

INDIA'S SOUTH ASIAN OPPORTUNITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Colorful peoples design for teamwork concept illustration

The statement issued by the Director Generals of Military Operations of India and Pakistan, in late February, that they agree to strictly observe all agreements between the two countries, coincided with a statement made by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in Colombo that “our only dispute is Kashmir and it can only be resolved through dialogue.” This was later strongly endorsed by Pakistan’s Army Chief, General Qamar Bajwa. This shows that there is a growing, but unstated, realisation that neither country can wrest parts of Kashmir that each controls from the other. Rather, it is best to focus on resolving issues that blight the entire subcontinent — poverty, malnutrition and an unconscionable neglect of the young. It is a realisation that the India-Pakistan animosity hurts regionalism and South Asian growth.

A fair peace between India and Pakistan is not just good for the two states but for all the nations constituting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Reports such as the World Bank publication titled ‘A Glass Half Full’ and others from the Asian Development Bank and the European Union conclude that there is explosive value to be derived from South Asian economic integration.

While SAARC has facilitated limited collaborations among its members, it has remained a victim of India-Pakistan posturing. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar observed in a December 2020 interview to this newspaper: “If SAARC is a serious regionalism initiative, and [Pakistan] blocks trade and connectivity and people-to-people ties... what regionalism are we speaking of?” Now, given that the two countries have agreed to maintain ceasefire, it is time for India to seize the moment and become more South Asia-concerned and much less Pakistan-obsessed.

An economically transformed and integrated South Asian region could advantageously link up with China’s Belt and Road Initiative and even join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the world’s largest trading bloc of 15 countries, accounting for 30% of its GDP, as a much valued partner.

Writing in a commemorative volume in honour of the late Sri Lankan economist Saman Kelegama, Professor Selim Raihan of the University of Dhaka brings out India’s overwhelming ‘size imbalance’ in South Asia: “The shares of India in the total land area, population, and real GDP of South Asia in 2016 are 62%, 75%, and 83%, respectively. The two other big countries in South Asia are Pakistan and Bangladesh with shares in regional GDP of only 7.6% and 5.6%, respectively.”

Given its size and heft, only India can take the lead in transforming a grossly under-performing region like South Asia. Collectively with a population of slightly over 1.9 billion, South Asia has a GDP (PPP) of \$12 trillion. Contrast this with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Numbering nearly 700 million, ASEAN has a GDP (PPP) of around \$9 trillion and a per capita income which, at \$14,000 (PPP), is closing in on China, with member states like Vietnam starting to grow spectacularly.

This is the moment for India to think big and act big by ambitiously aiming to engineer a South Asian economic miracle in half the time China did. If this sounds impossible, so did China’s rise in 1972. But for that to happen, India needs to view a peace with Pakistan not as a bilateral matter, to be arrived at leisurely, if at all, but as essential and urgent, all the while viewing it as a

chance of a lifetime, to dramatically transform South Asia for the better, no less.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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