

It's time to reimagine South Asia: On India-China-Pakistan cooperation

A few months ago, Anjum Altaf, former dean of the prestigious Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), wrote an article in the *Dawn* newspaper, making a strong case for mutually beneficial economic cooperation between Pakistan and India. He also gave a revealing example of how this has become impossible because of “blind nationalism” in Pakistan.

“At the time,” he wrote, “when tomatoes were selling for Rs300 a kilo in Lahore, they were available at Indian Rs40 a kilo in Amritsar a mere 30 miles away. But a visceral Indo-phobia, shared by many of our influentials, stood in the way of consumers benefiting from the lower priced supply.” Many Pakistani politicians want nothing to be imported from India, the enemy nation.

This kind of blind nationalism is by no means Pakistan's monopoly. Those who watch Indian TV channels debating India-Pakistan relations routinely hear similar Pak-phobia. Result: despite being neighbours, India and Pakistan are among the least integrated nations in the world. Because of their unending mutual hostility, South Asia too has become the least integrated region in the world. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is in a coma. Sadly, the most populous region in the world has also remained home to the largest number of poor people in the world.

A few striking examples will show how our two countries, which were part of a single seamless socio-economic and cultural entity before 1947, have now completely drifted apart. There are no direct flights between their capitals — New Delhi and Islamabad. The frequency of Delhi-Lahore and Mumbai-Karachi flights have become minimal. The Mumbai-Karachi ferry service (the two port cities, once part of a single province, are closer to each other than either Mumbai and Delhi or Karachi and Islamabad) was stopped after the 1965 war.

In this age of information revolution, the number of phone calls between Indian and Pakistani citizens (including calls between close relatives of divided families) is negligible, mostly out of fear of being questioned by their respective security agencies. At less than \$3 billion annually, trade with Pakistan accounts for a meagre 0.4% of India's growing global commerce.

Those who are happy with this status quo have set responses. On the Indian side, it will be said that terror and trade cannot go together. The Narendra Modi government has raised the bar higher — terror and talks cannot go together. On the Pakistani side, resolution of the Kashmir issue has become a precondition for any substantial bilateral cooperation.

But is the status quo benefiting either country? The answer is obvious, except to those arrogant ultra-nationalists who think India now has a seat on the global high table and hence need not care for Pakistan, and to those narrow-minded Pakistani patriots who think they need not care for India since they now have two protectors — China and the Muslim Ummah.

China, of course, has become a new factor influencing India's negative attitude towards Pakistan, both among policy-makers and the common people. Our Army chief, General Bipin Rawat's egregious remark last year about India being ready for a simultaneous two-and-a-half front war with Pakistan and China (the “half front” being our own alienated people in Kashmir) has helped solidify an impression that our two large neighbours can never be friendly towards India. If India's foreign and defence policies proceed on this belief, South Asia is surely heading towards a future of intensified hostilities and conflicts. Arms manufacturers and distant destabilisers will profit by this at the cost of common Indians and Pakistanis, who need employment, education, health care and food-and-environmental security. These needs can be met only through regional cooperation, not regional rivalry.

In other words, can China become a part of the solution, rather than being perceived as a part of the India-Pakistan problem? A three-way India-China-Pakistan cooperation is not only necessary but indeed possible, and Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides a practical framework for such partnership. Unfortunately, Mr. Modi has allowed himself to be misled by his advisers on the BRI. The government's opposition to the BRI is based, among other things, on the myopic argument that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the BRI, violates India's sovereignty since it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Not only does this argument hold no water but it also undermines India's long-term development and security interests. First, CPEC does not recognise PoK to be Pakistan's sovereign territory. Article VI in the 1963 China-Pakistan boundary agreement clearly states in that "after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with the Government of the People's Republic of China...." Second, there is little possibility of India ever getting PoK, or Pakistan ever getting the Indian side of Kashmir, through war or by any other means. Therefore, connectivity, cooperation and economic integration are the only realistic bases for any future India-Pakistan settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Third, and most important, both China and Pakistan have stated that they are open to India joining CPEC. China has also expressed its readiness to rename CPEC suitably to both address India's concerns and to reflect the project's expanded regional scope. Already, Iran, Afghanistan and several Central Asian republics have agreed to join this ambitious regional connectivity project. Will it help or hurt India if it joins this renamed initiative as an equal partner? Will it not connect Lahore and Amritsar (also Delhi and the rest of India), the two sides of Kashmir (which all Kashmir-based political parties want), Sindh and southern Punjab with Gujarat and Rajasthan, and Karachi with Mumbai?

A no less seminal benefit for India is that by joining the renamed CPEC, it would gain land access, through Pakistan, to Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia and western China. And if our leaders show vision, ambition and resolve, the CPEC-plus-India can be linked to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, thus creating a grand garland of connectivity and integration for the whole of South Asia. If 1947 divided our subcontinent, here is an opportunity for India, Pakistan and all other countries in the region to come together and rise in shared progress and prosperity.

Regrettably, the same short-sighted advisers who have misled Mr. Modi on the BRI and CPEC are selling India the pipe dream of an alternative connectivity project by the "Quadrilateral" of the U.S., Japan, Australia and India. This is unlikely to take off. Even if it does, its developmental benefits to India will be limited since it will seek to keep China and Pakistan out. We are also told that India does not need the CPEC since it has already partnered with Iran in building the Chabahar port. India's gains due to Chabahar are modest, and nowhere comparable to those that would accrue by India having a direct land access to Afghanistan through Pakistan, courtesy a renamed CPEC. The latter is also indispensable for the success of two other mega projects that are critical for India's energy security and accelerated economic growth — the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipelines.

Here is another huge potential gain for South Asia. The proposed connectivity initiative, which would create strong new bonds of regional cooperation and interdependence, could also help resolve three long-standing geopolitical problems in the region, in which countless people have been killed — terrorism, Kashmir and Afghanistan.

To realise this vision of a resurgent South Asia, two obstacles will have to be removed blind nationalism and the unfriendly designs of extra-regional powers. As Karl Marx would have said: peoples of South Asia and China, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains; you have a

bright new future to win.

Sudheendra Kulkarni served in the Prime Minister's Office during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure

Receive the best of The Hindu delivered to your inbox everyday!

Please enter a valid email address.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com