

# Transforming conflict to harmony in South Asia

THE BUSINESS TIMES 26 NOV 2009

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**T**HE three largest South Asian countries – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – share much in common. Prior to 1947, they constituted a single political entity. They had common leaders. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Sheik Mujibur Rahman were united in their aspiration to free the subcontinent of British domination. Their efforts eventually found fruition in the emergence of three separate and sovereign states.

That is now a fact of history. Their pluralist values render them today three of the world's largest democracies, with a combined population of nearly 1.5 billion.

Unfortunately, certain colonial legacies fed conflicts into their relationship. Animosity rather than amity coloured their perceptions of one another. It is a paradox that need not remain constant. One never steps into the same Indus or Ganges twice. Like nature, these rivers are in a constant flux. So too is the flow of history.

## Towards harmony

The challenge is to channel it, inexorably, even if meandering, in such a way as to move from conflict to harmony. It will call for a modicum of ingenuity. It will also require thinking out of the box. As the entire world is aware, the intellectual resources of the three countries are their pride. Their leaders and the peoples, therefore, happily, have the capacity to respond to this need.

In recent times, the three South Asian countries have held successful elections. There are new governments in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In India, the same party was returned to power, albeit in a strengthened "avatar". Newness lends impetus to the will to change. The idea should be to make the change better and more desirable. New Delhi, Islamabad and Dhaka should indeed focus on this.

Of late, positive signals are emanating from all three capitals. Pakistan's owning up to the responsibility of its citizens for the Mumbai mayhem was a departure from the



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past. Both India and Pakistan seized the scope to turn a tragedy into an opportunity. The process moved forward in the Sharm-el-Sheikh talks between India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan's Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani.

The Bangladesh-India relations, already on track during the previous governments, are also consolidating, setting the stage for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to New Delhi later this year.

Bangladesh and Pakistan share no borders, and consequently are spared the usual issues that bedevil immediate neighbours.

As this set of relationships evolves, India will need to play a critical role due to its size, power and economic endowment. It will need to shoulder a disproportionate responsibility, even if at times, it is to be without immediate reciprocity. For this country on the rise, the endorsement of the neighbours is essential if

it is to achieve the international recognition it feels it deserves. What the three countries will find rewarding, individually and collectively, then is if they can develop a culture of "trilateralism" between them. How can they go about it?

First, they should create a "matrix" that would entail arranging divisive bilateral issues into three "boxes" – a "green box" for those that can be resolved with some effort; an "orange box" for those that are more difficult; and a "red box" for the most difficult ones. The "low-hanging fruits" of the "green box" would receive initial focus, and then graduated to others. The hope would be that the resultant goodwill generated from the forward-movement in the negotiations on one box would positively impact the others.

Second, they should evolve an informal "strategic partnership". This is different from the more formal "classical alliance". A strate-

gic partnership seeks to increase the power of the states involved in absolute terms, and is different from a classical alliance which is security-oriented. Also, while a classical alliance would seek a balance of power against a perceived adversary, a strategic partnership is not directed against any common rival but instead aims at a general accretion of influence.

## Preserving sovereignty

Finally, while an alliance, or even a regional organisation, may involve a sacrifice in terms of policy-making space, a strategic partnership is based upon the goal of increasing individual power and independence, thus allowing for the preservation of national sovereignty.

This is exactly why a culture of trilateralism buttressed by a strategic partnership would be more likely to succeed in forging un-

derstanding between the three states than the existing South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This is a formal body in which the fear of erosion of sovereignty precludes any political discussions of a serious nature. Also, bilateral issues are ruled out from the agenda, which leads to a Catch-22 situation. So long as those problems remain unaddressed, progress on even functional co-operation becomes difficult.

There is ample evidence in the SAARC of this. Trilateralism will seek to turn this dilemma on its head, by taking the bull of issues by its horns.

Nonetheless, the purpose of trilateralism would not be to supplant the SAARC. Indeed, it should complement and strengthen it. The way to begin the new process could again be different from the one followed in SAARC. There, it begins at the official levels, formally working its way up through the ministers, to a summit of leaders. By the time the heads of state meet, too many bureaucratic hurdles would have been created; these tend to restrain the leaders. In the present case, it could be initiated with a summit of the leaders of the three countries, even in an informal "retreat" format, providing them maximum leeway to decide as to how to proceed.

## Radical shift

It is not necessary to resolve all or even some of the mutual problems. Many are truly complex. However, the demonstration of a resolute will to do so, with a structure put in place for the purpose, will make a huge difference in public perceptions. If such trilateralism should come to pass, it would radically alter the course, not just of regional, but of international relations. This will not only facilitate the rise of India, but will also enable Pakistan and Bangladesh to soar in concert in a "flying geese" formation, to the benefit of all their peoples. Surely this is an idea that must not take long in coming.

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