

## **Towards a Unified South Asia: Pakistan's Vision for Regional Cooperation and Community**

**SUBHASH KUMAR BAITHA**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Centre for inner Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

South Asians share a great deal of commonalities that cut over national and religious divides. The foundation of Pakistan's future is linkages to both the east and west of the Indus. This makes sense. South Asia stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Bay of Bengal, like a beautiful and complicated carpet. From a wider security perspective, Pakistan's admittance to the ARF is encouraging, and the chances presented by SAARC may be a helpful means of achieving this. It also makes sense to include Pakistan and Afghanistan in regional energy programmes in order to build the logical energy linkages that are required to support overall economic development. However, Pakistan's future is not limited to being east of the Indus. Pakistan's geostrategic position between the increasingly dynamic Indian economy and the mineral-rich Central Asian region is its main competitive advantage. Pakistan would gain from the expansion of the Indian economy because of its advantageous geographic location. The governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan have established an ongoing dialogue on economic matters that has resulted in significant progress in lowering transportation-related costs, resolving border and customs issues, decreasing Pakistan's negative list of prohibited items for transit to Afghanistan, and creating opportunities for Pakistani banks and air links in Afghanistan. These talks offer a good foundation for deeper regional economic integration, an endeavour in which Pakistan, in our opinion, may take the lead (Patterson, 2004).

Like other South Asian nations, Pakistan aspires to forge strong relations with the area of Southeast Asia, especially with Singapore, which is a great friend in this part of the globe due to its open economy, willingness to invest in the region, and anti-terrorism attitude. Pakistan has rich knowledge about the Middle East. Its ties to several of the Middle Eastern states are significant. It is in a prime position to be a strategic partner to bring the nations in the three areas closer to one another because of its advantageous location at the intersection

of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. With the goal of forming serious alliances with the nations of East Asia and ASEAN, Pakistan has adhered to its look east strategy, which it refers to as 'Vision East Asia'. The look east strategy aims to strengthen institutional ties and cross-sectoral ties with both individual and group ASEAN members. The economies of Southeast Asia are expanding quickly and provide a plethora of opportunities for enhancing trade and economic cooperation (Shivpuri, 2005).

The South Asian region is arguably the most impoverished in the world today, home to half of the world's absolute poor and one-fifth of the world's population. The region's pervasive sense of confrontation and impending conflict makes it difficult for countries to work together effectively, as each views the others with distrust and anxiety. Despite being a single geoeconomic entity throughout history, South Asia is still divided and isolated from one another. There's a generalised insecurity that makes confrontation unnecessary. Much of the region still sees ethnoreligious clashes, though. There has been some progress in efforts to lower tariff barriers and foster economic contact (Banerjee, 1999).

### **Pakistan and South Asian Countries**

#### **– Pakistan and India**

The relationship between India and Pakistan is essential to attempts to establish regional cooperation in South Asia. The reasons for this are that these two nations have the position of major states in this region in terms of their size, population, resources, and potential. Any assessment of the challenges facing South Asia's regional cooperation eventually comes down to the problems, disputes, and disparities in perceptions of these two adjacent nations and their interactions with one another. Development in the South Asian Regional Cooperation domain is impossible without ameliorating the bilateral ties between India and Pakistan. The values include non-interference in a state's internal affairs, respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the states and acceptance of their equal standing as sovereign countries. Unfortunately, India has long believed that the subcontinent was divided by British manipulation and that South Asia was artificially divided (Khan, 1984). Pakistan is a significant nation in South Asia even though it is far smaller than India in terms of both people and resources. Beyond the significance of its geostrategic location, it has a lot of potential in terms of human and material resources that might make it a significant trade partner with India as well as the smaller South Asian republics. Pakistan has already forged economic ties with a number of South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives, and these ties are only going stronger (Yaseen, 2016).

But Pakistan's relationship with India is still not developing to a sufficient degree, particularly when it comes to politics. Although the wars it caused are mostly bilateral between India and Pakistan, they have hindered the development of mutual trust and collaboration in the area and have kept it from evolving into a prosperous and peaceful region. After 1947, new and unanticipated issues surfaced in the broader realm of suspicion, competition, and distrust; these issues became additional indicators of the seemingly never-ending war between Pakistan and India. The missteps, disappointments, and failures of one nation became the most significant news in another, widening the already existing divide that began to expand in 1947. The perception of India's military prowess and nuclear weapons programme by Pakistan

poses a serious threat to regional security. According to Pakistan, the Modi government's inadequate crisis management strategy has jeopardised regional security and raised the possibility of escalating tensions. Addressing the underlying causes of regional tensions is essential to maintaining the region's precarious stability (Jaspal, 2011).

#### – **Pakistan and Bangladesh**

On December, 1971, Bangladesh was officially placed on the map of the globe. Relationship tensions between Bangladesh and Pakistan arose shortly after Bangladesh gained its independence on the subject of repatriating stranded Biharis. The Biharis who spoke Urdu worked with the Pakistani army during the liberation and were crucial to Pakistan's defence, organising local militias that engaged in extremely brutal behaviour against Bengalis. They were offered the choice to become citizens of Bangladesh or Pakistan after independence. Approximately 170,000 Biharis relocated to Pakistan in 1973 as part of the first round of the following repatriation. Bangladesh attempted further diplomatic measures to address the Bihari issue under the Ershad era (1982-1990), but it was unable to achieve any progress. During her official visit to Pakistan in 1992, Prime Minister Begum Zia achieved a significant breakthrough in finding a solution. After the January 1998 business summit between Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan in Dhaka, the Pakistani government declared its intention to repatriate all 238,000 Biharis living in Bangladesh. However, additional repatriation was doubtful following the 1999 military takeover of Pakistan and the overthrow of Nawaz Shaif's administration (Haider, 2001).

'Butcher of Mirpur' Abdul Quader Molla, the head of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, was killed in Bangladesh in December 2013 for war crimes. The lower chamber National Assembly of Pakistan condemned the execution and said it was politically motivated in a statement released after it. The interior minister of Pakistan expressed grief at Molla's execution due to his alleged 'loyalty towards Pakistan' (Chowdhury, 2013). After Imran Khan was elected as Pakistan's prime minister, relations between the two nations have gradually started to normalise.

#### – **Pakistan and Afghanistan**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States had a significant impact on Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Pakistan, which had previously backed the Taliban hard throughout the Soviet conflict, has now allied with the US in the fight against terrorism, with a special emphasis on demolishing the political and organisational bases of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's takeover of power in 1996, the Pakistani government gave the administration its wholehearted backing. Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy was driven by geopolitical and economic considerations, notwithstanding the country's reversal of its Taliban stance (Ayub, 2002).

Insofar as it allows Pakistan to reach economically productive Central Asia, Afghanistan is equally vital. There has been some indication of improvement in the neighbourly relations between the two since 2001. But Pakistan's efforts to establish relations with the new Afghan government have not been easy. However, a number of issues, including the repatriation of refugees, the release of Pakistani detainees from Afghan jails, the transit

trade facility, and the Taliban's rebirth, continue to sour ties between the two countries (Ahmed and Bhatnagar, 2007). The two countries' bilateral relations are only one part of a wider network of interconnected political and security factors in the area.

– **Pakistan and Sri Lanka**

Five heads of state from Sri Lanka visited Pakistan on official business between 1948 and 1985, however, only two visits to Colombo were made by Pakistani leaders in the same time frame. While three Sri Lankan politicians travelled to Pakistan in the first ten years following independence, no Pakistani leader made a reciprocal visit. One explanation for this is that, in contrast to their ties with India, the two nations had a mutually beneficial relationship free from issues, which eliminated the need for regular meetings between the leaders of their governments. Pakistan and Sri Lanka have both expressed scepticism over the intentions of their larger neighbour, India. One source claims that the threat to Sri Lanka comes from a potential chauvinistic administration in New Delhi that would try to use overseas conflict to support a weak internal position. Additionally, some Sinhalese think that India may invade Sri Lanka in order to put pressure on the government to provide the Tamil people their fundamental rights (Hasan, 1985).

Sri Lanka's stance on the Kashmir dispute were purely neutral. Colombo has frequently clarified its stance on Kashmir in an effort to uphold its impartiality and set itself apart from India's perspective on the matter. The East Pakistan issue caught Sri Lanka's attention when its prime minister, Mrs. Bandaranaike, pleaded with Pakistan and India to find a diplomatic solution in February 1971. Sri Lanka and Pakistan collaborated on the BRI from its beginning, forging strong strategic ties with China. India's close links to the US and Pakistan's expanding ties to China are therefore generating a geopolitical rivalry in the area where two more ambitious plans-the US's Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative-are being carried out concurrently. There are indications that the Sri Lankan government is shifting its foreign policy in favour of China, which has increased tensions between the US, China, and India in Sri Lanka.

– **Pakistan and Maldives**

The Maldives, a small island nation and Pakistan have friendly relations. The two nations are active members of the OIC and have a strong tie via their common Islamic history. Similar to Pakistan, the Maldives called for the Soviet Union to remove its soldiers from Afghanistan and showed support for the country's fight to maintain its independence and Islamic identity. The formation of NIEO, South-to-South cooperation, the Indian Ocean, and other regions like the NWFZ and SAARC were among the other significant international and regional issues that they jointly supported.

The Maldives visit by Zia-ul-Haq in December 1985 contributed to the development of their bilateral ties even further. The cordial relationship and shared viewpoints on the main regional and global concerns that Zia and Gayyum had said in January and February of 1984 were reiterated. When a gang of Tamil mercenaries, who were reportedly recruited in Sri Lanka, assaulted Male, the capital of the Maldives, in 1988 with the intention of toppling the government, Gayyum's administration was thrust into a crisis. Pakistan was relieved that the

attempt to topple the Maldivian government had failed. In December 1988, Gayyum travelled to Pakistan for the 4<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit conference. In 1989, he spent a day in Karachi and said that the relations between the Maldives and Pakistan were great and friendly (Rizvi, 1993).

– **Pakistan and Nepal**

As part of its efforts to optimise its choices for foreign policy, Nepal sought to improve its relations with Pakistan, but, the fear of aggrieving India delayed the process. Pakistan's Foreign Minister attended King Mahindra's coronation celebrations in 1956 and conveyed the country's wish to forge diplomatic ties. Nepal started to react more positively to Pakistan's actions as tensions between the two countries grew over King Mahendra's plan to remove the Prime Minister and take full control of the country. SAARC gave Pakistan and Nepal a platform to keep in constant communication with one another. Before or after a SAARC Related meeting, top officials from the two nations frequently engaged in informal discussions about bilateral problems. Pakistan expressed sympathy to Nepal since, in 1989, India curtailed commerce and removed the majority of transit facilities due to the two countries' inability to amend and expand their preexisting trade and transit agreements (Rizvi, 1993).

Over the years, Nepal and Pakistan have maintained a close political friendship. Pakistan has demonstrated its continued support for Nepal's democratic process following the triumph of People's Movement-II. Pakistan greeted the reinstatement of Nepal's parliament after the people's movement with joy, believing that this historic moment would bring about a long-lasting period of stability and prosperity in Nepal. Pakistan has always said that it supports Nepal's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and peaceful development (Embassy of Nepal).

– **Pakistan and Bhutan**

Pakistan and Bhutan have very little direct communication. The nation of Bhutan maintained its isolation from the outside world, and as per the terms of their 1979 treaty, it had to accept India's advice on foreign policy in exchange for India not meddling in its domestic affairs. With India's approval and assistance, Bhutan joined the UN in 1971 and started to progressively open up to the global economy. It fostered communication within the SAARC framework with Pakistan. In December 1988, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk made his first trip to Islamabad as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit conference. During that period, Pakistan and Bhutan reached a basic understanding to initiate diplomatic ties and switch ambassadors (Rizvi, 1993). Neither nation has an ambassador who resides there. Bhutan has an accredited embassy in Bangladesh, which is run by Pakistan

**Conclusion**

Finally, Pakistan's goal of creating a cooperative South Asian community offers hope for a better, more connected, and peaceful future for the area. Pakistan's ambitions to promote regional cooperation are motivated by a profound awareness of the common difficulties and the opportunity for joint advancement, as this essay has examined. This vision embodies not just Pakistan's strategic objectives but also a sincere dedication to advancing peace, progress and cohesion across South Asia. Pakistan's vision is primarily

characterised by its aspirations for regional peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Pakistan's sincere efforts to mediate disputes, like its attempts to set up peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, demonstrate its commitment to bringing stability to its neighbours. This dedication to peace stems from a deep-seated realisation that a tranquil South Asia would not only provide security but also open the door for economic growth and interpersonal relationships.

Pakistan has exhibited a resolute dedication to its goal of a cooperative South Asian society by its participation in many regional forums, diplomatic initiatives, and attempts towards conflict resolution. Pakistan, a major participant in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has continuously promoted communication, cooperation and the pursuit of common objectives. It acknowledges that the area can only successfully handle issues like poverty, climate change, terrorism and under development by working together. To sum up, Pakistan's goal of creating a cooperative South Asian community is evidence of its responsibility as a regional player. This vision includes economic development, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and improved people-to-people ties, as we have seen. Even if difficulties still exist, Pakistan's persistent dedication has set an example that gives hope for a future in which South Asia puts aside its divisions and unites for the sake of its people. Pakistan may become a light of hope and growth for the whole region by pursuing its dream of a cooperative South Asian community via committed diplomacy, open discussion and a common vision.

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