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**A restoration in ties?**

In a rare move, Pakistan’s high commissioner to Bangladesh met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, pledging to improve the otherwise dormant bilateral relationship between the countries.

Conceivably, the telephonic conversation of PM Imran Khan with his Bangladeshi counterpart paved the way in fusing the troublesome relations between the two countries. The backchannel diplomacy conducted over the year could upend the historic configurations of the South Asian region. The initiative of advancing cultural and economic ties is to be lauded. However, this series of diplomatic initiatives is breaking the long-standing impasse in maintaining cordial relations.

In the past years, cooperation remained limited. In fact, the two countries came at odds after the government of Bangladesh resumed the 1971 war crimes trials. The trials led to several leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami being tried and executed for siding with Pakistan (during the 1971 conflict). However, Pakistan claimed the executions were ‘politically motivated’ and had not been conducted to mete out justice. Bangladesh viewed these comments as interference in its domestic affairs. As a response, the Saarc summit in September 2016 was boycotted by Bangladesh to protest against Pakistan’s stance on those Bangladesh called war criminals who were guilty of participating in the 1971 war. Following the trials, relations between the two countries reached a low.

Now, with the changing geopolitical realities, regional actors should move past their historical baggage and see their relations with other countries in a new light. There are two routes to reconciliation, as suggested by academics Arie Nadler and Tamar Saguy: a) Socio-Emotional Reconciliation; b) Trust-Building Reconciliation.

The first route of reconciliation centers around the actors' wish to avenge the wrongdoings committed against them in the past and the perpetrator to pay its debt by apologizing and accepting the responsibility of its actions. The second deals with joint projects which can result in establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation.

In the case of Pakistan-Bangladesh ties, the application of the first route will account for an official recognition from Pakistan concerning the 1971 debacle. On the other hand, the latter route for reconciliation seems more viable as Pakistan and Bangladesh can work on improving their trade relations which will lead to enhancing the diplomatic mechanisms.

The combined trade potential of Pakistan and Bangladesh is $345 billion, with a consumer market of around $346 million, as per writer Zahid Shahab and Musharaf Zahoor. The rationale for the two countries to enhance their bilateral relations appears promising.

Recent developments in the region provide both the countries with an opportunity to establish a common ground and work towards building a concrete relationship. New Delhi faces a reduced sphere of influence vis-a-vis Bangladesh after the passing of the controversial citizenship law in India led to an increase in deportation of the Bangladeshis’ living in the eastern wing of India.

The prevailing regional dynamics might pave the way for recalibrating the policy decisions in both countries. A look at the redundancy of Saarc puts into perspective the low level of integration within the South Asian region. While the forum aimed to enhance regional cooperation and act as a catalyst for development in the region, the political realities of the region have kept the member states rather ambivalent towards its functionality. It is imperative to understand that these regional frameworks have become dysfunctional due to the underlying scepticism and mistrust. These are the very reasons that restrict the rapprochement between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The associated historical baggage significantly limits both the countries to take concrete steps in maintaining cordial ties. However, if the countries can manage to bury the hostility and start anew with restored commitment, then the incentives of increasing regional collaborations are high. The other regional blocs such as the EU and ASEAN are sustaining their regional frameworks despite sharing a bitter history. That is a lesson in itself for other regional actors.

Bilateral tensions between Pakistan and Bangladesh act as a hindrance and sabotage the spirit of multilateralism, Initiation of cultural and economic activities will help the countries reconstruct the existing narrative within their people. Lastly, shifting away from conflictual patterns will lead to greater prosperity and cooperation.

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