A track one and a half initiative between a group from India and Pakistan, chosen for their wide and varied experience in understanding issues that impact their neighbourhoods in South Asia, was held between November 4-9, 2012 in New York. Hosted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), New York, under its Dialogue on Globalization programme, the four representatives from India and five from Pakistan along with FES country and regional representatives came together for a study tour of the United Nations. The timing of the programme was especially appropriate, since India this month, and Pakistan in January 2013, will be chairing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Both nations are currently serving two-year terms as non-permanent members of the UNSC, although India finishes its term by the end of 2012, while Pakistan will continue till the end of 2013. It is interesting to note that India supported Pakistan’s candidature to help it enter the council and both nations have joined hands over the past year to present a joint front against poverty, to improve delivery of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and especially, seek to improve their leverage by their outstanding contributions to UN peacekeeping forces.

The FES study programme dealt with a range of topics such as various tools of the UN to maintain international peace and security; challenges for countries contributing troops to UN peacekeeping operations; problems and hurdles that various UN reform efforts face; maintaining a balance between the responsibility to protect and state sovereignty; and sanctions and preventive diplomacy that can effectively be employed in prevention of mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing and genocide. The cases of Rwanda in 1994, and more recently Sri Lanka in 2009, were invoked in discussing limitations of the UNSC, but the overriding message that emerged from a variety of interactions with UN officials, representatives of member states, committee heads and think-tank experts was that the UN was, often, less than the sum of its parts and permanent UNSC members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), most of them victors of the Second World War – did not hesitate to exercise their influence on fellow council members, as well as on the UN general body as a whole, in the naked pursuit of their own national interests.

A key finding from the deliberations was the distance that India and Pakistan continued to maintain over reforming the UNSC. India, a member of the G-4 group that includes Brazil, Germany and Japan, is
extremely keen that the council reflects the realities of the 21st century and be expanded to include G-4 members, while Pakistan, as part of the ‘Uniting for Consensus’ group which includes Italy and Mexico among others believe that there was no real need to create new centres of privilege, that is, the five permanent members must remain, and there is no need to add new ones, both with or without a veto.

Meanwhile, both countries appear focused in their respective pursuit of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, despite the fact that their progress in achieving these goals is at best wanting in both countries. Other common issues for discussion included the issue of counter terrorism, economic and sustainable development goals, promotion and protection of human rights, the enormous contributions towards peacekeeping operations in terms of volume of troops and their performance, and the pursuit of global and comprehensive disarmament.

For India, being part of the unique ‘horse-shoe’ table around which the 15 members of the Security Council sit, and after 19 years, it has been an incredible experience. Sitting in the centre, in its capacity as President of the UNSC during November 2012 and wielding the gavel, has allowed it to participate in the highest exercise of multilateral power, however limited. Most importantly, it has given India a first-hand view of how international real politik is shaped; how the world’s most powerful nations use the rough-and-tumble of the real world to elbow aside diplomatic courtesies, and how compromise is the only alternative to the brutish exercise of power. Over November, Indian diplomats said that they would seek to introduce resolutions seeking to reform the Security Council as well as enhance monetary compensation for peacekeeping troops.

Both India and Pakistan – which have a whole more year as members -- agree that the council has remained focused, for at least 80 per cent of the time, on conflicts in Africa and now in the greater Middle East, such as Egypt, Libya and Syria. Several questions by both Indian and Pakistani participants to their expert interlocutors revealed, time and again, that the council as well as the general body have recently hardly paid any attention to the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan, even though the US and allied international forces have decided to withdraw in 2014. Representatives from a permanent-five country (UK), from other allied western nations (like Canada) and from other parts of the UN agreed that Afghanistan was low down in the priority of the UN, even as they agreed that it would be ideal for the establishment of a special envoy who could take charge of the chaos that may possibly ensue.

The FES participants from Pakistan were especially eloquent about the need for national reconciliation and rehabilitation in Afghanistan, and believed that talks with the Taliban were long overdue. There was considerable concern that with the US and allied withdrawal in 2014, Pakistan would once again bear the
brunt of refugee emigration -- just as it had in 1989 when the Soviets left Afghanistan, after which the US also got out – and the Pakistani participants pointed out that at least 1.5 million Afghan refugees still lived in Pakistan’s villages.

A majority of the UN’s interlocutors seemed strangely indifferent to Pakistan’s concerns, even though they admitted, time and again, that it was imperative to do ‘much more’. The question was, who would do this, especially since the council was more involved with the ongoing diplomatic war between the US and its allies – the UK and France, and China-Russia – over the Libyan-Syrian entanglements?

The FES study tour revealed an overwhelming, if somewhat obvious truth: the UN, made up of its constituent member states, is a state-centric, heterogeneous, hierarchic structure, whose performance, transparency and deliverables remain dependent on these members. Since countries in their individual capacity are neither transparent nor have they made much progress on the MDGs, and the organisation appears static, turgid, and even, at odds with itself. The need for the UN is to become a flag-bearer for reform and development, adopt an integrated approach that encapsulates both sustainable development and environmental factors for achieving the MDGs beyond 2015, and this seems unlikely.

A look at the problems faced by different member states reveals a highly complex scenario that covers the full gamut from landlocked states (like Afghanistan), which either do not seek interconnectedness or are prevented from doing so, to smaller island states (like the Maldives) that have to battle a range of natural challenges such as coastal erosion, climate change, rising sea levels, oceanic acidification, loss of fisheries and governance related issues. In both cases, these tremendous structural changes enhance their vulnerability and lead to an incremental loss in Gross Domestic Product. As for transit states, a third category, their position is that enhancing infrastructural growth and upgrading trade and transport facilities contributes towards the building of sustainable economic development opportunities.

The extraordinary contribution of Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nepal towards UN peacekeeping efforts was a key session of the FES deliberations. While the first three countries contribute at least one-third of the UN’s peacekeepers, they are often unable to leverage this contribution in key decision making. It turns out that the US and the UK are key funders of peacekeeping efforts which is at least one-third of about US $7 billion annually; moreover, traditional South Asian peacekeeping contributing nations often find themselves at sea because of the increasingly sophisticated nature of armed conflicts worldwide, implying that these nations may need to improve both strategy and training.
The discussion on conduct and discipline of peacekeepers, especially when a variety of nationalities were involved, was an important part of the dialogue. Examples of how Pakistani peacekeepers saved the day in Somalia in the early 90s, even when peacekeepers from other countries had pulled out, were invoked to reiterate the need for zero tolerance against indiscipline.

But there were a few questions. Could South Asian nations come together and create a regional peacekeeping force for Afghanistan, after 2014? Would it be a good idea, considering the traditional suspicions and even hostilities that some South Asian states, for example India and Pakistan, continue to maintain against the other’s presence in that country? Did the Afghans want such a force or were they wary of getting caught in somebody else’s scramble for influence?

Given the history of factional support, prejudices and political biases, some FES participants felt that a regional peacekeeping force would not help keep the peace in Afghanistan after 2014, because of the contrasting national motives for helping the Afghans. Moreover, the permanent-five members of the council, if they weighed into this regional initiative, could further muddy the waters with their preferences. That is why a neutral UN envoy was necessary to play the role of an honest broker, felt the Pakistani participants.

Speakers reiterated the need for South Asians to find a common shock absorber and bridge the gap between foreign policy formulations and defence posturing, admittedly an uphill task, as these South Asian countries remain wedded to their respective versions of conflict prevention.

Have sanctions played an effective role in state compliance; deterring people from inimical behaviour? Again the score card appears mixed. The UNSC has learnt, over time, to tighten performance-based, targeted sanctions compared to previously vague, non-reciprocal and comprehensive sanctions regimes. The strength of a sanction regime depends very much on the united front maintained by its implementers, as very often violations are encouraged by countries with strong vested interests. The need remains for evolving an effective and doable sanctions regime, with transparency and necessary political will.

Often, though, it is the people under the dictatorial regime being sanctioned that suffer the worst fates, but have little say in the imposition or lifting of sanctions by the big powers. While the UN is extremely mindful of respecting the sovereignty and sanctity of individual state members, countries that violate basic human rights, indulge in mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing and genocide must be subject to humanitarian interventions. In these cases, the UN holds the right and responsibility to protect and intervene for the citizens of a state against the state itself, if need be.
However, the ‘responsibility to protect’ or R2P, should not be considered as an excuse for a regime change. Nor should it be exercised in all circumstances. Military intervention remains a last available option and should be exercised with immense constraint. A lively discussion ensued on the council’s failure in responding to the Rwandan genocide and considering the Sri Lankan military operation as a ‘clean war’ against Tamil insurgents under the cover of the post 9/11 environment, despite adequate knowledge of crimes against humanity being committed on the ground.

Afghanistan remained a central theme all through the four day long FES deliberations. The UNSC, through Resolution 1378, stood committed to play an important role in the country and called for the establishment of a transitional administration leading to the formation of a new government. Secondly, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established not only to help implement UN Resolutions but also has a regional mandate for cooperation and peace building.

However, the evolving story in Afghanistan pointed towards a bilateral resolution of issues, in which the predominant player was the US, rather than a multilateral approach, in which the predominant player could be the UN. The main issues in Afghanistan – counter terrorism, counter narcotics and trade, lack of progress on political consensus, an Afghan-led and Afghan-delivered reconciliation process – largely remain exclusive, marginal, arbitrary and de facto in nature. With the Obama administration’s re-election, the plan for troop withdrawal and drawdown will become clearer with time, but the US Department of State remains highly sceptical of handing over the process to the UN, as it fears loss of control and the accusation that it was sub-contracting American foreign policy to the UN.

FES participants from both countries suggested a three track approach as one possible option for Afghan reconciliation and settlement. This must be led by internal reconciliation between all Afghan ethnic tribes and groups, non-interference and non-intervention by neighbours (including those with contiguous borders), and efforts by the international community to facilitate this process.

The possibility of a regional solution to the Afghan imbroglio seemed to elude this FES group of India-Pakistan participants, even though it seems like an option on the table after the meeting in Istanbul.

In conclusion, India and Pakistan’s presence as non permanent members and chair of UNSC provides them with a window to seek some leverage and push for change. However, their chequered history of bilateral relations, layered by a highly divided South Asian region in general, means that the opportunity for such change may be elusive. The Security Council today stands heavily preoccupied by the African and Arab crises, with very little time available for Afghanistan. While this may seem like an opportunity for
south and central Asia to take charge and initiate a regional consensus, there appears to be very little movement in that direction.

This photo shows some of the participants from India and Pakistan at the Pakistan mission to the UN in New York.

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