Pakistan: Fostering Regional Cooperation And Stability

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About the Author

Mr. Amer Hashmi is a global strategist and entrepreneur, typical of the current innovation-based knowledge economy. Mr. Hashmi is a graduate of Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s prestigious Leadership Program on ‘Innovation for Economic Development’. A Business graduate from the York University in Toronto, Canada, he specializes in National Economic Development, Public Policy Framework, International Relations, Corporate Strategy, Global Finance and Marketing, with a diverse international experience of excellence in organizational leadership. He is also a graduate of the renowned IBM Executive Forum - US and Canada and has been a member of the select club of high-level executive managers at IBM, besides being National Principal for IBM Global Services, Toronto, Canada. Mr. Hashmi has attended the 15th round of the prestigious National Security Workshop of the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad. He was also Senior IT Advisor to the Commonwealth Society of Canada and was the founding CEO of Si3 – one of Pakistan’s pioneering technology outsourcing firms.

In the capacity of Advisor NUST, Mr. Hashmi has played a leading role in formulating a comprehensive strategy for realizing the five key strategic thrusts i.e., excellence in teaching and education; focus on research; spirit of enterprise; internationalization of higher education and a global perspective; and a positive impact on society. Mr. Hashmi has led the establishment of various initiatives at NUST serving as vehicles for realizing NUST’s strategic thrusts. He is the Secretary General of the Corporate Advisory Council (CAC), a pioneering university-based platform in Pakistan for promoting industry-academia-government collaboration for innovation and entrepreneurship and Chairman of the Executive Committee of NUST’s National Science and Technology Park (NSTP).

He is the President of NUST Global Think Tank Network. GTTN is a key strategic initiative for creating special knowledge partnerships for regional and global peace and prosperity with leading academic and non-academic think tanks in Asia-Pacific, North America, and Europe, of which the first is the China-Pakistan Joint Think Tank. In his capacity as President GTTN, Mr. Hashmi has successfully led the efforts to increase the role of NUST GTTN in national policy agenda-setting. His policy and strategic advice has been sought at senior official levels in Pakistan, Asia-Pacific, and North America. Mr. Hashmi has been invited as a special guest by domestically and globally renowned institutions like National Defence University, Islamabad, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London, Tsinghua University, Beijing, and others, to speak on global development, international relations, and regional cooperation and integration.
Unfortunately, Pakistan is not currently perceived globally as a contributor to regional peace, cooperation, and stability. Pakistan's contributions to regional peace and stability, including the fact that Pakistan is the largest troops-contributing country to the UN peace-keeping and peace-enforcing missions around the world\(^1\), at times, tend to be ignored.

Most current analyses on Pakistan portray an image of chaos and destruction. Just as it would be incorrect to deny the seriousness of what is happening in Pakistan, it would be equally incorrect to define and look at the country in terms of conflict alone.

While multiple crises are confronted by Pakistan, yet most of them are those, which are routinely faced by any developing country, and some may well be present even in the developed world. Pakistan is not exceptional in terms of the crises it faces. It should also be mentioned that the situation is not entirely that of Pakistan's own making. Insurgencies of one sort or the other have affected country after country in the developing world. On the other hand, law and order, terrorism, and inequitable distribution of resources are not unknown even to advanced countries of the world.

Despite the challenges, the story of today's Pakistan is one of renewal, rejuvenation, and reconstruction amidst conflict and chaos. Pakistan, together with other countries in the South Asian region, can enhance peace, stability, and prosperity in South Asia.

Pakistan has been the major American non-NATO ally in the so-called global War on Terrorism, which is a telling proof of the country's role in maintaining and enhancing regional and global peace. Islamabad has consistently called for fostering regional stability and cooperation with regards to rebuilding Afghanistan and ensuring peaceful transition of power once the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) draws down its military presence by the end of this year.

To ensure peace in and outside the country, Pakistan is engaged in a determined fight against coordinated and organized terrorism on its soil, which has inflicted terrible losses on the country and its people. The fight entered a decisive phase once the military surged the anti-terror military operation in North Waziristan. The nation is determined, united and firmly supports the military, despite some minor dissent. Even those sections of society and politics that have repeatedly emphasized the importance of peace through negotiation have not ruled out a military response to terrorism. It can be said that political differences on how to deal with terrorism are framed by the greater national consensus on the advisability of combating terrorism militarily.

Pakistan's contribution to the war against terrorism as the front-line state has had a dual effect on the state and on its people. While the shortcomings and failings in the state apparatuses and modes of governance have been exposed on one hand, the crucible of terrorism has also shown that Pakistanis are resilient people and that there is an inextricable bond between the state and the society.

It is not possible to put a price on human suffering and loss in fighting terrorism but some well-known estimates in terms of spending and indirect costs are worth mentioning. The total cost of Pakistan's War on Terror has been more than USD 100 billion.

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\(^*\) This article is based on the speech on the same topic that the author delivered, on invitation, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London, UK, on 7 July, 2014. It has also been published in the October 2014 Issue of Blue Chip Magazine.

1. Till date Pakistan has contributed over 150,000 troops to 41 UN missions in 23 countries. Pakistan has been promoting peace around the world through its peace-keeping contributions for more than 50 years. According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, UN currently deploys 100,000 peace-keepers around the world and one in ten peace-keepers is a Pakistani.
The losses incurred due to terrorist attacks add up to more than USD 28 billion. The country has been able to sustain this huge cost and price of its war against terrorism, in large part, due to the resilience of its society and people combined with the state-society cooperation, which often goes unnoticed by the eye and the camera lens and seldom recorded by the pen.

I am reminded of what Zbigniew Brzezinski calls in his book, “Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power,” the “capacity for reactive mobilization” of the American people and society in face of great danger to the security of the US. Similarly, the resilience of the Pakistani people and state will help us defeat terrorism. This resilience has been timely reinforced by the role of international financial institutions and donor organizations as well as the friends of Pakistan.

It is important to underscore that the situation in Balochistan also needs to improve for peace to thrive in the region. A lot of misperceptions abound regarding Balochistan. The real cause of disaffection and underdevelopment in Balochistan is the predatory “sardari system” in the province which has held back development and caused deprivations to aggravate. This regressive state of affairs has found generous external support which has only delayed the development of the province and thwarted peace in the country and, by extension, in the region.

Pakistan’s war against terrorism has focused not only on eradicating terrorism from Pakistan but, also equally importantly, making the region free from terrorism so that the people of Pakistan including the publics of various countries in the region can live in peace.

It will not be wrong to state emphatically that the region as a whole has been the greatest beneficiary of Pakistan’s fight against terrorism as this war has severely dented into the capability of terrorism to become a formidable roaming regional menace.

It is a welcome step in this regard that Pakistan and Afghanistan may also develop some bilateral security arrangement to deal with the problem of terrorism. Forging cooperation around the multifarious elements of national power – military, economic, political, cultural, moral, diplomatic, resource-based, industrial, geographic – can be a solid way of ensuring peace and stability in South Asia.

There is an overall desire for peace in the region. India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan understand the interconnected nature of conflict and peace, now more than ever. Peace with dignity, honor, and justice will prove to be the biggest driver for regional development. Peace will serve the South Asian masses better than conflict; conflict will only benefit regional malcontents and criminal elements.

What shall further promote the efforts for peace in the region in so far as Pakistan is concerned is an interesting outcome of its war against terrorism. This outcome is the groundswell in Pakistani public opinion, resonating with and across all social strata, that is increasingly calling for a strong and lasting civil-military alliance in the country which could result in a stronger polity overall. If properly negotiated by the concerned parties, this civil-military alliance could provide a strong foundation to accelerated socio-economic development of the country.

The smooth democratic and political transition in Pakistan in 2013 speaks volumes for the political maturity of the people and political parties of the country. Despite the recent political activism and oppositional vehemence, there is a fundamental consensus on the continuity of the democratic system of governance, albeit this consensus demands major changes in the way the system has been put together and has functioned previously. The realization of the need for major electoral reforms by all political parties, big or small, national or provincial, is a positive indication of the desire for concrete changes in the political and electoral system.

The Pakistani military is resolved to supporting the promotion of democracy in the country. It is also committed to helping civilian governance in areas where there is a lack of civilian capacity through building civilian institutional capacity and fostering capabilities for efficient administration, service delivery, and good governance. This resolve has been demonstrated amply in the fight against terrorism and active support for the smooth democratic political transition in May 2013.

The traditional six corridors of power in Pakistan, namely, parliament, military, judiciary, civil service or bureaucracy, corporate and business/industrial community, and media, are gradually beginning to
work together without interference and intervention into each other’s domain of application. This evolving separation of powers will enable each corridor to concentrate on improvements within its own domain and focus on means of increasing possibilities for synergy with other corridors. This focus will in turn help reinforce the development of democratic participation in the country.

Combined with the new civil-military alliance, the emergent balance between the six corridors of power, democratic continuity and far-reaching electoral reforms will benefit both Pakistan and yield major positive externalities for the region as a whole in terms of increased peace and multidimensional cooperation.

These positive trends are a fruit of appreciable demographic situation of the country. Estimates indicate that the population of Pakistan could be as high as 193 million. Of this estimated 193 million population, more than 55 percent Pakistanis are aged between 1 and 24. At least 6 people out of every 10 Pakistanis may be either 40 or less. Young female population for the same age group is around 50 percent. It has been estimated that nearly half (47.8 percent) of the total registered voters (84 million) prior to the general elections of Pakistan in 2013 were aged between 18 and 35.

Combined with this demographic window of opportunity, Pakistan has one of the highest rates of urbanization in the world at 3 percent with the highest percentage of urban population in the region at 36.2 percent after Iran (69.1 percent). Pakistan’s youth bulge and fast-paced urbanization can be turned to good account with sound educational and social policies geared for meaningful and integrated professional and social development of Pakistani youth in particular, and the nation, in general.

The youth of Pakistan are the guarantors of the long-term peace and prosperity in the country and in time they will help transform Pakistan into a moderately developed nation. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that the current government has started a number of schemes and programs for promoting the organizational and entrepreneurial talent and potential of young Pakistanis with a view to promoting self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Such measures are a step in the right direction but it is too soon to appraise their effectiveness and impact on the development of the country’s young people.

Sound educational and social policies will be still more effective and allow Pakistani youth to find meaningful avenues for the exploration of their innate and cultivated talents if there were to be integrated urban planning and development in Pakistan aimed at promoting the mobility of people, especially the young, across the length and breadth of the country.

This entails the construction of new comprehensive urban growth centers in the country. Since other countries in the region are also experiencing a not too different demographic and urbanization situation, there is a real possibility to facilitate regional mobility of talent through the creation and promotion of concatenated and coordinated regional growth-based urban integration.

This may provide the basis for a convergence of policy and decision-making in the region. Future already belongs to those countries that, amongst other things, have created and developed physical and social infrastructures to support and foster the movement of peoples, services, and goods within their borders.

In the last ten years, a lot of meaningful groundwork has been conducted in Pakistan to increase multi-modal transportation, connectivity, and communication in Pakistan. Pakistan’s National Trade Corridor (NTC), during the decade of 2000s and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, more recently, are two important concepts that can help in-land and cross-border regional integration benefitting both Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Both plans envisage a prosperous South Asia through win-win cooperation in energy, trade, transport, and industrial development further enhanced by the free circulation of talent in the region.

The successful construction of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has the special potential to dovetail with various country-specific plans for regional integration and stands to benefit the immediate neighbors of Pakistan as well as the regions surrounding South Asia. For instance, the Corridor will have, as one of its effects, the speedy construction of TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran) gas pipeline.
This shall further enhance Pakistan’s already positive record in promoting regional integration through the active membership of regional associations like South Asian Association for Regional Association (SAARC), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme of Asian Development Bank, and the observer-ship, together with India, Iran, and Afghanistan, of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Making these regional groupings work to their maximum potential should be a challenge for all member countries; sub-optimal existence of these associations should be seen as the failure of the member countries to promote meaningful multilateralism. Pakistan’s prime geographical position ideally places it in an important position to act as the key driver of regional cooperation. Healthy and horizontal multilateralism can only be enhanced by Pakistan’s position in the region.

USA and China are equally committed to the growth of peace in the region. Harmonious relations and cooperation between them will greatly help in the release of creative growth energies in the region. Due to Pakistan’s strong and good relations with both the US and China, Pakistan can play an important part in unleashing the growth potential of the region by contributing to increased cooperation between the two most important countries of the world in the regional context.

It is not realistic to ignore the regressive patterns of conflict and competition in the region when one talks of regional cooperation amongst South Asian countries but these patterns can be changed to those of collaboration and cooperation as policies are increasingly formulated in each country in such a manner that they simultaneously consider and prioritize the development of their own people as well as those of other countries in the region.

This may seem well-nigh impossible right now for South Asia but it is possible and does not belong to the realm of absolute impossibility but only time-bound, man-made, man-maintained, structural, and therefore, reversible and remediable impossibility.

One of the ways in which regional countries can formulate such beneficial policies is by considering becoming critical nodes in the land-based New Silk Road and Maritime Silk Route of China. This line of thinking has been offered here as what is called an “intuition pump” by philosophers. Intuition pumps are simple and perceptible analogues, images, and metaphors for something hard to grasp to aid thinking about difficult and stubborn concepts and things.

It may not be possible to formulate simultaneously beneficial policies as long as we keep thinking of benefits and outcomes in exclusive terms. It may still take some time for the power politics-based modes of governance in the region to realize that zero-sum route to relations amongst nations are already outdated. The longer South Asia and the adjoining regions remain stuck in this state of mind, the steeper and more arduous will be their trajectory of progress.

But a host of viable and effective ways of cooperation could be imagined once such a regional mind-set is transcended. China’s extended and powerful experience of opening up and reform provides a workable model already. South Asian cities could also begin by opening up to each other. After the fashion of global production networks (GPNs), regional production networks (RPNs) could be formed, initially focused on creating commodity chains that supply local regional markets aimed at redressing regional scarcities.

Such regional scarcities could be addressed through the promotion of free and fair regional trade. Pakistan has flourishing trade in the region with a great potential for further exponential development. To name some of Pakistan’s regional trade partners, China, India, Iran, and Afghanistan have long-established trade relations with it.

Bilateral trade between India and Pakistan has increased to USD 2.4-2.5 billion recently and can rise to as much as an estimated USD 18 billion. Pak-Iran trade stands at USD 1.2 billion and can increase up to an estimated USD 5 billion.

Pak-Afghan trade already lies between the region of USD 2.5 and 3 billion; the two neighbors have already vowed to increase the bilateral trade to USD 5 billion by 2015. China-Pakistan current trade of USD 12 billion dollar can increase to USD 20 billion.
Therefore, there is a potential for Pakistan to increase its regional trade by as much as approximately USD 30 billion in the next 4 to 5 years. Imagine the kind of prosperity the region can experience if possible increases in the bilateral trade of other countries in the region are also taken into account!

A free and fair trade area in the region will significantly increase regional trade and lead to GDP growth for the region as a whole which has not been encouraging in the recent years.

Higher education collaboration in the region is negligible. Pakistan has experienced a veritable higher education revolution starting with the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan in 2002. As a direct result of HEC’s policies, Pakistan’s tertiary enrolments grew from 401,056 in 2003 to more than 1.8 million in 2012. This was a 353-per centage increase in tertiary enrolment unprecedented in the history of the country.

The potential for further expansion of higher education in Pakistan and in the region is virtually limitless. South Asia’s teeming millions are clamoring to be educated, if not self-consciously, then by virtue of their cramped lives with no prospects for improvement in sight.

Higher education makes a very strong menu item for regional cooperation. This is so because higher education-based cooperation is essentially non-political and tends to be resilient and flourishes even in those difficult situations where diplomacy withers. The resilience of higher education can be evidenced by the fact that higher education has witnessed tremendous growth in one of the most critical and beleaguered periods of Pakistan’s history.

It also shows that heart of the Pakistani nation and its priorities are in the right place and once more breathing space is allowed by the defeat of terrorism a lot more will be achieved by Pakistan in higher education massification and quality. Higher education in Pakistan can further grow to cater for outward-bound students in other South Asian countries.

A lot of work can be done together by South Asian countries and China in this regard. US can promote regional higher education collaboration in its capacity as an important player in the region. Major cross-border initiatives and programs can be started which will allow the students of one country to study in another country. This could also lead to an integrated network of centers of excellence in the region. Increased regional student retention will help counter brain drain, promote in-region brain circulation, and will have visible regional development and growth effects.

The same could take place in the field of health and medicine, although medical tourism is quite popular and more developed that higher education cooperation in the region but more can be done to institutionalize this positive trend.

S&T-based cooperation and innovation-based collaboration can also pave the way for greater cooperation across other fields in future. Science park cooperation in the world has already contributed to promoting innovation in different countries. Such cooperation shall also benefit South Asia.

With a host of social problems like poverty, disease, hunger, and homelessness prevalent in South Asia, the diffusion of innovation across South Asian societies and their most neglected sectors will help alleviate the plight of the South Asian peoples. In this regard, India, Iran, and Pakistan can initially cooperate and then open up to all South Asian states. This is because these three countries have a relatively more developed S&T base. India and Iran have relatively well-established science parks. Pakistan has also taken concrete steps to build university-hosted and non-university science parks.

Common understanding amongst governments in the region to promote science-based cooperation will help state and non-state innovation actors to come together not in individual countries alone but across the region too. It is important to mention here that localized versions of Silicon Valley alone will fail to have wider regional impact which is important for the long-term development of South Asia.

Along with the development of local and domestic strengths in science, technology, and innovation, the need to network local innovation spaces will continue to be felt. The next step of building science-based cities and regions in South Asia could be relatively easily accomplished if there were already some measure of regional innovation collaboration in the region. The idea of city-to-city interaction in South Asia, discussed above, could adequately integrate
innovation cooperation as one of its planks.

The last decade has also brought a significant ICT-related transformation in South Asia as internet and mobile phone use has spread to more and more urban populations in the region. This has led to a sudden growth in associated infrastructure and business required for ensuring their continued use in the region. However, exports of domestically produced ICT goods of South Asian countries have lagged far behind their consumption, as compared to fast industrializing nations in Asia-Pacific. This is an area in which a lot could be achieved with promoting government-to-government and business-to-business contact.

The region also has a very big market for common cultural and creative products. With proper consultative deliberation and action, tolerably uniform cultural products acceptable to the diverse cultures of South Asia could be produced for local cultural consumption. This shall go a long way in creating political, diplomatic, and of course, economic convergence in the region. Regional groupings like SAARC and ECO should be activated to make coordinated policies for scoring gains in the sphere of ICT good exports as well as cultural and creative industries.

What is holding back the progress of the region is the time-honored tradition of linear power politics amongst nations. There is a dire need for the region as a whole to transcend this mode of conducting their international relations. The benefits of globalization and integration of world economy should not bypass South Asia.

With enough good sense, good will, sense of justice, and fair play, any casus belli can be defused into a situation where peace can have a chance. Interestingly, the 21st century has been dubbed “the Asian Century”. It will truly become Asia’s century if political and economic power not only shifts from the West to the East but also stays in the East.

In order to devise ways to make power stay in Asia in the longer run, one needs to ponder why this power shift is taking place in the first place. Based on the understanding thus derived, Asia will, therefore, have to design new ways of conducting international relations in the widest sense possible as it may not be too far-fetched to say that one of the reasons the power is shifting may be due to the inherent shortcomings of the international system of politics amongst nations which is based on the lop-sided accumulation of power.

Without a peaceful and prosperous South Asia, this century may well belong to Asia but will remain checkered at best. There is a room for multiple win-win scenarios in the region which can equally benefit all the regional players. It is pertinent to mention here that the efforts of Global Think Tank Network (GTTN) at the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) are based upon strong analytical and independent professional work to provide the decision-makers the options for prioritizing the action program for national socioeconomic development, including regional cooperation. In doing this, GTTN is building multiple cooperative nodes, including strong linkages with academia and think tanks across the world.

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) enjoys global clout in policy advisory; GTTN represents progressive and moderate Pakistan as a responsible citizen of global community. There is a firm and nuanced understanding of global development dynamics at GTTN which is committed to supporting the positive trends of development, democracy, globalization, and modernization. Cooperation between IISS and GTTN will be very useful for promoting peace and prosperity in the region.

Problems like poverty, urban-rural asymmetry, environmental degradation, terrorism, internal displacement caused by conflict, natural disaster and even mega-development, and law and order are sticky regional problems. It will be too hard for any country to tackle these challenges alone. Regional policy frameworks with coordinated action amongst nations in the region will achieve better and lasting results.

Cultivation of common and shared goals centered on economic growth, development, and generation of business, jobs and livelihoods will help the region transcend the narrow security mindset which has been based so far on different binaries like “Af-Pak” and “Indo-Pak”.

Looking past the path-dependent competitive pursuit and aggrandizement of power in international relations will allow South Asia that respite in which
things can be seen in their true perspective. It will then be seen that all shades of instability, insecurity, terrorism, conflict, and underdevelopment primarily originate from this obsessive pursuit of power. It is, therefore, about time that comparative and competitive advantages were replaced with collaborative advantage in the region.
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