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India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: ‘Trilateralism’ in South Asia?

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Abstract

This paper argues that, within the context of South Asia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have commonalities and potentials that could be positively developed through a policy of ‘trilateralism’. It would imply an informal process of identifying and categorising divisive issues into separate but not water-tight boxes and addressing them with a view to resolving them. Unlike the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), it would not avoid disputes but confront them. The idea would be to create a strategic ‘problem-solving’ partnership that could complement, and not supplant, the SAARC.

Introduction

In South Asia, there is a great deal that its three largest countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, share. Much more than others in the region, they have had a similar historical experience. Prior to 1947, they constituted a single political entity. As Jaswant Singh’s book on Muhammad Ali Jinnah underscores, the debate over it notwithstanding, they had common leaders. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sheik Mujibur Rahman were all united in their aspiration to free India of British domination. Their efforts eventually found fruition in the emergence of three separate independent and sovereign states, which is an established historical fact. Their pluralist values make them three of the world’s largest democracies. Unfortunately, certain colonial legacies fed conflict into their intramural relationship. It is a paradox that these countries are known to the world not for their amity, but for the animosities among them.

However, this situation need not be constant. It is an eternal law of nature that everything is in motion. One never steps into the same Indus or the Ganges twice, as those rivers are in constant flux. The flow of history is no different. How can it then be channelled in a way that we move forward, inexorably even if meandering, from conflict to harmony? It will call for a modicum of ingenuity which undoubtedly the peoples and the leadership of the three countries are capable of. As the entire world acknowledges, their intellectual resources are their source of pride. They must be able to muster and press these into their service at a time

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when they need them more than ever to make that quantum leap from poverty to progress, from protests over each other's behaviour to peace among themselves.

In the recent past, all three countries have experienced successful elections. New governments have emerged in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In India, the electorate returned the same party into power but in a strengthened 'avatar'. Newness accords impetus to the will to change. The challenge is always to make this change better and more desirable. This should also be the case even if it were to involve a break with the past. The three capitals, and the new leaderships, including the one renewed in India, should perhaps focus on this phenomenon. In this they are certain to have the support of their peoples, important for democracies (which all of them are), who are exhausted from decades of strife. In this they will also receive the support from the rest of the world.

Indo-Pakistan Relations

There are positive signals emerging from India and Pakistan in this regard. The relationship between the two powerful nuclear states is key to this desired stability. Pakistan's owning up to a number of its citizens' responsibility for the mayhem in Mumbai was a welcome departure from the traditional behaviour-pattern of the past. Indeed, it offered the scope to turn a tragedy into an opportunity, and to the credit of both sides, they were able to seize upon it.

It is a good thing too that in all these cases the initiatives made soft beginnings during the period of the immediate past governments. Nothing buttresses the new as an element of continuity, which lends the change a greater degree of robustness.

In the case of India and Pakistan, there was the Pervez Musharraf-Manmohan Singh agreement to strive for a "final settlement" on the Kashmir issue, and not to "allow terrorism to impede the peace process".

These, together with the bus links, the proposed pipelines to carry Iranian and Central Asian oil and gas to India and Pakistan and the reactivation of the Joint Economic Commission, have led both countries to describe their growing understanding as "irreversible". Some recent pronouncements by President Asif Ali Zardari and the Singh-Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani talks in Sharm el-Sheikh have taken the process forward. Given the nature of their past relationship, even a rhetorical advance on some of these highly sensitive subjects can be considered "progress".

Indo-Bangladesh Relations

Similarly, in terms of India-Bangladesh ties, during the period of the caretaker government in Bangladesh, some hot bilateral issues were brought to the discussion table and the 'apolitical' nature of the Bangladesh government allowed for a functionalist approach to some of these subjects, such as water-sharing, transit and connectivity, and the alleged provision of a 'safe haven' to Indian insurgents in Bangladeshi territory. The many meetings held between them led both sides to declare that the relationship was on an "irreversible trajectory".

India was not unhappy when power was transferred through elections to an Awami League-led government in January 2009, a party known to be better understood in New Delhi. The then-Indian Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, was the first high-ranking foreign official to

visit the new government in February 2009. The stage is now fully set for a visit to India by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in the course of which it has already been stated that the Indian side will not raise issues that might embarrass her.

Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

The Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship is in some ways less challenging. The two countries share no borders and, therefore, have no such issues that usually tend to bedevil relations between neighbours in post-colonial settings such as undemarcated boundaries or the sharing of river waters. Being Muslim-majority countries, both, of course, share many common values.

However, while Pakistan is battling terrorism and fundamentalism, Bangladesh is quite happy to maintain and underscore a distinctiveness that allows it to tackle such problems, far less menacing in that country to start with, through poverty alleviation and women empowerment. Thus far, the great value each saw in the other was the possibility of a linkage that could develop into a counterpoise vis-à-vis India, but as their relationships with India improve, this will require replacement by more positive features.

Developing ‘Trilateralism’

As this set of relationships evolves, India will need to play a critical role. Because of its size, power, influence and endowments, it has to bear a disproportionate responsibility, even if, at times, it is to be without immediate reciprocation. As I have said elsewhere,² it should be the ‘elder’ and not the ‘big’ brother; not only the largest country in the heart of South Asia, but the country with the largest heart.

In terms of politics and economics, India, like China, is a country on the rise in the global scene. It seeks not just regional pre-eminence but also the recognition of a wider international role that it feels it deserves. This can come more easily with the endorsement of its neighbours. Thus, how best can the three countries go about developing this ‘trilateralism’ between them, such that they will find it rewarding both individually and collectively?

First, they should perhaps work out a “matrix” detailing the problematic aspects of their relations with a view to solving them. This could involve dividing bilateral issues into categories – those that can be resolved with a bit of effort or ‘green-box issues’; those that will require some dedicated effort or ‘orange-box’ issues and those whose resolution for now will be difficult or ‘red-box’ issues. The ‘lower hanging fruits’ of the ‘green-box’ may be focused on at the outset, graduating thereafter to the ‘orange’ and ‘red’ boxes, hoping that the resultant generation of goodwill from forward-movement in one box could positively impact the others.

Second, an informal ‘strategic partnership’ could be evolved between them. It is distinguishable from the more formal ‘classical alliance’. A strategic partnership seeks to increase the power of the states involved in absolute terms. In this sense, it is different from a classical alliance, which is security-oriented (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and even from political and economic integration processes (such as the European Union, the

² “Post-Election India: How the Neighbours View the Elephant”, ISAS Insights No. 68, 22 May 2009 – <http://www.isasnus.org/events/insights/69.pdf>.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the African Union). While classical alliances seek a balance of power against a perceived adversary, a strategic partnership is not directed against a common rival but instead aims at a general accretion of influence. Also, while security pacts and political integration tend to sacrifice an element of national defence, monetary and fiscal policies, a strategic partnership, on the other hand, is based upon the mutual goal of increasing individual power and independence, thus allowing for the preservation of national sovereignty.

This is exactly why this 'trilateralism' and strategic partnership is more likely to succeed in forging a political *entente* than the SAARC. This is a formal body in which the fear of any erosion of sovereignty precludes political discussions of a serious nature. Moreover, the agreed structure rules out bilateral issues from the agenda, which leads to a 'Catch-22' situation because as long as the problems characterise mutual relations, progress on even functional areas can be rendered difficult. 'Trilateralism' will turn this over its head and seek to identify the problems first with a view to resolving them. Nonetheless, the purpose of this 'trilateralism' would not be to supplant the more formal SAARC process. Indeed, it should complement and help strengthen it.

The process could begin with a Summit of the leaders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. If it succeeds, it would radically alter the course, not just of regional, but of international relations. It is not necessary to resolve all or even some of the problems. However, the mere agreement to do so, with a structure put in place (the 'boxes') as a demonstration of the political desire, will make a huge difference. This will not only facilitate the rise of India, but will also enable Pakistan and Bangladesh to follow in a 'flying geese' formation, to the benefit of all their peoples.

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