

## REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY FROM PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*South Asia became the most lucrative trade route for the West at the turn of fifteenth century. Merchants and traders from the region operated world-wide through various routes, but today the region doesn't enjoy the same level of connectivity, thereby lacking collective growth and development infrastructure despite being well-endowed with natural and human resources. Unfortunately, the various initiatives for regional connectivity such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTECH) etc. have caused more divide than convergence to the detriment of regional states and peoples. This paper examines the contemporary significance of regional connectivity by analysing whether the initiatives such as SAARC and CPEC have the potential to integrate or to further divide the region? What damage can rise of parochialism and a reinforced traditional security outlook impart on the region? Also, can South Asia contribute positively to the comity of nations?*

**Keywords:** CPEC, Greater South Asia, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Trans-Asian Rail link, Act East Policy

### Introduction

Regions by definition are artificial constructs, knit together either by virtue of political, economic or ideological necessity. Same has been stated with regards to South Asia,<sup>1</sup> making it no exception. Given the interrelation of the member states, it has often been criticised as a mere grouping of extremely diverse and independent states, connected by shared land or maritime boundaries and in close geographical proximity. Furthermore, South Asia merits its name to imperial cartography, where at

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<sup>1</sup> "Introduction: Imagining South Asian Futures," in *South Asia 2060: Envisioning Regional Futures*, ed. Adil Najam and Moeed Yusuf (UK: Anthem Press, 2013), 1.

the height of colonialism, the British bestowed the areas under their control with titles necessitated by their administrative and geographic convenience than any natural merits.

Cradled in the lap of the mighty Himalayas, Hindu Kush, and Karakoram ranges, and opening in the south to the Indian Ocean, South Asia's peculiar geographic contours make it a naturally isolated and self-contained region. After centuries of exposure to invaders, South Asia gained recognition in the Western world as the most lucrative spice route at the turn of the fifteenth century, through the expeditions of Vasco de Gama. Gradually it became a contesting space for rival trading countries of Europe with the British East India Company ruthlessly establishing its ascendancy both amongst its European peers and local competitors through crushing the local order. However, South Asia's history is much deeper and older than the European conquests. It was the seat of the world's oldest civilisations; merchants and traders from the region operated world-wide much before some of the contemporary civilisations overcame their fear of the sea and emerged from the dark ages, marked by strife, mutual acrimony and superstition.

In terms of connectivity and infrastructure, whether it be the ancient *silk route* (206 BC), the grand trunk road that dates back to 322 BC, or the postal messenger service traced back to ancient *Arthveda* to the highly efficient *dakchowkis* and *Sarais* housing animal transport for swift and safer relay and connectivity, the South Asians were much ahead of their time. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to examine whether the regional groupings and initiatives such as the SAARC and the CPEC, have a greater potential to strengthen the region or are these more divisive in nature. What damage parochial policies such as the rising orthodoxy in India and over emphasis on traditional security outlook have cast on the region? Why is connectivity so important in the current geo-political environment, and does South Asia have the potential to contribute positively to the global order?

## **Persistent Colonial Hangover**

The South Asian region today stands as what Dixit calls as an "aloof geographic term" rather than a historical unity of our common living space.<sup>2</sup> Each member state despite sharing a common piece of history and culture is bound to the other through patterns of enmity than amity. As Buzan and Rizvi in their pioneering study on regionalism further stated, it's the sense of competition and patterns of conflict that knit the South Asian states in a seamless web of security than any intent towards cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Beena Sarwar, "Media: New Trends, Old Problems," in *South Asia 2060*, ed. Najam & Yusuf, 286.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Buzan, Gowher Rizvi, and Rosemary Foot, *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986)

What we may term as the modern South Asia, emerged from the ashes of colonialism - a catastrophic event that left each successor state trying to seek identity independent of its roots or regional identity. The British colonial heritage in shape of waterways, road, rail, postal or telegraphic infrastructure has been much criticised lately by various analysts including Tharoor,<sup>4</sup> who dismiss these advancements as a mere tool of British imperialist manifestation, than being meant for benefitting the locals or the colonised. Rather he considers them as *tools of oppression*. Yet, the departing colonists left an elaborate system both in terms of physical infrastructure and political orientation that further distanced these post-colonial entities from one another. The developments that led to the partition of successor states and the emerging hostility among local actors towards each other were also partially a legacy of the British. They ended up drawing faulty borders, dividing populations through contested geographic territories, thereby creating invisible but permanent lines of acrimony, South Asia still remains divided in its behaviour, leaving little space for intra-regional connectivity and meaningful cooperation.

One of the most populous geographic regions, South Asia is home to a quarter of the world's population. Hostile relations between regional states withstanding, the region shows alarming statistics indicating extreme poverty and underdevelopment, compounded further by drastic impact of environmental as well as climate change effects. All of these aspects and more add to the discord and lack of cooperation amongst these neighbouring states, as despite the availability of a regional platform-SAARC, there is little recourse to it. The region besides enjoying a naturally advantageous location, is gifted with immense indigenous resources, and has a significant youth bulge that is growing up in a world characterised by extreme interdependence, connectivity and endless variety of options and learning opportunities. Yet, when we glean the region, despite the commonalities and individual strengths that can be synergised for the collective benefit, the trend is towards pursuing self-contained policies--an approach that is contrary to the spirit of connectivity and regional integration.

Much of the common infrastructure that one sees in South Asia is the hand down legacy of the departing colonials. In its seven decades of independent existence, there has been no conscious and concrete effort towards building a regional infrastructure, which would connect member states to one another and benefit all. This is partly due to the lack of a common vision and partly because of negative security patterns. A quick glance at the rail and road infrastructure still resonates of the British colonial trends. An example is the highest rail link at Landi Kotal laid by the British North Western Khyber Pass Railways in 1925 terminating three

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<sup>4</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (New Dehli: Aleph Book Company, 2016)

kilometres short of Pakistan-Afghanistan border which has not extended any further ever since. The 58 kilometre long Khyber Railway travelling through exotic mountain passes and vintage tracks was for a limited time used by the Pakistani government to run a tourist safari. However, after falling to despair due to the 2008 floods and later security situation alongside the Pak-Afghan border, it was shut down.<sup>5</sup> Nearly a decade later the two governments floated a feasibility study in 2017 about provision of a 145 Km long rail link from Peshawar to Jalalabad through the *Loi Shalman* Valley, which would be first of its kind, but has still not been initiated.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, India despite its much trumpeted quest for global outreach, a Look-East to Act East<sup>7</sup> vision and centrality in position has been very slow in building such linkages with its regional neighbours. It has taken New Delhi over four decades to develop road and rail links with its *friendly* neighbours, such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The *Trans-Asian Rail link* proposed during the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's 2017 visit to India,<sup>8</sup> would be the first since independence allowing Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh to be connected with each other.<sup>9</sup> Given the politics of ascendancy, New Delhi would not encourage any direct bilateral infrastructural links between any of these neighbours. The successful passage of 2017 *Trans Asian proposal* can also be seen in the backdrop of New Delhi's concern over increased presence of external powers such as Japan, US, China and many others who have been active in countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka for humanitarian assistance or economic uplift.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Syed Inayat Ali Shah, "The Derailed Safari Train. One of the Five Celebrated Trains of Asia Calls for Immediate Attention," *The News*, April 20, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Pakistan to Lay Modern Rail Tracks for Trade with Afghanistan, Iran," *The Express Tribune*, May 12, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> The *Look East* policy of India was initiated by its Prime Minister P. V. Narsimha Rao in 1991, to build better trade relations with fast growing economies of South East Asia, known as the *Asian Tigers*, and diverting its focus from the West and neighboring states to this emerging economic block. Primarily an economic and commercial approach, in recent years under Premier Narindra Modi it has been re-envisioned as the *Act East Policy*, with an additional focus on strategic and security cooperation and expanding its scope from South East Asia to the larger East Asia and Indo-Pacific.

<sup>8</sup> Shohel Mamun, "Govt to Restore Rail Links to India, Nepal, Bhutan," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 5, 2017 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2017/04/05/govt-restore-rail-links-india-nepal-bhutan/>.

<sup>9</sup> PTI, "Rail Link Plan with Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal: Suresh Prabhu," *The Economic Times*, January 20, 2017. [http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/56688825.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/56688825.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>10</sup> Vishal Arora, "R.I.P, India's Influence in Nepal," *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/r-i-p-indias-influence-in-nepal/>.

The South Asian discourse is highly securitised due to the traditional patterns of enmity. This causes not only a major hindrance in developing sustained intra-regional cooperation, but also creates an inevitable trade-off between security and development. The changing dynamics of security especially after the termination of cold war have compelled the comity of nations to develop an alternate security discourse, where security is no longer singularly gauged through the traditional lens alone. First, security is multifaceted, including political, economic, environmental, societal, and military aspects. Second, in an increasingly globalised and integrated world, the state is no longer the sole security provider, given the evolving nature and variety of threats/challenges which compel the state to rely on forces beyond the state, thereby shrinking its traditional capacity. The other forces may range from regional groupings based on geo economic or geo strategic interests to non-state entities that help meet the desired goals.

Despite its immense potential as reflected from the endowed resource potential, promising economic indicators, a huge economic market, motivated and ambitious youth as well as highly valued diaspora, the average South Asian state in general has either been weak or negligent in delivering on the social contract with its citizens. This is evident from the abysmal human development as well as security indicators in which none of these states with the exception of Sri Lanka occupy a double digit status on the international indices.<sup>11</sup> Ranging from individual security, to education, to economic development, the South Asian state can no longer continue to make excuse for its poor performance without altering its ways, nor any longer will the citizens remain complacent to state responses at face value.

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the contemporary citizen has the choice to no longer restrict himself to mere territorial confines, feeding blindly on archaic state narrative, but to reach out and integrate in a highly interactive and networked world. However, influenced by the evolving global trend, unfortunately in South Asia as well the counter-currents of ultra-nationalism and a corresponding quest to carve distinct nationalist identities has taken the strongest sway, which again shrinks the space for a collective approach towards problem solving and building of common infrastructure.

## **CPEC: Bridging the Gap or Divider**

From colonial legacy to piggy-backing on the progress of new global

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<sup>11</sup> The Human development index for the eight countries of South Asia between the years 1990 and 2015 at an average are: Afghanistan 169, Bangladesh 139, Bhutan 134, India 131, Maldives 105, Nepal 144, Pakistan 147 and Sri Lanka 73 ; United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Data (1990-2015)," *Human Development Reports*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>.

actors and their vision of expansion, the regional actors despite their potential for progress, have not created a joint yet independent vision. China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and infrastructural investment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka as well as neighbouring Myanmar/Burma has been viewed with great scepticism by New Delhi. Ironically in parallel, the construction of Chabahar port by India in Iran and the rail-road infrastructure from the Iranian port all the way into Afghanistan's resource rich area is being marketed as a great opportunity for the landlocked Afghanistan and an alternate to BRI's China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the shortest and most economical transit trade route via Pakistan. The CPEC can also link New Delhi with the key trading zones of West and Central Asia. However, most of the aforementioned initiatives are being perceived by regional countries for bilateral gains rather than for the collective benefit of the region as such. Additionally, deep rooted distrust, mutual acrimony, overarching security concerns and sense of individualism erodes any potential move towards an integrative approach or process.

For Pakistan, the CPEC appears to be the key to all its economic and developmental woes. Though cognisant of how beneficial the corridor is and can be for the country, there is a need to dwell and strategize on this landmark opportunity more intensely, in order to fully utilise its potential. Hailed in its initial years of inception as the best alternative to the West's receding investments and as an opening to the world markets, the optimism and bonhomie was overshadowed by sceptics, who did not see enough *win-win* options for Pakistan in this bilateral equation, coupled with the distrust raised by Western capitals and institutions over China's intentions. The current political regime in Pakistan, during its election campaign and after, also sought better (internal) transparency over economic and trade agreements including the CPEC, more so because of Pakistan's inability to pay the mounting debts and loans and also due to the perceived lack of oversights when these bilateral ventures were being initially signed.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, the CPEC, instead of becoming a zone of regional connectivity, ended up adding to the region's predictable culture of distrust and competition. Initiating a race for a parallel infrastructure in the shape of Chabahar port, and aggressive negative press by New Delhi that reinforces US reservations, CPEC is not viewed as an infrastructural and connectivity hub that can be a zone of opportunity for the region, but merely a North-South corridor that will benefit Pakistan alone. China as a true economic actor has and will definitely stand benefited from access to more markets and the CPEC is by no means just a North South corridor or Beijing's solitary venture in its BRI vision. However, to realise and benefit from these changing trends, the South Asian neighbours need to change their traditionally oriented mind-sets and move towards a path of

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<sup>12</sup> "Pakistan Calls for more Transparency over CPEC," *Dawn*, September 3, 2018.

recognition and empathy. Citing Sri Lanka's Hambantota port development project as an example of China's colonialism through debt entrapment,<sup>13</sup> the anti-China lobby comprising US, India as well as European capitals are campaigning vigorously to curb China's future expansion.<sup>14</sup>

Responding to the BRI, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson in a 2017 press briefing stated:

We are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities. Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>15</sup>

New Delhi has in very clear and loud words expressed its suspicion about China's intentions and growing influence in the region. Most visible was its boycott of the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum hosted by China; Delhi views China's outreach and connectivity as "a set of tools to influence other countries' foreign policy,"<sup>16</sup> and feels that it would "grant China greater geopolitical influence and undue economic and diplomatic leverage over the policymaking decisions of India's neighbours in ways that disadvantage India."

There is no doubt that as a rising global power, Beijing exercises its smart power potentials to reach out to the world and has over the decades invested well in the markets of resource rich but smaller economies of Latin America, Asia as well as Africa. In Africa alone, 39 countries are China's trading partner through the BRI.<sup>17</sup> However, most of these

<sup>13</sup> Maria Abi-Habib, "How China got Sri Lanka to Cough up a port," *New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>

<sup>14</sup> Sholto Byrnes, "The Example of Sri Lanka Handing over a Port to China Shows the Belt and Road Initiative was Never Meant to be Pure Altruism," *The National* (UAE), September 10, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-example-of-sri-lanka-handing-over-a-port-to-china-shows-the-belt-and-road-initiative-was-never-meant-to-be-pure-altruism-1.768918>

<sup>15</sup> "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum," *Indian Ministry of External Affairs*, May 13, 2017, <http://mea.gov.in/>.

<sup>16</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, "India's Answer to the Belt and Road: A Road Map for South Asia," *Carnegie India*, August 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Kleven, "Belt and Road: Colonialism with Chinese Characteristics," *The Interpreter*, May 06, 2019.

countries, despite their resource richness have either been ignored or extended conditional commercial linkages by the Western economic blocks, which have over the decades willingly pushed them towards a rising China. The West realising their mistake too late, and even after that, instead of offering viable alternatives, it campaigns vigorously against Beijing through engaging in an economic and commercial cold war. The West portrays the threat of Chinese colonialism as the worst case scenario, saying that, "(for) countries hoping to escape Western conditionality by embracing China, a rude awakening is coming, no matter how hard China's top diplomats are denying it: far from being the better choice, colonialism is back – but this time with Chinese characteristics."<sup>18</sup>

Despite all these misgivings, Beijing has been very steadfast in pursuing the BRI. Using the mantra of Asia for Asians,<sup>19</sup> China initially signed a series of bilateral infrastructure development projects with its partner countries, with BRI being discussed in order to garner sufficient support. It was by 2017 that Beijing started to sign partnerships exclusive to the BRI, of which the CPEC was one of the initial agreements. Through the Silk Route Fund, China Development Bank, and the Export-Import Bank, China's BRI agreements span the European Union; it includes the countries of South East Asia such as Thailand, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, South Korea, Myanmar; Central Asia; Middle East as well as African Union member states. The 2017 Forum according to China was a huge success, with 130 countries participating, of which 29 were represented by their heads of state.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, between years 2014-16 its investment in participating states has been around \$50 billion, which has generated trade exceeding \$3 trillion. Given China's capital surplus, global financial analysts predict that Beijing will invest up to \$4 trillion in connectivity financing,<sup>21</sup> which is not possible for any of the existing or emerging powers.

Distrustful of China's intent, perceiving it to be in quest for regional supremacy and using the BRI to unfold an alternate Asian security model, many leading powers of the world such as the United States, UK, France, Germany, Australia, and Japan abstained from committing to the initiative. For India, the prominent Western capitals' stance on BRI further provided credence to its anti-China rhetoric, despite Beijing's repeated offers to New

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Holland and James Pomfret, "Obama Cancels Asia Tour over Shutdown; Raises Questions on U.S. Pivot," *Reuters*, October 4, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> "Achievements of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, *Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*," May 16, 2017, <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/n100/2017/0516/c24-422.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Our Bulldozers, Our Rules," *Economist*, July 2, 2016. Also See, Jonathan E. Hillman, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-five-years-later-0>



Delhi. With the exception of Bhutan, all the South Asian states along with Afghanistan and Myanmar enthusiastically signed up agreements with China. This is indicative of two trends: first, the countries of South Asia want to break out of the tightly knit Indo-Centric security circle and second, they are eager to seek strong economic and development partners, even at the risk of being wedged in a power competition. It furthermore exposes New Delhi's limitations in proving its much touted image of a strategic balancer and economic anchor to the smaller neighbours, despite Indian Prime Minister Modi's Neighbourhood First<sup>22</sup> policy. This much touted neighbourhood outreach strategy of India has been highly selective and politicised, as it totally disregards India's largest regional neighbour to its West – Pakistan and seeks smaller neighbours' support primarily to counter its northern neighbour's (China) growing interests in the Indian Ocean Rim.

### **Slow death of SAARC**

All this leads to a widening gap within the region, where each state actor seeks viable alternatives and external security arrangements conditioned to their strategic needs. The sole regional platform SAARC is the biggest casualty of this impasse. Purpose-built to focus mainly on non-traditional concerns that affect the region than bilateral security problems, and despite making a halting progress in certain areas under its purview, SAARC has eventually and gradually been rendered ineffective. With a complete disregard to making the process work for collective benefit, member countries failed to invest in all capacity in the institution. As a result, SAARC's human development centres in key regional capitals have shut down, SAARC's Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) program, as well as the region's Free Media Association SAFMA have either been terminated or are dying a slow death. The South Asian Federation (SAF) games, the singular and most unique biennial regional sports event as well as the South Asian University are also not invulnerable to the hostile state politics, and the limited space available for performance is also rapidly shrinking.

The idea of a regional mechanism was envisioned as early as the 1940s, at various fora including the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, and eventually the end of 1970s brought about a greater push from smaller states of South Asia for the creation of a trade bloc. President Zia ur Rehman of Bangladesh, set forth the initiative for a common regional platform that would help bridge the mutual distrust, and promote understanding and amity between the member states, thus eventually leading to regional cooperation and growth. Endorsed and strongly

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<sup>22</sup> Aryaman Bhatnagar Ritika Passi, "Neighbourhood First: Navigating Ties under Modi," *Observer Research Fund and Global Policy Journal*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/neighbourhood-first-navigating-ties-under-modi/>

supported by the regional neighbours minus India and Pakistan, it was not before December 1985 that the Association officially materialised. India considered this as a move by smaller neighbours to create a grouping against India and settle their grievances against India through a strong regional grouping. Whereas for Pakistan, the fear was that SAARC might become an India-dominated platform to be used against the former, a concern which unfortunately proved true more than two decades later.

Cognizant of the regional security parameters, where on one hand SAARC stressed upon mutual cooperation, sovereign equality, non-aggression, non-interference/non-intervention, collective growth, progress, and self-reliance, it specifically laid out the exclusion of bilateral as well as contentious issues from the deliberations.<sup>23</sup> This was done to pre-empt any disruption in the process and make SAARC a truly representative regional body aimed towards the growth and development of the people and states of South Asia. However, the November 2016 boycott by India of the SAARC summit in Pakistan, and its successful manoeuvring of other regional states to join the boycott drove a virtual last nail in the coffin of an efficient South Asian regional bloc. Although not an unprecedented move, as in SAARC's thirty four years history there have been only eighteen SAARC (annual) summits, yet this time the process appears worse affected due to many reasons.

One proposal to revive the process was to adopt *SAARC minus one* formula,<sup>24</sup> by excluding or bypassing Pakistan. A notion that gathered sufficient support from India, which has already been working since the past two decades to build parallel initiatives, such as the 1997 Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)<sup>25</sup> to exclude Pakistan from any collective or cooperative security mechanism. Being the pivotal state in the region, India never fully owned the SAARC process, as the Association was based on unanimity and equality, which did not accord New Delhi or any other member a superior status, making Indian policy makers such as Yashwant Sinha dismissing it as a "complete failure".<sup>26</sup> Could the process be revived with the exclusion of Pakistan? Ironically no - as India is one country that not only has problems with Pakistan which it has used as a legitimate front to sabotage the sole regional organisation, it equally nurtures deep distrust with Bangladesh

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<sup>23</sup> "General Provisions Article 10.2," *Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation*, December 08, 1985.

<sup>24</sup> Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Bharath Gopalswamy, "SAARC Is Dead; Long Live SAARC," *The Diplomat*, November 05, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/saarc-is-dead-long-live-saarc/>

<sup>25</sup> The BIMSTEC stands for Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and was founded in Dhaka and comprises of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand as its members.

<sup>26</sup> Miller and Gopalswamy, "SAARC Is Dead; Long Live SAARC."

and Sri Lanka. This is much evident from the fact that even with regards to performance, SAARC could make only modest progress in specific sectors. Despite the SAFTA and other trade initiatives, intra-SAARC trade remains at a low five per cent of their cumulative global trade, and still at around \$50-billion mark,<sup>27</sup> which leaves much to be desired.

The compounding effect to SAARC's slow death has been the lack of ownership and commitment to the process by the member states led mainly by India, and their gradual reaching out and subscribing to other regional bodies. Parallel to the boycotting of the 2017 summit, the concept of Greater South Asia<sup>28</sup> emerged, which has India's Act East policy, of which the BIMSTEC is the necessary first step towards ASEAN engagement. Whereas, Pakistan with the need of better economic and regional anchors, appears to favour and support China led processes such as the China-South Asia Cooperation Forum (CSACF),<sup>29</sup> a part of the BRI. What India doesn't realise is that by killing SAARC, it has ended up exposing South Asia to the unfolding US led pan-Eurasian cold war against China and Russia.<sup>30</sup> New Delhi, in its blind pursuit for a great power status quest, employs anti-Pakistan and anti-China stance as its best strategy to align with the Western powers; the alignment evident through the Indo-Pacific outlook, the increasing imprint of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the purely counter-China security arrangement QUAD comprising US, Australia, Japan and India. However, amidst all these, India remain oblivious to the possibility of ending up as a pawn in enabling a new *Arc of Crisis* envisioned in the 1970s by Brzezinski.<sup>31</sup>

## Rising Disconnect Over Seven Decades

In the initial decade and a half after independence, the political elites in both states attempted to carve a distinct national identity while the trauma of partition and separation was fresh in the minds of Pakistani and Indian citizens – ironically during this period, there was more tolerance and far better physical connectivity between the two countries. With time, the

<sup>27</sup> N. Sathiya Moorthy, "SAARC in Coma, China Throws another Challenging Regional Initiative," *Observer Research Fund*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/saarc-in-coma-china-throws-another-challenging-regional-initiative/>

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Korybko, "The Death of SAARC Gave Birth to "Greater South Asia," *Geopolitica*, November 07, 2016, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/death-saarc-gave-birth-greater-south-asia>.

<sup>29</sup> Moorthy, "SAARC in Coma, China Throws Another Challenging Regional Initiative."

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Korybko, "India Just Split Up SAARC and Brought The New Cold War to South Asia," *Geopolitica*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/india-just-split-saarc-and-brought-new-cold-war-south-asia>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Korybko, "The Death of SAARC."

leadership across the borders built restrictive regimes to bar citizens' access as the real and perceived conflict became deeper and wider. This intentional alienation has been institutionalised through (as mentioned earlier) restrictive visa regimes, mirror imaging consular behaviour and treatment, shrinking physical connectivity, discouraging people to people contact, denial of space for joint research ventures, conference opportunities as well as exchange programs -- to the extent that school children on such ventures have been denied entry or turned back without any plausible reason.<sup>32</sup> Medical treatment which forms a critical part of multi-track diplomacy has also been politicised and made conditional. Handling of stranded people is also subject to political whims and sentiments.

There is a barring of media channels and entertainment as well as sports activities, with news channels becoming a shoddy mouthpiece of governmental rhetoric; above all there is very little intra-regional trade. Even the Track-II ventures as well as non-governmental spaces are being used to hurl accusations or parrot governmental hard lines. As these multi-track channels of parallel connectivity (the critical software) are transforming for the worse or get hijacked by interest groups, there would be an ever increasing alienation and disconnect between the regional actors.

If we look at the tools of connectivity and infrastructure in terms of soft and hard ware, firstly the region's ever growing population requires a constant supplement to cater to their basic needs, and secondly there is also the urgent necessity to build physical infrastructures as well as virtual capacity within and across the region. The lack of intra-regional linkages is not so much because of insufficient resources or absence of infrastructure, but more a result of inter-state rivalries and political inertia. If the citizens need to travel within the region, the biggest impediment is a country specific visa regime. With the exception of Nepal and a select privileged lot that holds a gratis or SAARC visa, the majority of people undergo an exhaustive process, which is subject to the concerned countries' bilateral relations. Nothing could be more pronounced than the mirror imaging consular behaviour between India and Pakistan, with Bangladesh becoming equally hostile.

The second and most troubling aspect is the lack of direct air links to the regional capitals. As the political conditions within the region have deteriorated, so have the means of direct connections. Either countries do not allow their flag carriers to travel to neighbours (Air India ceasing its operations to Pakistan since 2008), or one has to travel outside the region to an extra regional hub in order to access a regional neighbour. Although

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<sup>32</sup> Abhishek Bhalla, "Why India Rejected over 17,000 visa applications from Pakistan," *India Today*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/india-pakistan-visa-applications-rejected-14646-2016-06-17>

the entire region (with the exception of Island states of Sri Lanka and Maldives) are connected with each other through roads and highway networks, but again due to the overarching security concerns and acute trust deficit, movement of citizens is highly restricted, which has adversely affected the growth of the region as well as the collective lives of South Asian citizens. From the British legacy of Azad border<sup>33</sup> between Pakistan and Afghanistan to the closure of consulates,<sup>34</sup> relations between neighbouring states are worsening. What needs to be done is to cultivate diplomacy at multiple levels in order to facilitate citizens who are worse affected and conditioned against one another by legacy of decades' long conflict. People-friendly visa regimes, especially for medical and study purposes, are a necessary first step towards creating this critical space. Pakistan has the capacity and the necessary expertise to assist Kabul in road-rails infrastructure development, as well as construction and infrastructural growth. Such projects can help generate blue-collared jobs within Afghanistan, which can pay enormous dividends.

Till a decade and a half ago, citizens travelling within the region could not avail banking facilities, and to date, cellular connections remain blocked. There is a bar even on entertainment channels or popular cinema. There are several justifications offered, including public pressure, loss of revenue, acrimonious political conditions, distrust, security and terrorism concerns, as well as maintaining the British divide and rule legacy. New Delhi ideally likes to maintain its supremacy throughout the region on any matter big or small, but it also upholds its traditional policy of hegemony and bilateral exclusivism, and hence does not tolerate other state actors to claim even the slightest of space available. Evident from barring of Pakistani media channels within India and Afghanistan, and in a later move disallowing Pakistani entertainers to perform in India, the space for public diplomacy and engagement has been drastically reduced. Sports - the biggest bridge builder and conflict transformer - is yet another casualty of the political bitterness and parochial thought.

## Viability of Multi-track Channels

As mentioned earlier, New Delhi in pursuit of its traditional mind-

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<sup>33</sup> The Pak-Afghan border was demarcated in 1893 through an agreement between the Afghan ruler Amir Abdul Rehman Khan and then Colonial British government representative Mortimer Durand and came to be popularly known as the *Durand line*. The 2,590 km border stretch is highly porous and owing to common tribes residing on both sides of the border, in certain declared areas, provision was given for people from listed tribes to move freely on specified permits, hence the notion of Azad border.

<sup>34</sup> "Pakistan Consulate in Afghanistan closed after Woman Tried to Sneak in with Grenade," *Pakistan Today*, August 25, 2019; "Kabul closes its Peshawar Consulate to Protest Flag Removal," *Dawn*, October 12, 2019.

set, seeks an exclusive and central position in all bilateral and regional affairs without the critical realisation that being the most prominent member of the region, its position, status, and value can never be disregarded or denied. At the bilateral level, where external actors' engagement with regional neighbours is viewed with suspicion and distrust, even bilateral links between regional neighbours are not encouraged. Likewise, regional ventures of any kind have also been relatively short lived, either due to lack of funding opportunities or characteristic political dysfunctionality. There have been excellent regional networks such as the Colombo based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, (RCSS), that has progressively focused on both traditional as well as non-traditional security concerns since 1990s, providing a platform for the South Asian researchers, young and old, to deliberate and develop a common narrative.

Likewise, Delhi based Women in Security and Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) has been instrumental in bringing together young South Asian thought leaders on a conflict transformation journey. The youngest of these regional initiatives, Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks Association (COSATT), in its decade long journey provides South Asian research and academic bodies a common platform to work together on areas of regional concern and security, making a conscious attempt to reinforce SAARC's vision. However, most of these entities are reliant on foreign funding for their smooth and sustainable functioning. As the region's security narrative becomes murkier and complex and domestic institutions hold a septic view of external interests, there is lesser to overcome absence of interest or reduction in funding opportunities. These institutions have been most critical and beneficial in bringing up a generation of South Asian thought leaders who can be and are the key critical mass in regional connectivity and bridge building.

## **Rise of Ultra-Nationalism in India**

There was a time when despite worse situations, India and Pakistan would continue to talk, whether through open or closed channels or through the intervention of a third party, usually the US as a crisis diffuser. But in the current scenario, owing to the thickening wave of ultra-nationalism in India, craftily orchestrated false flag operations such as the Balakot incident of February 2019 and resulting air strikes have drastically changed the dynamics of bilateral relations between the two neighbours. Further, India's anti-Muslim migration policies have endangered the lives of Muslim citizens of the once Secular India.

The rising tide of Hindu nationalist fervour in India has put Muslims of different ethnic origins at the risk of being targeted by Hindu zealots. This will have drastic consequences for neighbouring states such as Bangladesh – possibly resulting in bilateral confrontation, internal

destabilisation of neighbours, and adverse impacts on Muslim diaspora working in the Arab capitals. Amidst these turbulent currents of acrimony, distrust, ultra-nationalism and rising religious orthodoxy, initiatives such as the Kartarpur corridor facilitated by the Institute of Multi-track Diplomacy and financial help by the Sikh diaspora as well as resident community are a beacon of hope and faith that all is not lost.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, South Asia by no means is devoid of talent, opportunities and infrastructure to connect and act as a cohesive force. What is lacking is a collective contribution at all levels to make the region progress and grow. With cross currents of hyper-nationalism, hate mongering, parochial and interest group politics that are also reflective at the global level, the region will keep on losing its strategic space. At best progress would be made by one odd country, but at the cost of its disadvantaged, smaller neighbours. The South Asian states behave like a bunch of individual actors pursuing individual interests in isolation.

The region is blessed with immense natural and man-made resources, which provide it with commonalities as well as diversity. It is up to the South Asian citizen whether to harness these endowments as a dividing factor or synergise them as a bridge builder. The time is for concrete action towards collective growth, development and peace, rather than indulging in totally disconnected confidence building measures or a plethora of heavy inconsequential talks. If the virtual doors are kept padlocked and not opened from within, how can we expect external actors to engage at our terms? The success of SAARC as well as an integrated South Asian region can only be possible if the states in the region connect and learn to grow together. Let us aim and build a shared vision for the region, which is our common heritage and singular homeland.

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<sup>35</sup> Eddie Walsh, "Bridging the Sikh Divide," *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2011, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/08/bridging-the-sikh-divide/>

