**Moving towards an ecological state**

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Five hundred years ago, in the days of big empires, one would look like a political idealist or even an idiot to assert the need for a nation-state.

What was political idealism then, the nation-state is now a political reality. As history progresses, human societies continue to encounter new realities. Thinking of the ecological state, for instance, may look like political idealism today but the merging reality is instructive that human beings need new geographical arrangements beyond political frontiers to deal with the challenges of environment and climate change.

The North Pole has already experienced glacial and hydro-meteorological disasters and cryosphere depletion. Outside the North Pole, the region of High Asia (which includes the mountainous regions of Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Pamir, the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau) is now exposed to irreversible natural calamities with abrupt changes in weather patterns, melting of glaciers and ecological fragmentation. Approximately 2.7 billion people living in countries across High Asia are likely to face existential threats if actions are not taken to mitigate the impending calamities of climate change trigged by environmental degradation. Destruction of crops due to abrupt changes in weather patterns, flooding of arable plains and fragmentation of natural habitats will unleash famines, huger and millions of deaths.

There are no easy solutions to the ecological challenges in the High Asia region which is plagued by political rivalries, border conflicts and immediate geostrategic thinking of nation-states. However, ecological reintegration of High Asia is the only viable way to address its fragility as one of the most sensitive ecological zones of the world. The nation-states across High Asia are political constellations which were artificially created by colonial powers. Well, we cannot undo history but we can read it critically for course correction.

The modern nation-state is essentially a Western construct which evolved in the course of history as a political institution of governance. Unlike medieval empires, nation-states are governed by legally defined geographical boundaries and a constitutional ideology of nationhood. Empires expanded and shrank depending upon their power to control territories and people without any defined geographical frontiers and centralized ideologies of nationhood. Kings and emperors asserted their power through acquisition of territories by force and there was no universal law to restrict kings and emperors to a defined political geography.

When feudalism started to crumble in Europe in the 17th century the empires were also disintegrating, which led to political anarchy. All of Europe was at war and it took 80 years to find diplomatic solutions for peace through a number of peace treaties in 1648, collectively known as Westphalia Peace. This was the end of religious wars waged by medieval empires for political dominance and control. The treaties of Westphalia were the beginning of a new political system in Europe which introduced diplomatic engagement as a means of conflict resolution, whereby the geopolitical boundaries of states were also determined.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, and with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Europe was reconstructed as an international system of ethnocentric nation-states. Industrializing European states developed their military technology and maritime power exponentially and they explored new continents for raw material to feed their industries. Hence, the era of colonialism was started; powerful industrializing European states started to occupy resource-rich but technologically impoverished continents of Africa, Asia and America.

Colonialism disrupted the political and economic evolution of colonized societies by dislodging the indigenous institutions of collective life. New legal, political and religious identities were created to reshape the colonized societies as territorial extensions for political control and economic exploitation. According to Hamza Alvi, British colonialism resulted in the destruction of cottage industries and indigenous economic institutions of value exchange with extractive practices of exploitation to feed the growing industrial base in Britain.

It was not only about the destruction of indigenous economic institutions; colonialism also created parallel institutions to forge new political identities on the basis of religion. Religious nationalism was juxtaposed with civilizational and ethnic-political imagination of the Indian subcontinent. The evolving identities of nationhood across British India were diluted and replaced with religious nationalism while in the princely states customary laws were allowed to ossify as providential decrees.

In 1947, at the time of creation of India and Pakistan there were some 565 princely states in addition to a number of zamindaris, small estates and principalities in the Indian subcontinent. These were all governed through local rajas without any change to centuries’-old customary laws. At the time of the British exit, India had become a battleground of multiple identities that drew their political legitimacy from religion, culture and caste. The landed classes which feared the loss of their estates took refuge in religious nationalism while the peripheral and oppressed social groups started to assert their indigenous cultural identities.

There was not a singular or unified political movement with a defined idea of nationhood and hence the postcolonial state continued to function as the carrier of political contradictions of concocted religious and legal identities of colonial era. Therefore, the postcolonial state in reality is an artificial geographical amalgamation of irreconcilable political identities and hence it fails to function coherently like a European nation-state.

In Africa and Asia, artificial geographical boundaries were drawn by colonial rulers to the detriment of nationhood and the collective political aspirations of decolonizing societies. Even the ecologically sensitive regions like High Asia were disintegrated for political reasons by various contenders of regional domination during the Great Game and the cold war.

The nation-state in High Asia is, therefore, not a natural corollary of struggle for nationhood; rather, it is an artificial political arrangement which continues to serve the economic and political interests of Western powers. Beyond their economic and political dependence, nation-states of High Asia offer a great prospect for building a safer world to billions of people of our planet. Ecological significance overrides all other considerations for the future of humanity in High Asia and beyond. This region is considered to be the powerhouse to control global climate; hence, disruptive environmental activities in this region will lead to disasters of global proportions.

There need to be trans-boundary solutions engaging India, Pakistan, Afghanistan China, Nepal and Central Asian States. Ecology has no political boundaries and even if it is fragmented states must rise above their parochial national interests to secure the future of humanity.

The High Asia region must be declared as a free ecology zone and its native population as ecology citizens with guaranteed rights to free movement across the region. The region may be called an ecological state with minimal political interference from the member nation-states of the free ecology zone. Without surrendering their sovereignty, the member nation-states of High Asia must work towards creating integrated climate change adaptation, water and cryosphere management action plan to begin with.

If the European nation-states can become one union for economic reasons even after fighting two disastrous wars, High Asia has even stronger ecological reasons to become one block for regional cooperation, peace and ecological integration.

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