**Blurred boundaries**

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As I sat on a live talk show recently, discussing the high-stakes COP29 summit in Baku and the mounting climate crisis, my call for Pakistan and India to one day join forces on climate action was met with a chuckle from a defence analyst on the panel. His light-hearted dismissal of the idea was all too familiar – a knee-jerk reaction to any suggestion that these two nuclear neighbours, with decades of animosity, might one day set aside their differences to tackle a shared existential threat.

But if history has shown us anything, it’s that even entrenched rivals can eventually unite when the stakes are high enough. In a world where climate devastation respects no borders, our nations can’t afford to let grudges hold back solutions that might save millions of lives and preserve our shared environment. If we can’t imagine cooperation now, as we choke on the same smog and face floods that wash away homes across borders, then when?

Recently, the EU’s climate pact ambassador spoke powerfully about regional self-reliance, stating that Europe will no longer wait for the US to take the lead on climate action. Instead, the EU intends to shape its own climate narrative and set its own course, emphasising the strength of regional alliances. So, why can’t South Asia do the same? Pakistan, through Saarc, has the potential to spearhead a strong regional coalition on climate. And if Saarc doesn’t fulfill that role, then let the focus fall on the G77, including China, to create actionable momentum on climate.

It’s no fantasy to imagine Pakistan and India on the same side of the table, working together on climate issues. If not immediately, it’s a partnership that’s inevitable in the long run. History shows us that bitter rivalries can give way to cooperation. Why, then, can’t Pakistan and India – locked in a mutual crisis with smog, flooding, and extreme weather – unite for the survival of South Asia? The smog-choked cities in both Pakistan and India aren’t bound by borders. Pakistani Punjab’s chief minister recently suggested reaching out to India for cooperation on air pollution – a call that deserves respect and, ideally, a positive response. Climate catastrophe is a regional crisis, one that demands coordinated action beyond the political gridlock of the past.

COP29 has come to be nicknamed ‘Money29’ as finance issues dominate the agenda, especially for developing countries like Pakistan, which successfully lobbied the United Nations to establish the Loss and Damage Fund. However, the fund has yet to yield results and the financial help our countries need remains mostly symbolic.

Globally, we see faltering commitments – such as the US backpedalling on its climate goals and the potential withdrawal from the Paris Agreement as Trump returns to office. These policy reversals send a demoralising message, and the whole world takes note. But instead of depending solely on the superpowers, South Asian nations should follow the EU’s example of self-reliance. Recently, the EU’s climate ambassador underscored that Europe will no longer look to the US to dictate climate policy; it will steer its own course. South Asia must seize the same initiative.

If Pakistan can’t find momentum through Saarc, we should focus on leveraging the G77, alongside China, to drive meaningful change. The world has seen reconciliations before.

As it stands, relying on world leaders for climate funding is proving futile. For developed nations, COPs have devolved from opportunities for action into uncomfortable reminders of broken promises. In 2023, Oxfam reported that wealthy, high-emission countries are three years overdue on their pledge to mobilise $100 billion annually in climate finance for lower-income countries. We need to change the narrative around climate finance; it is not charity or a loan – it is a matter of climate justice.

But while we need support from the Global North, Pakistan cannot rely on international funding alone. To survive and thrive, we must adopt the mentality of the survival of the fittest. Yes, the climate crisis was forged in the factories of Manchester and New York during the Industrial Revolution, and yes, the global North bears significant responsibility. But to become resilient, we must look inward, strengthen our economy, and create robust, self-sustaining climate initiatives.

Pakistan should consider implementing ‘green fines’, holding corporations accountable when their profits come at the cost of our environment. While switching to electric vehicles is a start, it’s not enough. We need foundational reforms to address climate change effectively. Climate action in Pakistan must encompass issues that intersect with climate change, including water, food, and energy security. To tackle these, all provinces must come together, united in purpose rather than divided by politics.

We have policies in place – the National Adaptation Plan 2023, the Living Indus Initiative, and the National Climate Change Policy – but they are only as good as their implementation. Without significant progress on these fronts, policies remain words on paper, not solutions on the ground.

Sadly, as Pakistan grapples with extreme poverty, institutional mismanagement, and an exodus of young talent seeking better opportunities abroad, the climate crisis often takes a backseat. But make no mistake, this is not a distant, abstract issue – it is one of the gravest internal security threats we face today. Environmentalists may not hold priority in our current political landscape, or they may even become targets of mockery. But as we continue advocating for climate action, we hope the doubters and deniers are proven wrong before it is too late.

History shows us that the most resilient nations overcome adversity by building strength from within. They stop pointing fingers and start fixing what they can at home. For Pakistan, resilience means committing to climate action with or without international support because our survival depends on it.

The writer is an environmentalist and a professor of environmental law.