**[Thriving South Asia a pipe dream?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1783037/thriving-south-asia-a-pipe-dream)**

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SOME two weeks back, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a 23-member inter-governmental organisation, held its annual meeting in Colombo. Pakistan has been intentionally kept out of this forum despite having a 1,046-kilometre-long coastline along the Arabian Sea and being a major state of the Indian Ocean Region. For its part, Pakistan has also not made a serious attempt to get its foot in the door.

Like the rest of South Asia that has been the most affected by the climate storm, Pakistan, which in particular has been in the throes of a serious existential threat (the Himalayas have lost 40 per cent of their ice due to the melting of glaciers), would have benefited from the rich discussion which was on the IORA’s menu and included regional trade, maritime safety and security, fisheries management, disaster risk management and the blue economy.

Around the same time as IORA’s meeting, and in the same hotel, the World Bank had organised its second Editor’s Forum with journalists and editors from South Asian countries — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan (Afghanistan wasn’t present) to discuss the benefits of regional cooperation and integration and the barriers to achieving it. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a growing realisation of the importance of regional and sub-regional cooperation.

This region of two billion people (nearly a quarter of the world’s population) has failed to build relationships like, say, the EU and Asean, or to capitalise on their proximity and come together, despite a shared history, philosophy, food, culture and art.

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Recently, however, there is an emerging trend in the eastern part of South Asia to forge ties without Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Take for instance the energy sector. The Sri Lankan minister for power and energy, Kanchana Wijesekera, talked about developing a “power corridor” between Sri Lanka and India for electricity trade in the next five years. And if everything goes as planned, he said, the island nation will import electricity during the dry season and export hydropower during the wet season. He also envisioned going beyond India, to Bangladesh, Nepal and even Bhutan.

Nepal, which produces an excess of nearly 30 per cent hydroelectricity during its wet season, and is exporting 632 megawatts of power from its 10 run-of-the-river hydropower projects to India since May, now has its eyes set on Bangladesh to sell 40MW to it via India. If the tripartite agreement, the first of its kind for the three countries, materialises, Nepal eventually hopes to transmit as much as 500MW to Bangladesh.

If the southern part of South Asia can think of connectivity through crisscrossing energy corridors, imagine the huge economic benefits this may have for the entire region through one regional grid transmitting clean energy throughout. The region will be lit up and blackouts will become a thing of the past.

But energy is just one example. Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed, international, political, and strategic issues expert, believes the “sky is the limit” when it comes to regional collaborations in the areas of culture, medicine, travel, tourism and even sports. For all of these, South Asian leaders need a “vision followed by a will to act”. He believes Pakistan has much to offer, especially to smaller countries, including diplomatic and military training, or even making inroads through the use of drone technology in agriculture. “If Pakistani footballs are used in World Cup matches, why not in South Asia?” he asked.

Pakistan, which built and gifted the Maldives its parliament building, is currently offering 25 scholarships per year to Nepalese students and 60 of Nepal’s military officers come for training annually to Pakistan. It also provided military and diplomatic help to Sri Lanka to help them defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

However, along with the low-hanging fruit in the form of Pakistani TV dramas and pop songs that are so popular in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, and which must be promoted through a special South Asian “soft power” fund, Sayed says Pakistan has yet another advantage — CPEC which can offer regional economic connectivity to all of South Asia with Central Asian countries via Pakistan.

The same goes for healthcare. While there is much to learn from Sri Lanka’s universal healthcare system and Bangladesh’s family planning success, when it came to pandemic preparedness (scientists are already warning of the possibility of the next pandemic at the scale of Covid-19: 2.5pc to 3.3pc yearly, and 47pc to 57pc in the next 25 years), Pakistan was a notch above the rest of South Asia. It handled the pandemic well with its robust coordination, preparedness, and response through the National Command and Operation Centre. This best practice can be fine-tuned and expanded to form a larger regional pool to share resources and information, even have joint procurement and distribution services of say, test kits and PPE distribution.

Trade between countries in this region can reduce poverty. Setting aside mistrust, business processes need to be less cumbersome and transport and digital connectivity improved. Allowing for labour mobility within South Asia along with export and exchange of capabilities, may reduce the number of tragedies like the [Greek boat disaster](https://www.dawn.com/news/1759719).

The recent resumption of the passenger ferry service between India and Sri Lanka after 40 years reminded one of the weekly bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar that was in place for a good 10 years from 2005 to 2015 and then stopped in 2019, as did the Delhi-Lahore passenger bus service due to India’s revocation of the special status of occupied Kashmir. However grave the political differences between countries, they can perhaps agree to rise above them and stop people-to-people exchanges from becoming a casualty in political war-mongering.

In the end, however, as Sayed points out, South Asian relationships will only warm up if these are based on “non-interference” and are “non-hegemonic”.

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