded from the majority of multilateral groupings and frameworks developed in the 1990s since membership of these was restricted in the most cases either to the former Soviet republics or to members of Euro-Atlantic organizations.

Given this backdrop, Iran has expressed interest to join the SCO and the Arab League. One of the constant themes of Iran's statements on regionalism has been self-reliance among regional states and exclusion of extra-regional powers. Now, Iran's geographical position, size, economic height and military size provide it the potential to play pivotal role in a number of regional configurations like the Persian

¹¹⁷ E. Herzig , "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 503-517.

Gulf, Central Asia and the Caspian Basin. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to a new awareness in Iran of the possibilities presented by the combination of the country's strength relative to the other regional states and its geographic locational advantages at the heart of the Eurasian continent (Heartland Eurasia). Participation in groupings that exclude extra-regional powers holds out the prospect of allowing Iran to fulfil its proper role in the way that the country cannot currently do within the international system subject to current relationship with the US-led West centring on nuclear issue. That is why Iran has consistently favoured formation of new regional structure for the Persian Gulf states.

However, Iran's interest in using regionalism to exclude the US has frequently been counterproductive while engaging neighbouring countries in cooperation. For example, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc. who are Iran's neighbours welcomed the US military presence in their region as an effective way to ensure their security in relation to regional power like Iran. Geopolitics was an important factor in explaining Iran's interest in regionalism in early 1990s. But today its strategic dilemma is not shared by any of its regional neighbours, and now geopolitics does not provide a basis for its regional cooperation. Still Iran's inclusion in the SCO would serve as a shade of against the west. Iran's military and security set up is likely to be enhanced due to formal security ties among the members, in particular Russia and China.

VI. Possibility of Changes in the Regional Strategic Configuration

An important change in the Central Asian strategic posture is that the US has entered Central Asia in an all-round way in the new millennium. It began to enter the region after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, including military access. After 9/11, the US has improved relations with all the countries except Iran in the region, including those it showed indifference to and those it criticized on the grounds of their political systems and cultures. In view of the substantial strengthening of US presence in Central Asia and Caucasus, the improvement of US relations with India and Pakistan, US decisive role in Afghanistan and the strengthening of US traditional alliance relations with Turkey after 9/11, the Grand Central Asian region has

become for the first time a complete strategic region in the US diplomacy and the US has also become a country with the most diplomatic resources and influence in the region. After the US put so many political, military and economic resources in this region, its importance and interests to the US have been enhanced and the US will not make a strategic withdrawal from the region. Russia's control of and influence in Central Asia had been greatly weakened, but it remained the country with the most political, economic and security influence on the region. Besides, after Putin assumed office in 2000, Russia increased its input in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Central Asia and its influence on the region rebounded and picked up the momentum. After establishing diplomatic relations with five Central Asian countries, China began to take an increasingly active attitude to its access to Central Asia.¹¹⁸

The SCO stems from border security. Border involves national security and common border often becomes the basis of a special relationship between countries. The emergence and development of terrorism, separatism and extremism widely spread in Central Asia had internal and external reasons. The growing US presence in Central Asia has radically distorted the political topography of the region; it has uncovered the limitations of the SCO and will force Russia and China to alter their strategies *vis-à-vis* the security and military concerns of the SCO states. The initial appearance of US troops in the region underscored the internal dissension among SCO members: the Central Asian states embraced the arrival of US troops on their military bases, while Russia and China were shocked by their arrival. For Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, positive relationships with the US unlocked new opportunities to obtain political and economic aid from the West. Such relations allowed these countries to complement Sino-Russian attempts to court them with new western attention. Reciprocally, the US and its allies have enjoyed the free use of their territory in order to stage military operations into Afghanistan.

¹¹⁸ Z. Huasheng, "New Situation in Central Asia and Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *SIIS Journal*, (2), 2003, available at <http://www.siis.org.cn>, accessed on 01 September, 2006.

Iran's inclusion in the SCO will not bring about any significant change in the regional strategic set up given the US presence in Central Asia, particularly in Afghanistan. Although China and Russia have recently been somewhat vocal against US or extra-regional military presence in Central Asia, the US-led ongoing war on terror does not seem to be coming to an end very soon.

The SCO although has provided Iran the observer status, it feels shy of its inclusion as a member from the ground that it would worsen the relationship of Russia and China with the west. Unfortunately, the Middle East has become a field of bloodshed because of vested interest of the current unipolar world. Therefore, it would be rationally expected that this situation will never be stopped until and unless at least a major player emerges in the region. Stability in the Middle East would not only reverse destruction of the great civilizations of the world, but also restore stability of energy supply and greater economic and social security and flourishing human quality in this part of the world.

VII. Conclusion

There has been a general resurgence of regionalism in the post-Cold War international order, since early 1990, resulting in regional and sub-regional groupings involving the Central Asian countries.¹¹⁹ The states have also been involved in increasing frequency in conflicts among themselves, including trade war, border disputes and disagreements over the management and use of water and energy. The relocation of Central Asia from the periphery to the center of the US's area of strategic interest following 9/11 served to deepen extant fault-lines within the region, further reducing the prospects for enhanced cooperation, appearance of a pan-Central Asian regional identity and of course greater Asian regionalism. The recent crisis has exacerbated the US concerns that Iran has made significant progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons despite US's international efforts to control trade in nuclear technology.¹²⁰ A regional structure that combines Central Asia and the Caucasus under the aegis of SCO would be a

¹¹⁹ A. Bohr, "Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No.3, 2004, pp. 485-502.

¹²⁰ Bowen and Kidd, 2004, *op cit.*, p. 264.

balancing effect in the region. Asian regionalism is expressed in terms of inclusiveness of other regional grouping like South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The current policy of exclusiveness particularly for Iran¹²¹ does not demonstrate the Organization's characteristic of greater Asian regionalism. In order to overcome this crucial limitation, the SCO must be more inclusive and out of fear.

However, the SCO should come forward for normalizing Iran's relationship with the west for the betterment of their own as well as greater stability, security and economic well-being in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Caspian Sea, East and Southeast Asia and even poor but growing South Asia as their economic performance is greatly dependent on oil supply from the Middle East. On the other hand, under the umbrella of the SCO Iran's flourishing as a power in the Middle East would bring about and eventually strengthen peace and stability in the region.

¹²¹ It is an important and integral part of the Middle East as well.

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THE KURDS AND THE MIDDLE EAST POLITICS: A HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Abstract

The Gulf War was a 'critical event' for the Kurds in the Middle East politics. With the end of the Gulf War, the Kurdish issue received more attention in the West and people in many parts of the world became familiar with it. In other words, the Gulf War has not changed the existing problem itself rather it has changed the perception of the problem in other countries. The main objective of this paper is to present a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish problem in the Middle East and analyze effects of the current events, especially in the post-1991 era, on the Kurds. Special attention will be given to the effects of the war in 2003 on the Kurdish political power, especially within Iraq.

Introduction

Many changes have taken place in the Middle East politics since the end of the Gulf War of 1991. The evolution of events in northern Iraq since 1990 has been especially important for possessing the potential of causing a large destabilization in the Middle East. In the era following the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds, living in northern Iraq, have established an autonomous political entity in the area by taking advantage of the no-fly zone that was enforced by the

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US-led coalition against the Iraqi aircrafts. As a consequence of the political changes that took place in northern Iraq in the post-1991 Gulf War, the Kurds have received big media coverage in the Western world. In these new circumstances, the Kurds gained the opportunity to make their cause to be heard in various countries and many people all around the world became aware of not only the current conditions but also previous atrocities committed against the Kurds and historical evolution of the Kurdish problem.¹²² In the post-September 11 era, the George W. Bush Administration launched a military campaign against Saddam Hussein in March 2003. As a result of the military campaign, Saddam Hussein's regime came to an end and Iraq went through various political changes. One of the most important changes has been the increasing power of the Kurds within Iraqi politics. Especially, when increasing power of the Kurds is taken into account, there is a need to take into consideration the events of the last two decades. By presenting a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish political power in this paper, it is argued that the 1991 Gulf War has constituted a "critical event"¹²³ for the Kurds.

The main objective of this paper is to present a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish problem in the Middle East and to analyze effects of the current events, especially in the post-1991 era, on the Kurds. The Kurdish population in the Middle East is mainly divided among four countries, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This paper will focus on the Kurds living in Turkey, the largest ethnic group, and the Kurds living in Iraq, the group that has received the biggest attention since the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

¹²² Apart from the media coverage, since 1991 even within international political institutions, the Kurdish issue received much more attention than previous decades. For example, recently the European Parliament has accepted a report about the Kurdish problem.

¹²³Richard Pride, "How Activists and Media Frame Social Problems: Critical Events Versus Performance Trends for Schools," *Political Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1995, pp. 5-26. According to Pride, "Critical events are contextually dramatic happenings [...] Critical events are eruptions; unlike routine performance indicators, they are radical discontinuities in the real world that attract attention."

While analyzing the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, one of the central questions that needs to be addressed is that how did the Gulf War affect the Kurds? This question has several components. First of all, the political changes have to be analyzed. There is also a need to examine the changing perception of the Kurdish problem in Western countries. As a part of this question, there is also a need to examine whether this change in perception was explicitly toward the Kurds living in northern Iraq or was it a change for all the Kurds living in other countries in the Middle East? It is also important to examine the contemporary Kurdish problem. What kind of opportunities has become available for the Kurds in the current era? How does the current situation affect future of politics in the Middle East? While examining these questions, there is a need to present historical evolution of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East.

After presenting a brief historical background about the Kurdish problem in the first part of this paper, the 1991 Gulf War's effects on the Kurds will be examined in the second part. Since this war has had the greatest influence on the Kurds living in northern Iraq, special attention will be given to them in this part. In the last part of the paper, effects of the war in 2003 on the Kurdish political power, especially within Iraq, will be analyzed.

Evolution of the Kurdish Problem

The Kurds live mainly in the area called Mesopotamia, the region between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and they have very long historical background in the area. The Kurdish problem too has a long historical background and with a total population of approximately 30 million people, the Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East after the Arabs, the Persians, and the Turks.¹²⁴ Despite this large population size and several attempts that have been made during the twentieth century, the Kurds have not succeeded in establishing their own independent state. The Kurdish population and the problem associated with that is so significant that some authors refer to the

¹²⁴ Henry J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998, p. 5.

Kurds as “the world’s largest nation without a country.”¹²⁵ As the country where half of the total Kurdish population lives, Turkey has the largest Kurdish population in the area, a total between 12 and 18 million. Iran has approximately 6 million, Iraq 4 million, and Syria 1 million Kurds living within their territories.¹²⁶ Apart from the Kurds living in Middle Eastern countries in the current situation, there are about 850,000 Kurds living in various European countries as a result of the migration that mainly took place during the 1990s and 500,000 to 600,000 of them are living in Germany.¹²⁷ The presence of this large Kurdish population in Europe is another reason that made the countries outside the Middle East, especially the European Union, to be more sensitive to the Kurdish issue.

¹²⁵ William Safire, “The Kurdish Ghost,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2003, p. A23.

¹²⁶ The numbers about the total Kurdish population and distribution of this population among countries vary and we are using the numbers that seem to reflect the average among various sources. All these numbers seemed to be calculated based on ethnicity but ethnicity and personal feeling about nationality may vary greatly. Some people who have Kurdish origin may not call themselves as Kurdish as they integrate within dominant culture of the country where they live. About the numbers of the Kurdish population see Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the 21st Century: Opportunities, Challenges, Threats*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, p.120; Stephen Kinzer, *Crescent and Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 120; Michael Gunter, “The Kurdish Question and International Law,” in Ferhad Ibrahim and Gulistan Gurbey, (eds.), *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, p. 31; Robert Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations: From World War I to 1998*, Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1998, p.3; Miron Rezun, *Saddam Hussein’s Gulf Wars: Ambivalent Stakes in the Middle East*, Westport: Praeger, 1992, pp.110-111; Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Iraq’s Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p.18; For more conservative estimates about total Kurdish population see Paul J. White, *Primitive Rebels of Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, London: Zed Books, 2000, pp. 16-17.

¹²⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Transnational Aspects of the Kurdish Question*, European University Institute, Working Paper RSC No. 2000/22, San Domenico, Italy: 2000, p. 24.

The Kurds have lived in the territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire for several hundred years. During this time, the Kurds revolted many times against the Ottoman central government and they became famous for their non-cooperation with the central authority.¹²⁸ At the end of the World War I, the Ottoman Empire came to an end and the territory where the Kurds lived was divided among four major countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.¹²⁹

During the Turkish Independence War that took place after the First World War in Anatolia most of the Kurds supported Mustafa Kemal, leader of the Turkish forces that fought against foreign invaders and who later became president of the Republic of Turkey. But even during this war against foreign invaders a section of the Kurds revolted against Mustafa Kemal.¹³⁰ The new Turkish state that was founded in 1923 put great emphasis on Turkish nationalism and most of the Kurds were not satisfied with the arrangements carried out by the state. The Kurds mostly felt offended by new policies, like prohibiting non-Turkish names¹³¹ and non-recognition of the Kurds as minority. Therefore, the Kurds revolted more than a dozen times during the 1920s and 1930s against the government in Ankara.¹³²

¹²⁸ About Kurdish uprisings during the Ottoman era see Kendal, "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire," in Gerard Chaliand, (ed.), *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (Translated from French by Michael Pallis), New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993, pp. 11-37.

¹²⁹ Not all of these four countries became independent immediately after the World War I; Iraq and Syria remained under the British and French protectorate for a long time.

¹³⁰ The most significant Kurdish revolt during this period was the one that was called as Kocgiri revolt which took place in 1920. For this issue, see White, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-73; Barkey and Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹³¹ A number of other policies were implemented by Mustafa Kemal to form a unified 'Turkish nation' and to westernize the Turkish society. To get an idea about the Kurdish uneasiness to these policies, see Cornell, *op. cit.*, p.123.

¹³² For well documented history of Sheik Said rebellion, the largest Kurdish uprising, that took place in 1925, see Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989.

Although there were no significant Kurdish uprisings between 1940 and 1980, uneasiness continued to exist among the Kurds in Turkey. Apart from the lack of cultural rights for the Kurds, the areas where they live remained underdeveloped and an economically inferior position to other regions in Turkey. During the 1960s, as a response to this backwardness the Kurdish students created leftist groups like many groups that were created by the Turkish students during that era. Despite these student activities during the 1960s, no powerful Kurdish group emerged until the early 1970s.¹³³

The Partia Karkaren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan as a Marxist-Leninist organization fighting for independence of the Kurds living in Turkey.¹³⁴ Although the PKK was recruiting most of its members from Turkey, after the military coup that took place in Turkey in 1980, Ocalan and some of his close associates fled to Syria. They lived in Syria under the protection of the Syrian government until late 1998.¹³⁵ For Syrian President Hafiz Assad, the PKK was a good tool to be used against Turkey.

Between 1978 and 1984, the PKK grew very fast and carried out its first terrorist act against Turkey on August 15, 1984, by killing more than a dozen people.¹³⁶ According to many analysts, the PKK reached its most powerful position in the years following the Gulf War.¹³⁷ The PKK continued its operations against Turkey until February 1999, when Ocalan was captured in Nairobi, Kenya, and handed over to the Turkish authorities.¹³⁸ Upon capture of its leader,

¹³³ See White, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-134. Also see Dogu Ergil, “Aspects of the Kurdish Problem in Turkey,” in Debbie Lovatt, (ed.), *Turkey Since 1970: Politics, Economics and Society*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p.168.

¹³⁴ In early 1970s, Ocalan was a student of Political Science at Ankara University and he was from rural southeastern part of Turkey where the Kurds are the dominant ethnic group.

¹³⁵ Ergil, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹³⁶ Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Ergil, *ibid.*,

¹³⁷ Barkey and Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 22; Michael Radu, “Who is Abdullah Ocalan?” *Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ac/acf/Radu.htm>, accessed on January 05, 2003.

¹³⁸ Syria had to expel Ocalan in late 1998 upon Turkey’s increasing pressure. After traveling between Russia, Italy, and Greece he was captured in Kenya

the PKK declared ceasefire and later changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) in 2002. Although Ocalan received death penalty in a Turkish court, the verdict was not carried out and later on Turkey abolished the death penalty from its law mainly as a response to the European Union's demands.¹³⁹ Currently, Ocalan is still in prison in Turkey and the KADEK is trying to develop political strategies rather than military ones in order to adapt itself to the new situation.

Revolts against the central authorities were not something seen solely among the Kurds living in Turkey. The Kurds in other countries too have had several conflicts with the authorities of states they are living in. From this perspective, the Kurds living in northern Iraq have been especially important. When the Iraqi and the Iranian Kurds joined their forces under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani they established the first quasi-independent state called the 'Mahabad Republic' in 1946. However, it lasted only a year before it was crushed and Barzani fled to the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁰

As indicated earlier, there are about 4 million Kurds living in Northern Iraq.¹⁴¹ When we look at the political structure of the Kurds in northern Iraq there are mainly two powerful Kurdish parties in that

and handed over to Turkey. For a rich analysis of the evolution of Turkey-Syria relations during 1990s and Ocalan's capture in February 1999, see, Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000: The Kurdish and Islamist Questions*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 105-124. About the same issue also see, Gunter, *op. cit.*, p. 54; Ergil, *op. cit.*, pp.170-175; Kinzer, *op. cit.*, pp.119-123; Cornell, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

¹³⁹ Turkey is trying to get full membership of the EU and in order to consider Turkey's membership application, the EU has asked Turkey to carry out various reforms, including abolishment of the death penalty.

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds*, A Middle East Watch Report, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993. For details see, Chapter One: Ba'athis and Kurds available at www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALI.htm, accessed on January 06, 2003.

¹⁴¹ This number differs among the sources and the numbers we met. There is a range from 3.2 million to 5.6 million. Therefore, we use 4 million, which is a kind of mean for the numbers in this case, as the number of Kurds living in Northern Iraq.

area. First one is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani, son of the legendary Mullah Mustafa Barzani. The second big Kurdish party in northern Iraq is the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani. The PUK was established in 1975 when Talabani left the KDP politburo and chose to follow a more secular leftist movement.¹⁴² The KDP has more feudal linkages, compared to the PUK, and it is more powerful in rural areas. On the other hand, the PUK has more influence in urban areas and less feudal structure. Apart from their struggle against Saddam Hussein, these two parties have also fought many times against each other to have greater areas of influence in northern Iraq.

In order to secure its power in Iraq at the beginning of the 1970s, the Ba'ath Party offered autonomy to the Kurds living in northern Iraq. While doing so, the regime excluded oil rich lands from the autonomous Kurdish region. The Kurds rejected this proposal but the Iraqi government unilaterally imposed this autonomy in 1974. At the same time, the government in Baghdad started its 'Arabization' policy in oil rich areas in northern Iraq. Upon this Iraqi policy the Kurds revolted against the Iraqi central government under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and at the beginning of this revolt he was supported by Iran, Israel, and the US.¹⁴³ Things changed when Iran signed a border agreement with Iraq in 1975 and withdrew its support from Barzani. With Iran's policy change toward Iraq, the US followed a similar policy and cut off aid to the KDP. When Barzani wrote to the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to ask for help against the Iraqi government, Kissinger did not deign to reply. Therefore, the KDP fled into Iran and Iraqi government forced tens of thousands of Kurds to leave their homes and they were relocated in south of Iraq.

In the mid and late 1970s, the Iraqi government removed more than a quarter million Kurds from Iraq's borders with Iran and Turkey. Most of those people were relocated in areas controlled by the Iraqi Army and they were forbidden to go back to their homes.¹⁴⁴ When Iran-Iraq war started, the KDP, this time led by Massoud Barzani, revived its alliance with Iran and in 1983 the KDP helped Iranian

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch/A Middle East Report, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Army in operations against Iraq. In addition to this KDP-Iran alliance, the KDP's major Kurdish rival, the PUK, could not reach an agreement with the Iraqi government and in 1986, Jalal Talabani also concluded a political and military agreement with Iran. As a result, rural areas in northern Iraq were liberated by the Kurdish forces and Iraqi government lost its control in these areas.

In order to deal with this Kurdish problem, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party granted special powers to Hassan al-Majid, a cousin of Saddam Hussein. Al-Majid conducted a series of military actions, called as Anfal, between 23 February and 6 September 1988 against the Kurds in northern Iraq. He described his mission as "to solve the Kurdish problem and slaughter the saboteurs." In fact, Al-Majid targeted all the Kurds living in rural areas and during the Anfal at least fifty thousand people, including many women and children, were killed. During these operations, Iraqi forces used chemical weapons along with the advanced conventional weapons. In fact, Iraq became the first state in history to attack its own civilian population with weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴⁵ During the largest chemical attack on March 16, 1988 in Halabja, between 3,200 and 5,000 civilians died.¹⁴⁶ Iraqi forces did not only kill the civilians but at the same time they destroyed about 4,000 of 5,000 Kurdish villages.

Iraq's attacks on the Kurds with chemical weapons did not receive enough attention in the Western media and at the governmental level. Most of the Western states preferred to take no action about Iraq's genocide policy.¹⁴⁷ Although in the US, the senate unanimously passed the Prevention of Genocide Act, 1988 and called for economic sanctions against Iraq, the Reagan Administration strongly opposed the senate bill. The US Secretary of State Shultz declared that "the attacks on the Kurds were 'abhorrent and unjustifiable.'" One of Shultz's deputies argued that to impose sanctions was "premature". "We need 'solid, businesslike relations' with Iraq," said another. The bottom line,

¹⁴⁵ Ibrahim al-Marashi, "Saddam's Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Iraq as Case Study of a Middle Eastern Proliferant," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2004, p. 84.

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch/ A Middle East Report, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-15.

¹⁴⁷ Rezun, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

as laid out in an administration memorandum, was that “there should be no radical policy change now regarding to Iraq.”¹⁴⁸

During the Iran-Iraq war, the US supported Iraq against an unfriendly regime in Iran. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 but even after that the US continued to provide economic, political and military assistance to Iraq until its invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The argument for a change in the US policy toward Iraq at the beginning of the Bush Administration did not pay enough attention and the administration did not see Iraq as a possible threat source to the US interests in the Middle East.¹⁴⁹ When George Bush took the office, he continued Reagan’s policy about Iraq and signed the National Security Directive (NSD) 26 on October 2, 1989. With NSD 26, President Bush aimed to “propose economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior”, increase the US “influence within Iraq” and bring Saddam Hussein and his country into “the family of nations.”¹⁵⁰ The NSD 26 “noted that “access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area” remained vital to US national security and that the United States was “committed” to defending those interests, “if necessary and appropriate through the use of US military force.” The NSD 26 went on to conclude that the evolution of “normal relations between the United States and Iraq would serve our longer-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East.”¹⁵¹

The 1991 Gulf War and the Kurds in Northern Iraq

After the Gulf War conducted by the US-led international coalition against Iraq, the Kurds in northern Iraq once again revolted against the Iraqi central government. At the same time, the Shi’ites, the majority population in Iraq, also revolted against Saddam Hussein. Since the

¹⁴⁸ Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam 1982-1990*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994, pp. 68-69.

¹⁴⁹ Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D. C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993, p. 34.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Jentleson, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵¹ Kenneth I. Juster, “The United States and Iraq: Perils of Engagement,” in Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, (eds.), *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions, and Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 55.

Shi'ites comprise about 60 percent of the Iraqi population,¹⁵² after the Shi'ite uprising more than 70 percent of Iraq's population became no longer under the control of the central government in Baghdad. Things were going out of US's control and therefore, instead of continuing to support the revolts against Saddam, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf¹⁵³ "lifted ceasefire restrictions on Saddam's helicopter force and allowed it to crush the revolt."¹⁵⁴ The US had three main reasons to follow such a policy. First, the breakup of Iraq would disturb the stability in the Middle East. Second, an Iraq under the Shi'ite control would be in the benefit of Iran. Therefore, the US did not want to allow transformation of power to the Shi'tes. Third, the US wanted to see a coup led by one of Saddam Hussein's top colonels, but certainly not a widespread uncontrolled revolt.¹⁵⁵

As a result of the Iraqi Army's offensive against the Kurds in northern Iraq, tens of thousands of Kurds died and about two million Kurds left their villages and fled into the Turkish and Iranian borders.¹⁵⁶ Upon this humanitarian crisis, the UN Security Council passed the resolution 688 and authorized the use of force to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq. The US, French, and British forces established a 'safety zone' in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds against Iraqi Army's assault. Under the 'Operation Provide Comfort,' in April 1991, the US sent about 10,000 troops to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq. In addition to these US troops, other allied countries sent about 11,000 troops to the area. After this security measure, most of the displaced

¹⁵² Jentleson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁵³ Michael R. Gordon, "US is Wooing a Shiite Exile to Rattle Iraq," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2002, pp. A1-A14.

¹⁵⁴ David Wurmser, *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein*, Washington, D. C.: The AEI Press, 1999, p.10. Also see "Iraq Under Pressure: View From Northern Iraq," *PBS:NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, November 28, 2002, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/july-dec02/wright_11-28.html, accessed on January 13, 2003.

¹⁵⁵ Wurmser, *ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁶ Robin Wright, "Iraqi Kurds Say US is Back," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2002, available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/custom/showcase/la-fg-kurds12now12.story>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

Kurds returned to their homes by the end of May 1991.¹⁵⁷ While deploying ground troops in northern Iraq the allied forces also ordered Saddam Hussein to stop flying his planes in the area north of the 36th parallel.¹⁵⁸ When the US threatened use of force, Iraq stopped its offensive against the Kurds and Saddam Hussein did not challenge this order in northern Iraq until 1996.

By Operation Provide Comfort, the US first of all wanted to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein. In addition to this effort, the US also wanted to reassure its longstanding and strategically very important ally, Turkey, that the US was not going to destabilize its internal stability.¹⁵⁹ The main concern of Turkey was to prevent creation of an independent Kurdish state, because such a state would threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. Officially, the US is still pursuing the policy of unified Iraq and, therefore, Turkey and the US seem to be agreeing at least on the basic principles of the policy toward Iraq.¹⁶⁰

After the 1991 Gulf War, the US and its allies chose not to create a separate political entity in northern Iraq. Such an entity would disturb not only Turkey but also many other Arab states. As Byman and Waxman put it aptly, "the Arabs sympathized with the Kurds' sufferings, but they opposed any plan that might contribute to dismembering a major Arab power."¹⁶¹ A new independent entity in northern Iraq would change the whole balance of power in the Middle East and obviously most of the Arab states, if not all, were not willing to see such a change in the region.

When allied forces withdrew their ground troops from northern Iraq the no-fly zones in north of the 36th parallel and south of the 32nd parallel were left in place. Originally, the no-fly zones were designed to protect the Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites in the south from the

¹⁵⁷ Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, *Confronting Iraq: US Policy and the Use of Force since the Gulf War*, Arlington, VA: RAND, 2000, pp. 43-44.

¹⁵⁸ Bruce W. Nelan, "A Land of Stones," *Time*, Vol. 139, No. 9, March 2, 1992.

¹⁵⁹ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁶⁰ Kemal Balci, "US Assures Turkey, No Separate State in Iraq," *Turkish Daily News*, October 17, 2001.

¹⁶¹ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Iraqi air strikes. Although the US claims that the no-fly zones are based on the UN Security Council Resolution 688, there are some authors suggesting that no-fly zones, in fact, do not have any bases in international law and the UN did not authorize them.¹⁶² “Since France withdrew from the northern zone at the end of 1996 and suspended its participation in the southern zone at the end of 1998,”¹⁶³ until the beginning of the US-British war against Iraq, only the US and British aircrafts were patrolling the no-fly zones. After the French withdrawal from patrolling the zones “the US and Britain escalated their military role to include assaults on antiaircraft batteries that fired at allied aircraft enforcing the zones. This role was escalated further when antiaircraft batteries were attacked simply for locking on their radar screens on allied aircraft, even without firing. Then, the Clinton administration began attacking radar installations and other military targets within the no-fly zone, even when they were unrelated to alleged Iraqi threats against US aircraft.” Even before declaring war against Iraq, the current Bush Administration started “targeting radar and command-and-control installations well beyond the no-fly zone.”¹⁶⁴

In October 1991, the Iraqi government decided to withdraw its troops and all funding from three governorates in northern Iraq. Hence, the region came under the Kurdish control without having a formal status. Saddam Hussein imposed a blockade on the north, he also halted the payment of salaries to government officials there, ordering them back to Iraqi-held territory. Arabs working the north obeyed, but Kurdish officials remained at their posts. That is when the Kurdistan Front, the coordinating body for the various Kurdish parties, took over the administration of northern Iraq, assuming the responsibility for paying the salaries of essential workers.” In addition to Saddam Hussein’s sanctions against northern Iraq, the UN economic sanctions

¹⁶² For the discussion about legal issue concerning no-fly zones, see Bennis, Zunes, and Honey, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6; Sarah Graham-Brown, “No-Fly Zones: Rhetoric and Real Intentions,” *MERIP Press Information Note 49*, February 20, 2001.

¹⁶³ Graham-Brown, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Bennis, Zunes, and Honey, *op. cit.*, p.6.

against Iraq were also imposed on the area.¹⁶⁵ When the oil-for-food agreement was reached, it was decided that about 15% of the total revenues from this oil trade would be spent in northern Iraq¹⁶⁶ but even after this arrangement the UN economic sanctions continued to affect the Kurdish population.

The no-fly zone in northern Iraq that was in effect from 1991 to March 2003 was not coincident with the line of the Iraqi troops' withdrawal. "The no-fly zone, therefore, included Mosul, still under government control, but excludes Sulaimaniyya, the largest city of the Kurdish-controlled region, along with the southern part of that governorate. Also outside the zone is the city of Kirkuk, a center of the Iraqi oil industry that remains under government control."¹⁶⁷

As a result of the US and British aircraft patrol on northern Iraq, the Iraqi aircrafts were no longer a danger for the Kurds. The Iraqi aircrafts were effectively deterred from flying over the area, but this restriction did not apply to the Turkish and Iranian aircrafts. In many cases, Turkey used the airspace on northern Iraq to attack the PKK and sent ground troops with temporary missions to the area. Although the UN and the EU protested Turkey's operations in northern Iraq, the US did not raise strong opposition against any of these operations.¹⁶⁸

While these things were going on after the 1991 Gulf War, the two main Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq, the PUK and KDP, continued their rivalry for controlling the area. During this struggle between the two parties various combinations of alliance were formed. For example, when the armed conflict erupted in July 1996, the PUK aligned itself with Iran and started being offensive against the KDP. In response, the KDP asked the US to stop the PUK. But when the US refused to intervene, the KDP sought Saddam Hussein's help. On August 1996, the Iraqi forces moved into northern Iraq and the PUK was defeated. During this operation, the Iraqi troops took much of the northern Iraq, arrested and executed many opposition members. Apart

¹⁶⁵ Jennifer Washburn, "US has to meet Responsibility to Kurds," *Newsday*, The Long Island Newspaper, October 2, 1996.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Feuilherade, "Iraq Agrees Oil for Food Deal with UN," *The Middle East*, July/August 1996, p. 9.

¹⁶⁷ Graham-Brown, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

from that, thousands of opposition members were evacuated to the US. After the Iraqi-KDP victory over the PUK, the US responded to Saddam Hussein by carrying out the “Operation Desert Strike”. The US launched 44 cruise missiles against the targets in southern Iraq. The US also extended the no-fly zone in the southern Iraq from the 32nd parallel to 33rd parallel. After the strikes, Saddam Hussein withdrew his forces to the cease-fire line.¹⁶⁹

During the post-1991 Gulf War era for the first time in modern history, excluding short experience of the Mahabad Republic, the Kurds gained the opportunity to control a huge territory and since May 1992 they have had a ‘democratically’ elected government based in Erbil.¹⁷⁰ The Kurdish parliament that was established after the 1992 elections could not be effective because of the rivalry that lasted during the 1990s between the KDP and PUK. The parliament’s last meeting during the 1990s was held in 1996 and it did not have any other meeting until 2002 because of the high scale military clashes between the two Kurdish parties. After this six-year of inactive role the parliament met for the first time on October 4, 2002 in Erbil. During the parliament’s meetings in early November, the constitution for Regional Kurdish Authority was adopted, and Kirkuk was declared as the Kurdish region’s capital¹⁷¹. As mentioned earlier, this Kurdish region does not have any formal status and in the long term it will be very difficult to keep it in its current situation. There can be different scenarios for the future of northern Iraq like its full independence or its status as an autonomous region and, finally a return to the pre-1991 Gulf War conditions.

The changes that have taken place in northern Iraq after the end of the Gulf War have caused big concerns in Turkey. Turkey is not only a

¹⁶⁹ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59; Husayn Al-Kurdi, *What Really Happened in Iraq?*, October-September 1996, available at <http://www.sonic.net/~doret/Issues/96-10%20OCT/whatreally.html>, accessed on November 12, 2002.

¹⁷⁰ Chris Kutschera, “Kurds in Crisis,” *The Middle East*, November 1995, p. 6.

¹⁷¹ İlnur Cevik, “Kurdish Regional Parliament Convenes in North Iraq Today,” *Turkish Daily News*, October 4, 2002, available at <http://turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>; *NTVMSNBC*, “Kuzey Irak Anayasası Parlemtoda”, November 1, 2002, available at <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/185399.asp>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

country where approximately half of 30 million Kurds live, but it is also a country where a serious separatist Kurdish movement took place during the 1980s and 1990s. According to the sources from the Turkish government, during the fifteen years of conflict, from 1984 to 1999, more than 30,000 people, including the PKK members, have lost their lives, more than 3,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and about 3,000,000 Kurds were displaced.¹⁷²

Many people view the PKK as the biggest threat to the Turkish State and its territorial integrity since the foundation of the republic in 1923. At the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK found a more suitable ground to increase its power as a result of the new situation that no central authority existed in northern Iraq. In addition to the absence of the central authority, the existence of about 4 million Kurds in northern Iraq gave the PKK an opportunity to move easily in that part of Iraq. As a response to the PKK's increasing activities in northern Iraq, Turkey cooperated with the Kurdish parties in the region, mainly with Barzani and to smaller degree with Talabani, against the PKK. The KDP did not want its relations with Turkey to be jeopardized because of the operations carried out by PKK at Iraqi-Turkish border. Therefore, in fall of 1992, Barzani's forces, with the assistance of Turkey, fought against the PKK, and at the end of these battles the PKK lost several of its bases in northern Iraq.¹⁷³ When a full-scale fighting broke out between the KDP and PUK in May 1994, the former took advantage of the situation and reestablished new bases in northern Iraq near the border with Turkey. In order to prevent existence of PKK in the area, Turkey launched several cross-border operations into northern Iraq. As a result of the Turkish Army's cross-border operations, by 1997-98, PKK's ability to operate from northern Iraq

¹⁷² Again, these numbers include PKK members that were killed by the Turkish security forces and PKK has also blamed the Turkish Army for death of civilians in eastern part of Turkey. These numbers are quoted in Gunter, *op. cit.*, p.54.

¹⁷³ Ferhad Ibrahim, "The 'Foreign Policy' of the PKK: Regional Enemies and Allies," in Ferhad Ibrahim and Gulistan Gurbey, (eds.), *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p.106.

had significantly declined.¹⁷⁴ As mentioned earlier, the Iraqi aircrafts were effectively deterred from flying over no-fly zones but this restriction did not apply to the Turkish aircrafts. From time to time some people in the US have suggested Turkey's seizure of Northern Iraq as the most convenient alternative for both the US and Turkey.¹⁷⁵ Even the Kurdish leaders in Northern Iraq namely, Barzani and Talabani, considered the possibility of joining Turkey as an alternative immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. During their visits to Turkey they raised this possibility publicly. The Turkish President of that time, Turgut Ozal, rejected this offer. Turkey already had problems with the PKK's uprising and such a territorial expansion would just contribute to make Turkey's internal Kurdish problem much more severe.

US War on Iraq and the Kurds

Many external actors have played very significant role in the Kurdish issue and it is quite probable that these actors rather than the Kurds themselves will shape the future of the Kurds. In the current circumstances, it will not be wrong to say that the US is the most important external actor in the Kurdish issue. Since we cannot expect the US or any other country in that matter, to follow a policy against its own interests, while analyzing the US's Kurdish issue we should keep in mind the US interests in the Middle East. It has been widely accepted by many scholars, policy makers, and government officials that maintaining the flow of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf at reasonable prices is one of the most important national interests of the US. Oil is not the sole interest the US has in Middle East. Besides the oil factor, the US has many other national interests in the Middle East: ensuring security of Israel, maintaining stability in the region, halting proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and preventing emergence of a dominant or regional influential power hostile to the US.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1774-2000*, London: Frank Cass, 2000, pp.307-311.

¹⁷⁵ John O'Sullivan, "If at first... (Turkey Should Seize Northern Iraq Territory) (Editorial)," *National Review*, Vol.48, No.19, October 14, 1996.

¹⁷⁶ There are many different views about the US national interests in the Middle East and instead of listing all these interests in this paper, we have presented the ones that have been cited quite often. For various thoughts and

Creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq would not only cause destabilization in the Middle East, but also by weakening Iraq's power would provide Iran a higher influence in the region. Therefore, it is not very desirable for the US to see an independent Kurdish state emerging in the Middle East. When the current Bush Administration was preparing to go to war against Iraq by holding several meetings with the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq, it tried to ensure, as a form of guarantee, from the Kurds that they would not be seeking independence in case of a war in this region. Although the military campaign against Saddam Hussein did not last long and took less than two months for George W. Bush to declare the victory¹⁷⁷, the post-war era proved to be more challenging to manage. After the fall of Saddam regime, Iraq went through a religio-sectarian violence in the intra-state level and within the chaotic situation, the Kurdish areas seem to be most stable part of Iraq. As a result of this new political environment in the post-war era, the Iraqi Kurds have gained many new rights and along these new rights they have gained power, too.

Theoretically, the Kurds in northern Iraq are not independent now, but they have a powerful state structure; they have an army, and although they are still part of Iraq, they are affected very little by the

lists about the US interests in the Middle East, see Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: A Superpower Assesses Its Role in a Turbulent World*, 2nd ed. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001, pp.200-202; Juster, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-69; Richard M. Preece, *CRS Report for Congress: United States-Iraqi Relations*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, July 30, 1986, p.12; Alan Friedman, *Spider's Web: The Secret History of How the White House Illegally Armed Iraq*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993; Valerie Seward, *The Middle East After the Gulf War*, London: Wilton Park Papers 53, March 1992, p.7; Richard N. Perle, "Iraq: Saddam Unbound," in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, San Francisco, California: Encounter Books, 2000, pp.99-110; Statement by Madeleine K. Albright, Secretary of State, *Preserving Principle and Safeguarding Stability: United States Policy Toward Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Department of State, March 26, 1997; Phyllis Bennis, "And They Called It Peace: US Policy on Iraq," *Middle East Report*, No. 215, Summer 2000.

¹⁷⁷ Timothy Garden, "Iraq: The Military Campaign," *International Affairs*, Vol.79, No.4, 2003, pp.701-708.

central government in Baghdad. In addition to these factors, Kurdish leaders have been able to control the most important positions within the central Iraqi government. The leader of PUK, Jalal Talabani, as being the president of Iraqi government, is holding the highest position within the central government. In addition to this, the former spokesman of KDP, Hoshiyar Zebari, has been the foreign minister of the central government since 2003. Ironically, these two members of central Iraqi government are members of Kurdish parties, who do not hesitate to talk about possibility of an independent Kurdish state in the future. The Kurdish region that was divided between the KDP and the PUK for decades has been united since May 8, 2006 as the Regional Kurdish Government. Although it is difficult to predict the unity of Iraqi Kurds, so far they have been successful in developing common policies against other groups within Iraq.¹⁷⁸

When it comes to the Kurdish issue, Turkey is another important international actor. Since 1991, Turkey has continuously supported territorial integrity of Iraq and opposed any independent Kurdish state in the region. This is a reflection of Turkey's security concerns because of the large Kurdish population within its territories. Turkish authorities are panicked that any independent Kurdish state would affect the Kurds living in Turkey and at the end would threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. Although Turkey cooperated with the KDP and PUK, it was always suspicious about their real intentions. Although leaders of both parties, Barzani and Talabani respectively, made several declarations about having no intention of declaring an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq in the contemporary situation, especially Barzani, several times has indicated the Kurdish right to and dream about an independent state. Barzani has repeated his position on this issue during the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Iraq on October 05, 2006. Therefore, Turkey's security concerns have not been satisfied by the existing situation. In the current situation, the two parties are officially still supporting the territorial integrity of Iraq and demanding a federal status within Iraq in the post-Saddam era.

¹⁷⁸ Patrick Cockburn, "Kuzey Irak Giderek Ba ımsızlı a Yakla ıyor," *Radikal*, (in Turkish), June 25, 2006, p. 10.

When the probability of the US intervention appeared to be high, the Turkish authorities repeated the unacceptability of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. At the same time, the plan for the Kurdish parliament's first meeting in six years had increased Turkey's concerns about northern Iraq. Upon this change, the former Turkish Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit, in October 2002, declared once again that Turkey wants "Iraqi territorial integrity to be firmly secured." Furthermore, Ecevit warned the Kurdish parliament by saying that "if it goes beyond limits, Turkey will take every necessary measure against such a situation." More explicitly, Ecevit said that Turkey would "intervene with all its weight" if the *de facto* Kurdish state inclined to be more official one.¹⁷⁹ In fact, this was not a change in Turkey's policy and it is the position of the Turkish National Security Council. As an influential Turkish columnist Cengiz Candar puts it, "in a possible operation against Iraq what the Turks asked from Americans were guarantees for the territorial integrity of Iraq." This is, in Candar's words, "not the kind of relationship that the Turks asking to the Americans, 'please stop the Kurds from forming an independent state.' It is a declaration on the Turkish part to the Americans that we will not permit it."¹⁸⁰

After the Kurdish parliament's meeting on October 4, 2002, the Turkish officials became much more concerned about the future of northern Iraq. In an interview former Prime Minister, Ecevit, said that Turkey did not "want war" but it [Turkey] was "drifting into it with developments."¹⁸¹ On various occasions other Turkish officials raised their concern about the same issue. Some Turkish officials believe that

¹⁷⁹ *Turkish Daily News*, "Turkey Serves Veiled Warning to Iraqi Kurds," October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>, accessed on November 22, 2002.

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in reports of Elisabeth Farnsworth, "Reluctant Ally: Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds," *PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, October 23, 2002, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/july-dec02/kurds_10-23.html, accessed on January 26, 2003.

¹⁸¹ Fikret Bila, "Gelismeler bizi savasa surukluyor," *Milliyet*, (in Turkish), October 14, 2002, available at <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2002/10/13/yazar/bila.html>; About the analysis of the same interview see, Mete Belovacikli, "Kirkuk-Ankara line," *Turkish Daily News*, October 16, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/mete.htm>, accessed on January 16, 2003.

“some people in Washington are ‘encouraging’ the Iraqi Kurds and are also inclined in playing the ‘Kurdish card’”¹⁸² against Turkey. Although the US officially continues to support territorial integrity of Iraq, from some Turkish officials’ perspective, former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell’s letter to the Kurdish parliament is an indicator of the US’s support to an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq.¹⁸³

Apart from opposing creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, Turkey also demands a fair representation of Turkmen minority in the Kurdish parliament. The Turkmen were invited to the Kurdish parliament’s meeting that was held on October 4, 2002, but they rejected to join it because they claimed that they were under represented in this parliament.¹⁸⁴ In northern Iraq about 15% of the population are Turkmen.¹⁸⁵ “The Turkmen have lived for millennia in northern Iraq, especially in the oil-rich region around the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. Like the Kurds, Turkmen want autonomy in that region in a federal Iraq if Saddam Hussein is overthrown.”¹⁸⁶

The new government in Ankara that came to power after November 3, 2002 elections has followed the previous government’s policy toward Iraq. The Turkish parliament, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP–Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi) has the

¹⁸² “Turkey to US: Make up your Mind on Iraq,” *Turkish Daily News*, October 23, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

¹⁸³ For the text of this letter see, Colin L. Powell. “Message to Joint Assembly of the Kurdish Parliament,” October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.krg.org/news/powel-letter-4october2002.asp>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

¹⁸⁴ Ilnur Cevik, “PUK to host 2nd Session of Kurdish Parliament,” *Turkish Daily News*, October 8, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>; Murat Akgun, “Turkmenler esit sartlar istiyor,” *NTVMSNBC*, October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/180038.asp>, accessed on January 26, 2003.

¹⁸⁵ In an interview conducted by Elisabeth Farnsworth, Orhan Ketene from Iraqi Turkmen Front claimed that Turkmen are about 13 to 15 percent of the total population in northern Iraq. In another interview conducted by Murat Akgun, Turkmen representative Mustafa Ziya claimed that 20 percent of the total population in northern Iraq is Turkmen. For details, see, footnotes 59 and 63.

¹⁸⁶ Farnsworth, *ibid.*

majority of seats, rejected the bill allowing the US troops to use the Turkish territories. Rejection of this bill also limited Turkey's ability to have a greater influence in northern Iraq. Because according to the previous negotiations between the US and the Turkish government, the Turkish troops would take part in operations in northern Iraq alongside the US troops. In the era following the Second Gulf War in 2003, Turkey has made several attempts to prevent emergence of an independent state in northern Iraq. In addition to these attempts, the PKK is still using northern Iraq as a base for its operations against Turkey and the Turkish government has been trying to develop a new mechanism with the US to end PKK's presence in northern Iraq.¹⁸⁷ The US seems to be willing to end the PKK presence in that area because in the current Iraqi territory, northern Iraq is the only stable area that the PKK may jeopardize.¹⁸⁸

Turkey is not the only country that has concerns about creation of an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East. Other countries in the Middle East, especially Iran and Syria, which have significant Kurdish population within their territories, are opposing such a new entity in the region as well. These countries are not opposing only the creation of an independent Kurdish state but also any change to the *status quo* in the region.

Conclusion

The Kurds in northern Iraq once again found themselves in the middle of the ongoing war between the US-led forces and Iraq. In the Middle Eastern political arena, there are so many signals about what they intend to do and how they are going to pursue their goals.¹⁸⁹ The Kurds in Iraq cooperated with the US and Britain against Saddam Hussein, but this did not end decade-long disagreements among the Kurds. Although in the current situation, Kurds in northern Iraq have

¹⁸⁷ Both countries have recently appointed a coordinator to deal with this issue.

¹⁸⁸ Deniz Zeyrek, "ABD'siz bir operasyon çok zor", *Radikal*, (in Turkish) July 19, 2006, p. 6.

¹⁸⁹ For the perspectives from the Kurds about ongoing events, see *Kurdish Regional Government*, available at <http://www.krg.org/> ; *Kurdish Media*, available at <http://www.kurdishmedia.com>, accessed on February 20, 2003.

gained autonomy from the central Iraqi government, they are still skeptical about intentions of the US in Iraq. It is because of the Kurds' previous experiences with the US in 1975 and 1991 that have taught them, if anything else, not to rely on the US.

Any change in northern Iraq will inevitably affect the Kurds living in other countries. Now many countries are worried about how to hold Iraq together without creating a larger destabilization in the Middle East. In other words, currently main concern of many states in the Middle East is to preserve the *status quo* if this is not possible to get the most preferable outcome for their national interests. Although it is possible that the Kurds are going to be the group that is affected most by ongoing situation, they do not have much power to shape the overall outcome. Their history has taught them not to trust the big powers but it seems that they are following the path they followed several times in the past. Nonetheless, they hope that history will not repeat itself. But the existing reality and critical development essentially do not bring prospect of materialization of this sort of conclusive outcome in the near future. Effective stand basing on past experiences and dynamic diplomacy of the Kurds will ultimately bring a new chapter for all.

Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES AND THE ORIGINS OF ASSAMESE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Abstract

The article deals with the origin of the Assamese nationalist movement in India, which can be termed as the most organized among all separatist movements in the country. The paper argues that the colonial administrative and economic policies during 19th and 20th century laid the basis for formation of an Assamese nationalist movement that was different in its objective and character from the Pan-Indian nationalism. The paper shows that the most distinct dimension of the Assamese nationalism *vis-à-vis* the pan-Indian nationalist doctrine concerned the struggle of the Assamese people against the domination of the migrant communities from other regions of British India. It also articulates how geographical construction of Assam provided the basis of nationalist agenda on part of the Assamese. The narratives of Assamese nationalism, thus, reveal the presence of the fragmentation within the idea of Indian nation during the colonial era.

Introduction

Northeast India is an assembly of ethno-cultural diversity. Out of India's 67.76 million population considered to be 'tribal', 8.14 million live in the seven northeastern states, popularly known as the 'seven sisters'.¹⁹⁰ The region has long remained as one of the most volatile

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areas in terms of violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Among the major separatist movements in Northeast India, the Assamese ethno-nationalist struggle is perhaps the most organized, involving a high level of violence and atrocities. During 1978-2000, more than 15000 people including civilians, military officers and the members of the insurgent group died in violent conflicts in the region.

The nationalist movement of the Assamese people in independent India took shape mainly as a movement against the migrants from other provinces of India and from neighboring Bangladesh. The movement intensified during 1979-85 under the leadership of the All Assam Students Union (AASU), whose leaders later formed the regional government of Assam in 1983, under the banner of Assam Gono Parishad (AGP). But on one hand, AGP's failure to ensure the active role of the central government in solving the migration problem and on the other, persistence of economic backwardness of Assam compared to other regions of India, fueled grievances of the local population against the central government. It was in this context that the separatist slogans of the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) became the dominant player in the Assamese nationalist movement. The 1990s experienced a prolonged period of military measures by the Indian government to suppress the movement and the ensuing violent confrontation. Since then, the counter insurgency measures together with offers of economic rewards and *de facto* legal immunities to the militants who surrender have significantly reduced the intensity of the movement. But, as Sanjib Baruah rightly pointed out, the response of the Indian state to Assamese nationalism did little to address the ideological challenge to the Indian nation-state posed by separatist nationalist movement.¹⁹¹

This paper argues that the colonial administrative and economic policies during 19th and 20th century laid the basis for formation of an Assamese nationalist movement that was different in its objective and character from the Pan-Indian nationalism. While the mainstream Indian nationalist movement targeted the establishment of a

¹⁹⁰ Fernandes, Walter, "Conflict in North East: A Historical Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 51, 1999, p. 3579.

¹⁹¹ Baruah, Sanjib, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 144.

homogenous Indian nation-state by ousting the colonial authorities, the Assamese nationalism developed its own objectives and goals that were different and sometimes even contradictory to the former. The paper, thus, focuses on explaining the essential differences between pan-Indian nationalism and Assamese nationalism by tracing its evolution under the colonial rule.

Indian Nationalism and Assamese Nationalist Movement under the British Colonial Rule

Indian nationalism during the British colonial period grew out as a movement to fight colonial domination with the aim of establishing a homogeneous Indian nation-state, a state essentially shaped by the experience of modern colonial administration, education and socio-economic policies. As Partha Chatterjee argued, anti-colonial nationalism as a political movement “begins its journey...by inserting itself into a new public sphere constituted by the process and forms of modern (in this case colonial) state.”¹⁹² The dominant and more popular explanation of the development of Indian nationalism has treated the process as unilinear and mono-dimensional, manifesting itself as a movement that rallied all Indians together to combat British colonialism and establish an independent Indian nation-state, where the Indian identity surpasses and satisfies all other regional, tribal or ethnic identities of various groups within the geographical boundaries of British India. As Sajal Nag observed, “The Indian nation that the nationalists constructed to present to the British as well as to the rest of the world was an enumerable monolithic community which was unified despite diversities in terms of language, religion, caste, creed, tribe and region.”¹⁹³ But the nationalist movement of the Muslims for separate homeland during the colonial era challenged this vision of monolithic Indian nationalism.

Similar challenges were also posed by separate nationalist agendas of various regional, linguistic and cultural groups within the colonial geographical boundaries. Authors like Sajal Nag, Amelandu Guha and

¹⁹² Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 10.

¹⁹³ Nag, Sajal, *Nationalism, Separatism and Secessionism*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1999, p. 23.

Ranjit Guha (in the context of Bengali Nationalism) argued that the colonial India experienced two streams of coeval processes as far as its nationality question was concerned. One was based on its pan-Indian identity and the other on its regional linguistic-cultural identity.¹⁹⁴ This paper has attempted to evaluate Assamese nationalism broadly on basis of such assumption, but places more emphasis on the role of colonial policy in development of a political nationalist movement on the basis of separate linguistic-cultural identities and socio-economic interests.

The most distinct dimension of the Assamese nationalism *vis-à-vis* the pan-Indian nationalist doctrine concerned the struggle of the Assamese people against the domination of the migrant communities from other regions of British India. The movement emerged as means to resist the subordination of the Assamese culture to that of the migrant Bengalis and the marginalization of the Assamese people in the colonial economic structure, which facilitated the domination of the Bengalis and Marwaris. The primary motivation of the Assamese nationalist movement was to protect the status of Assamese language when Bengali was proclaimed as the official language of the province in 1836. The forced supremacy of the Bengali language made the Assamese discover and articulate a separate linguistic identity. Gradually, other important issues like economic marginalization, discrimination in terms of employment and arbitrary demarcation of colonial boundaries of Assam became major sources of their nationalist discontent. The migrants, as it turned out, started to be defined largely as the “foreigners” (Bideshi) in the Assamese nationalist discourse, which indicated the cultural and physical boundaries that the Assamese had drawn between themselves and the “others”.

Assamese nationalist issues not only had an anti-migrant overtone, but also often were contradictory to the pan-Indian nationalist discourse. This was clearly revealed soon after the independence of India in 1947 when the Assamese Prime Minister Gopinath Bordoili attempted to restrict immigration of Hindu Bengalis from the newly created East Pakistan (former East Bengal). Bordoili faced severe

¹⁹⁴ Guha, Amalendu, “Indian National Question: A Conceptual Framework” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.17, Special Number, July 31, 1982, pp. 2-12; and Guha, Ranjit, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and its Implications*, Calcutta: K. P Bagchi, 1987.

criticism and intimidating response from the then India's Prime Minister Jawharlal Nehru who accused and criticized Assam for pursuing a narrow-minded policy. Nehru wrote in a letter to Bordoli, "It is patent that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India" and even went to the extent of threatening that "if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam for financial help will obviously suffer".¹⁹⁵ Assamese nationalist leaders also came in confrontation with the leaders of All India Congress in 1946 when the latter almost accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan that envisioned the creation of two groups of Hindu and Muslim provinces in Independent India with Assam becoming a part of the Muslim province of East Bengal. Fierce resistance from the Assamese is cited as one of the important reasons behind Congress's decision to reject the plan.¹⁹⁶ Thus, in terms of major issues and political concerns of the nationalist movement, Assamese nationalism differed substantially from the vision of pan-Indian nationalism. Moreover, the nationalist discontents of the Assamese were mainly directed against the Bengalis, who in fact were one of the leading groups that articulated the Indian nationalist agenda during late 19th century. It was such diverging characteristics of the Assamese nationalist agenda and its alienation from the mainstream that created the basis for separatist movements of the Assamese in the postcolonial period.

The major impacts of the colonial economic and administrative policies that contributed towards a separate nationalist agenda for the Assamese may be summarized as following:

- a) Facilitation of migration of different communities from other provinces of India and allowing them to
 - subordinate local culture and
 - marginalize the local people in terms of socio-economic position and status.
- b) Construction of Assam's geographical position within British India that led to its subordination to a more advanced province of Bengal.

¹⁹⁵ Cited in Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Indignation towards the growing dominance of the people from other regions and the policies that facilitated a process of marginalization remained at the center of Assamese nationalist agenda. On the one hand, a sense of economic deprivation developed due to direct economic dislocations caused by various colonial policies regarding land distribution, taxation and territorial boundary demarcations. On the other hand, relatively better standing of the migrant communities *vis-à-vis* the local also contributed in creating such economic deprivation.

Assam and the British Rule

Assam came under British rule in 1826 in accordance with the Yandabo Treaty between the Burmese (present Myanmar) empire and the East India Company. The Ahom kingdom used to rule the region and the British interference in Assam came as a result of the Ahom aristocracies seeking British assistance against military intervention by the Burmese. By the early 1840s, the East India Company consolidated its dominance over the region and as Sanjib Baruah observed, “it was the first time in history that the Assamese heartland became politically incorporated into a pan-Indian imperial formation.”¹⁹⁷ In fact, it was the colonial rule that introduced the concept of entire North-east India as a geographical category, a category that was completely absent in ancient and medieval Indian writings.¹⁹⁸

The British interest in Assam was primarily driven by a motivation to exploit certain lucrative resources: natural and climatic conditions highly suitable for tea production and existence of abundant natural and mineral resources like timber, coal, oil and gas. The British rulers also wanted to capture the inexpensive trade routes to China and Tibet through Assam. In 1840, the British rulers established the first tea company in Assam— the Assam Company. By the end of 19th century, Assam emerged as a major tea producing Indian state covering 67.4%

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹⁸ Bhumik, Subir, “North East India: Evolution of a Post Colonial Region”, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 310.

of the total cropped area of the country.¹⁹⁹ In 1867, oil was struck near Digboi and commercial drilling started from 1889. Also, the British rulers initiated the opening of Makum Coal field in 1884. The British administrative and economic policies in the region developed primarily to ensure and maximize their economic and strategic interests. The resulting transformations had profound impact upon the native Assamese lifestyle and society, which was already devastated by repeated Burmese invasions. In the following sections, this paper evaluates the implications of the colonial policies for the development of Assamese nationalism.

Colonial Policy and Migration

With the development of tea plantation, oil prospecting and timber collection there were a massive influx of population from other regions to Assam. From the perspective of the colonial rulers, Assam was primarily seen as a land frontier of a pan-Indian economic space that needed more settlers and accordingly, the authorities actively pursued a policy to encourage immigration. Then, as Sanjib Baruah described, “The economic transformations that began with the introduction of tea plantation set off economic forces that gave further impetus to immigration and turned the colonial vision of Assam as a land frontier into a reality.”²⁰⁰ The communities that immigrated under the British rule included:

- Tribal laborers from Chota Nagpur region of Bihar and Orissa, employed in British owned tea gardens;
- Bengali Muslims from the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) district of Mymensingh;
- Bengali Hindus, originating in East Bengal and especially from Sylhet district, who held important administrative and white-collar jobs;

¹⁹⁹ Sharma, Manoranjan, “Industrialization of Assam and its Effect on the Development Process”, in Udayan Misra (ed.), *Nation Building and Development in North East India*, Guwahati, India, Purbanchal Prakash, 1991, p. 93.

²⁰⁰ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

- Marwaris, an entrepreneurial community from Rajasthan, who were actively engaged in trade, commerce and money lending.²⁰¹

Table 1 provides the figures on immigration into Assam during the first part of the 20th century.

Table-1: Growth of Migrant Population in Assam 1921-1951²⁰²

Year	Cumulative Migrant Population as % of Total Population
1921	17.83
1931	21.83
1941	22.94
1951	26.17

British policy not only encouraged migration but also allowed migrant groups, especially the Bengali Hindus and the Marwaris, to become dominant in the socio-economic hierarchy of Assam. This particular aspect of migration during the British period formed the basis of Assamese fear of economic and cultural marginalization and led them to assert their separate nationalist identity.

Colonial Policy, Bengali Domination and Rise of Assamese Linguistic Nationalism

Colonial administration in Assam required people with sufficient English language to staff different administrative positions. Early in their administration, the British sought to make use of high-ranking officials of the previous Ahom kingdom, especially in revenue administration and judiciary. But difficulties arose due to their inexperience in proper record keeping and more importantly, inefficiency in using English. Thus, the British government persuaded a policy of *importing* officials from other regions. The Hindu Bengalis were almost an automatic choice due to Bengal's geographic proximity to Assam and the Bengali people's early exposure to colonial education. David Scott, the agent of East Indian Company in Assam, acknowledged the potential problems caused by the decline of the power of the Assamese *vis-à-vis* the immigrant Bengalis within the

²⁰¹ Weiner, Myron, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 86.

²⁰² Kumar, D. P., *Challenges to India's Unity: Assam's Student Agitation and the Government*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1990, p. 92.

colonial system of administration, but also “was equally aware of the extreme difficulty of finding local officials competent to serve the company.”²⁰³ Although he proposed to establish a system of indirect rule where the aristocrats of Ahom kingdom and the high-ranking officials would possess significant positions, the East India Company “doubted the capacity of native government to maintain order among the various tribes of the frontier and had no intention of permitting a weak and hostile state to stand between itself and the frontier.”²⁰⁴ Thus, the colonial policy facilitated the inroad of the Bengalis in Assam and let them acquire influential positions in the administrative hierarchy and in other middle-class professions like legal practice or teaching as well. Weiner described the process as following:

“And so the Bengalis came. First they moved into administrative positions. Then, since Bengali Hindus were among the first social group in India to study at the British created missionary and government colleges, they entered the modern professions. By the beginning of the 20th century, the doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, clerks, railway and post office officials, as well as officers of the state government were Bengali Hindu migrants.”²⁰⁵

The Assamese discontent grew over the influence and dominance of the Bengalis, particularly, in the realm of culture, promoted by the Bengalis and the colonial administrators alike. Since there are a lot of similarities between Bengali and Assamese language and scripts, it appeared to be beneficial for both the British and Bengali administrative officials to use Bengali as the official language of Assam. In fact, as Sanjib Baruah pointed out, assertion of Assamese nationalist distinctiveness emerged as a corollary to the decisions of the British colonial officials’ recognition of Bengali as the language of court and medium of instruction in schools in 1836.²⁰⁶ Apart from pointing out the difficulties for the Bengali administrative officials to read Assamese, another major argument of the colonial rulers was the sheer lack of any material in Assamese to properly pursue education in

²⁰³ Barooah, Nirod, K., *David Scott in North East India: A Study in British Paternalism*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970, p. 137.

²⁰⁴ Weiner, Myron, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁰⁶ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

schools and colleges. A major implication of the British decision was the tacit acknowledgement towards the superior status of Bengali language and culture *vis-à-vis* the Assamese. This was clearly reflected in the British announcement regarding the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction. The statement mentioned that the learning of Bengali would enable the Assamese to be “enlightened by the progress in science and arts with their brethren in Bengal.”²⁰⁷ Another important aspect of the British language policy was also reflected in an official letter of Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General of Assam and Northeast, to the Secretary to the Government of India. The letter stressed the importance of assimilating different nations and tribes. As Jenkins wrote;

“It must be our policy and the duty of the Government of India, by all means in its power to assimilate the many nations and tribes under our rule into one people and if the early introduction of Bengali in this lately conquered province of Assam be in any degree productive of blending the people of Assam with the people of our earlier acquired provinces...I think the government will have course to rejoice...”²⁰⁸

The subordination and removal of local language generated a severe dissatisfaction among the Assamese who were almost forced to discover their separate linguistic identity and demand for restoration of the status of their language. The activities of the American Baptist missionaries, however, played an important role in consolidating the local demands against official status of Bengali language. In his statement about the state of education in Assam to the Judge of the Sudder (town) Court, missionary A.H. Danforth made a strong appeal to replace Bengali by vernacular Assamese as the medium of instructions in schools. He stated,

“education is growing up here merely as a foreign plant. It is emphatically an alien, and must continue to be such so long as the Government carefully excludes the vernacular from the schools. It forms no part of the constitution of the people; it enters not at all into their

²⁰⁷ Cited in Nag, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

²⁰⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 51.

social feelings and interests. It does not combine with or modify their (Assamese) customs.”²⁰⁹

The problems arising from replacing vernacular language with Bengali was officially put forward by Anundaram Dakeal Phookun on behalf of the Assamese in his petition to the Saddar court, “We find, however, with regret that...a *foreign language*, viz. the Bengallee (Bengali) has been introduced into the courts of Assam. The mass of the population and even private gentlemen possess no knowledge of the language...On what grounds the Bengallee has been allowed to supersede the vernacular we are at a loss to understand.”²¹⁰ Repeated pleas and petitions succeeded in reversing the British decision in 1873 and Assamese once again became the official language of the province. But the fear of cultural subordination left a deep imprint that articulated a sense of Assamese nationalism. The period when Bengali was the official language (1836-73) has been portrayed as a “dark period” for Assamese language, literature and culture in the Assamese nationalist historiography.²¹¹ In order to restore the status of their language, the educated Assamese people initiated a nationalist project of identifying the different characteristics of the Assamese language and improving its status. Dakeal Phookun published an influential book titled *A Few Remarks on Assamese Language* in 1855, which sought to identify the vast and extensive literary tradition of Assam. Also, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Boruah published important works like *The Grammar of Assamese Language* (1856), *Hemkosh* (1900, the first Anglo-Assamese Dictionary) and also *Adipatha* and *Pathmala*, which were meant to be vernacular textbooks for Assamese pupils. Hemchandra Barua also started the first Assamese journal, *Assam Bandhu* (Friend of Assam).²¹² Another important step towards consolidation of linguistic nationalism was the foundation of Ashom Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Samiti (Association for the Development of Assamese Language) in 1888 by the Assamese students in Calcutta. The association sought to enable the Assamese to “reach the heights of

²⁰⁹ Mills, Moffatt, A.J., *Report on Assam-1853*, Delhi: Gian Publications, 1980, p. xxix.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²¹¹ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

²¹² Nag, *op.cit.*, p.115.

other rich and prosperous languages of the world.”²¹³ The foundation of the association is considered to be a landmark in the development of linguistic nationalism in Assam. As Udayan Misra observed,

“It is important to note that, right from the days when a handful of Assamese students set up the Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhani Samiti in Calcutta in 1888, the growth of Assamese nationalism has been inextricably tied up with the question of the official recognition of the Assamese language. Loyalty to the Assamese language was seen as the sole criterion in establishing one’s identity.”²¹⁴

Socio-economic Marginalization and Assamese Nationalist Movement

Colonial administrative and economic policies also caused economic marginalization and subordination of the Assamese people *vis-à-vis* the migrant communities and exposed them to the latter’s exploitation. This in turn fueled anti-migrant nationalist movement.

With the introduction of colonial economic system, which initiated tea cultivation, ancillary industries, communication and transport route with the rest of India and commercial townships, a large number of traders, speculators, merchants and shopkeepers gained important position in the local socio-economic hierarchy. In absence of any substantial competition from a local trading class, the Marwaris quickly attained a dominant position in the region’s new trade and commerce. They were largely engaged in money lending business and also selling salt, cotton-twists, brass metals and sugar. By 1906, according to a government report, Marwari merchants practically monopolized the whole of the trade of Assam valley²¹⁵ and at the same time, the Bengalis attained powerful administrative positions. As Weiner observed,

²¹³ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

²¹⁴ Misra, Udayan, “Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 21, 1999, p.1267.

²¹⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1269.

“The Assamese were largely unequipped to take the advantage of some of these new opportunities. They lacked the education which the Bengalis had acquired...As for moving into entrepreneurial and banking activities, the Assamese lacked the skills and vast contacts that characterized the Marwari.”²¹⁶

Moreover, on behalf of the British rulers, the Bengalis were empowered to carry out various administrative measures, especially tax collection, which severely embittered their relationship with the local Assamese. The colonial tax policy put severe pressure and burden upon the local peasantry, who never had the experience to pay taxes in cash. High rates of different kinds of taxes like 1% of the value of production to the treasures for profit or loss, 0.5 % as commission, 12.5 % - 37.5 % to cover the expenses of police and contingencies besides interests and fines for dilatory payment, caused severe impoverishment in Assamese villages.²¹⁷ Direct involvement of the Bengalis in the tax collecting system strengthened the antagonistic feelings of the Assamese against them. However, the initial peasant revolts against repressive tax measures like the Jayantia Rebellion (1860-63), The Phulaguri Uprisings (1861) and Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat uprisings (1860s) were directed mainly towards the British rulers and not against migrant domination. But these movements clearly lacked any politico-cultural identification of the involved community as Assamese and cannot be considered as important part of the nationalist movement.

Nationalist sentiment seemed to be more involved in the discontent of the growing number of educated Assamese over the lack of access to administrative jobs and other positions due to stiff competition from the Bengalis. Primarily, such discontent mainly lied with the high-ranking officials of the previous Ahom kingdom and the members of the Ahom aristocracy, who were replaced by the Bengalis in order to facilitate the British rule. As Barpujari pointed out,

“It was not so much the cultural or linguistic domination as the economic impact – the virtual monopoly of office

²¹⁶ Weiner, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

²¹⁷ Barpujari, H. K., *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 1, Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1977, pp.14 -15.

in all departments – that made the immigrants of Bengal the eye sore of the Assamese upper classes for whom there was no means of livelihood except that of government service.”²¹⁸

This discontent intensified with the spread of higher education in the region during the latter half of the 19th century. A section of these educated Assamese received employment in the middle ranking positions in the administration and some of them went to Calcutta to attain higher education in English. But the earlier attainment of education and administrative positions by the Bengalis severely curtailed the prospect of any increase in the number of Assamese having proper employment. Thus, a sense of discrimination and frustration contributed towards the Assamese nationalist objective of removing Bengali domination. As the judge of the town court in Gowhatty, A.J. Moffatt Mills pointed out in his report,

“The motive which brings the boys to the school is simply the prospect of getting government employment....The people should be disabused of the idea that one great aim and the end of giving them education is to qualify them for public employment, but the natives of the province have greater reason to complain of the preference, which is too often given to Bengallees, when selecting officers to fill vacancies.”²¹⁹

Mill recognized that earlier it was necessary to employ the Bengalis but “there are now in Seeksagur and Gowhatty (two provincial towns) many young men of high family and good character who have qualified themselves...and it is most discouraging to them to see most of the high and even some of the inferior offices filled by foreigners.”²²⁰

The situation turned complex due to the overall state of economic underdevelopment in Assam. There was almost no effort, what so ever, to strengthen the local market or increase local investment from the profits generated by new industrial activities initiated by the colonial authority. Whatever benefit they could earn from plantations, mines

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²¹⁹ Mills, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and related industries, were quickly repatriated to London. Moreover, entrepreneurs from other regions of India, specially the Marwaris, used to send their dividend to their own provinces. Even the tea garden laborers sent remittance back home. Thus, people were coming in and money was flying out of Assam. British capitalists organized primary industries in Assam but kept all major economic activities connected thereto in distant Calcutta, using Assam as a mere production base. Thus, the migrants and the British prospered quickly, leaving the Assamese severely lagging behind. Manoranjan Sharma observed in this context, “The pattern of development (in Assam) was simply “dualism” marked by coexistence of developed and underdeveloped sectors side by side.”²²¹ The situation was clearly suitable for escalation of a feeling of exploitation, discrimination and relative deprivation, which eventually led to a xenophobic nationalism on part of the Assamese. The crux of the Assamese nationalist feeling was uniquely captured in a set of essays by Gynanath Borah, an influential nationalist intellectual of Assam, titled *Ashomot Bideshi* (Foreigners in Assam) published in an Assamese nationalist magazine *Chetana* (Consciousness) in 1935. He argued that the major obstacle to Assam’s progress is that its trade and economy is totally under the control of ‘foreigners’. He resented the fact the Assamese had to rely on ‘foreigners’ even for their food and clothing and were indebted and subordinated to them. Millions of rupees were going out of Assam, leaving its productive base and market totally underdeveloped. Thus, the sole concern and responsibility of the Assamese, he believed, was “to save themselves from the grip of foreigners.”²²² These essays also pointed out the basic underlying contradiction between Assamese and pan-Indian nationalism; “These days people often say that unless Indians unite, they will not be able to gain independence. But how should different provinces, different languages, different literature and different religions become one?”²²³ Baruah’s essays indeed pointed out the distinct nationalist perceptions and aspirations of the Assamese that were different from and even contradictory to a monolithic version of Indian nation and such differences were essentially developed on the basis of resentments against the migrants.

²²¹ Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

²²² Cited in Baruah, *op.cit.*, pp. 81-82.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

The nationalist response of the Assamese to the domination by the migrant communities was further reflected in the wave of political and social movements spearheaded by the middle class during late 19th and 20th century. Various Assamese civil society associations like the Assamese Sahitya Sabha (Assamese Literary Organization) stressed the importance of both Assamese national unity against migrant domination and the glory and prosperity of the people during the Ahom kingdom, compared to their condition under colonial rule. Tarun Ram Phookun, in his presidential address at the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1927 said,

“We Assamese are a distinct nationality among Indians. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas it is otherwise; we are not only dependent, our neighbor (implying Bengal) is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our helplessness. Brother Asomiya (Assamese), recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation.”²²⁴

Alak Chandra Rajkhowa, another influential Assamese leader, also pointed out in the Assam Student Conference of 1926, “Today the Assamese have forgotten all the skills their forefathers possessed. Even our industry, commerce home-hearth everything is trailing behind. Recall the past. Our industrial pursuit was a matter of pride to us.”²²⁵ This strategy of revoking the glorified past to condemn the dismal present has indeed been present in the agenda of numerous nationalist movements throughout the world. And the ‘present’ for the Assamese was a deplorable one due to the domination of migrant communities.

Geographical Construction of Assam under the Colonial Rule: Implications for Assamese Nationalism

The manner in which the colonial authority defined Assam within the geographical boundaries of British India had a profound implication for the Assamese nationalist agenda. The boundaries of Assam were drawn and redrawn and its administrative status changed.

²²⁴ Cited in Guha, Amalendu, “Little Nationalism Turns Chauvinist”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XV, No. 41, 1980, p. 1710.

²²⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 1710.

These changes had far reaching implications for Assamese defining of self-identity under colonial rule.

First, drawing Assam's boundary under British rule never reflected any considerations about historical continuity or cultural contiguity. For almost fifty years after its annexation, the British ruled Assam as a part of Bengal. This was totally unprecedented in the history of Assam since the region was not even a part of pre-colonial Indian empires (like Mughul Empire), let alone be a part of Bengal. It was only in 1874 that Assam was declared as a separate Chief Commissioner's Province of British India. But even after that, the geographical perception of Assam as an extension of Bengal continued to loom large in the mindset of the British administrators. This, in fact, laid the basis for a more 'modernized' Bengali community to become dominant in the Assamese affair. Given the problems associated with the Bengali domination, it was only natural that the Assamese people reacted adversely to their state of subordination as a part of a more advanced province. Thus, they rejected the Bengal partition of 1905 that turned Assam into a part of East Bengal. The grievances and concerns of the Assamese people were reflected in the activities of the Assam Association (formed in 1905) and played a significant role in the political advancement of the province. The association expressed its grave concern that due to the partition,

“the historic name of Assam will be obliterated for ever, her language (will) suffer and the removal of the seat of the government to a place outside Assam proper and further away from geographical center will necessarily make her lose the amount of care and attention which it (has) at present received from the government.”²²⁶

The Assam Association's statement not only reflected their fear of marginalization as a national group under Bengal province but also their perception about the colonial authority, which they felt could ensure their progress when Assam is administered as a separate province. Once again, it shows the greater importance attached to domination of Bengal in the Assamese nationalist agenda.

²²⁶ Barpujari, *op.cit.*, p. 180.

The partition of 1905 was annulled in 1911 in face of stiff resistance movement spearheaded mainly by the Hindu Bengali middle class and Assam gained back its position as a Chief Commissioner's Province. Assamese nationalist leaders widely supported and participated in the movement for their own nationalist aspirations. The period of 1905-11, however, added another dimension to the Assamese nationalist movement. This time, their nationalist struggle came into confrontation with the large number of Bengali Muslims, who were much more integrated with Assamese life and culture than the Hindus.²²⁷ This friction grew deeper with the advent of the movement for Pakistan led by the All India Muslim League, particularly when the Muslims advocated inclusion of Assam with East Pakistan. Assamese discontent in this respect, however, was driven more by the fear of subjugation under Bengal than communal feelings against the Muslims.

Another closely related geographical concern that constantly influenced Assamese fear of cultural and socio-economic marginalization was the inclusion of Sylhet district (presently a district in Bangladesh) with Assam, even when the latter was a separate province. Sylhet, being a predominantly Bengali inhabited region, increased the threat of marginalization of the Assamese. To refer once again to Sanjib Baruah, "When to the population of Sylhet one adds the large number of Bengalis who immigrated to Assam, there were more Bengalis in Assam than Assamese."²²⁸ The people of Sylhet, being Bengali Muslims, also resented their inclusion in Assam. Therefore, there was a strong support among the Sylhetis in favor of 1905 partition, which placed Sylhet under Bengal. After the annulment of the partition, both the Bengalis of Sylhet and Assamese wanted to get rid of each other. Exclusion of Sylhet turned a major concern of political movements of the Assamese during 1910s and 1920s. The Sylhet controversy further shows how colonial geographical boundaries raised the level of contention between Assamese and the Bengalis and promoted Assam's anti-Bengali nationalism. Actually, the boundary demarcation among different colonial provinces in India was mainly in accordance with administrative convenience of the British rulers and often was a part of their divide and rule strategy – the

²²⁷ Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

partition of 1905 being a major example. Such demarcation rarely considered difference of cultural identities and socio-economic interests of different communities. Therefore, as the paper has discussed in the case of Assam, scopes of contentious relationship among different communities were widened and such contentions quickly turned into strong basis for both protecting and asserting nationalist causes and aspirations.

Conclusion

During the colonial period the Assamese nationalist movement grew mainly on the basis of cultural and socio-economic grievances against migrant communities from other regions of India. The British administrative and economic policies allowed the migrants to attain greater socio-economic status *vis-à-vis* the native Assamese people, which resulted in the latter's assertion of own nationalist identity in order to resist its marginalization. H. Srikanth has nicely captured the essence of such reactive nationalism of the Assamese by arguing,

“the migrations that took place during the British period, apart from creating the ground for cultural and linguistic conflicts, generated competition among different groups for new economic and political opportunities thrown open to the public by colonial rule...The ‘natives’, who could not compete with the new immigrants, began to worry about domination by these new immigrants in all spheres. Their sense of insecurity and feeling of alienation made them conscious of their own identity *vis-à-vis* the Bengalis.”²²⁹

Such characteristics of Assamese nationalism clearly separated it from the monolithic vision about a single homogenous Indian nation. Unlike the Indian nationalist movement, the primary nationalist motivation for the Assamese was not confined to ending colonial domination. Rather, they aimed at removing the domination of other communities who belonged within the perceived Indian nation. Thus, the narratives of Assamese nationalism reveal the presence of the fragmentation within the idea of Indian nation during the colonial era.

²²⁹ Srikanth, H., “Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 47, 2000, p. 4119.

The legacy of such fragmentation has been clearly reflected in the numerous nationalist movements for autonomy and separation within the post-colonial Indian nation-state.