



Chasing the Holy Grail of Peace in South Asia

The world seems to be slowly becoming enveloped in the pall of gloom and doom. The confirmation of the same is all around us if we just take a look around us. Against the background of the globe reeling under the massive problem of recession and stagflation, the global peace index has also been worsening, more so in the wake of increasing threat of sinister forces of terror like ISIS and Taliban. And the situation is no different for the countries of South Asia.

If the behemoth India seems to be grappling with a negative economic scenario along with the problems of terrorism and left-wing radicalism, the scenario *ipso facto* applies for the other countries of South Asia. The Nawaz Sharif Government in Pakistan is already seized with the increasing terrorist menace in the country, led by a resurgent Taliban. Myanmar and Maldives are undergoing political transitions, which have serious implications for the future of the two countries. While Bangladesh grapples with a 'Shahbag' movement for assertion of libertarian values, Sri Lanka is still coming to the terms with the aftermath of the alleged excesses caused during the annihilation drive of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil *Ealam*, not to speak of the global pressure for a democratic resolution of the Tamil problem in the island state. Afghanistan is also somehow reluctantly readying itself for the final departure of the US forces to take the reins of national security all by itself.

While all these appear quite different and unrelated problems, but the truth remains that they are very much interconnected and intertwined. After all, we live in a globalised world of complex interdependence. A problem in one country today does have its positive or negative impact in other countries. And unless and until we accept this fact and deal with the same in a synergised manner, we are doomed to be accursed with many more without any success with those already existing.

While the 1990s saw the end of the Cold War everywhere else, it actually saw a ratcheting up of the same in South Asia, if defence expenditures are any indication to go by. With the

drawing down of the Iron Curtains on internecine and debilitating Cold War, one expected the winds of positivity to blow away all the mistrust and distrust in South Asia but the same never happened. And this is truer with regards to the two principal protagonists namely India and Pakistan between whom the chasm of mutual distrust seems to be growing by the day. It was not very long ago when the Islamabad-based Mahbub ul Haq Foundation pointed out that with if India and Pakistan were to reduce their defence expenditure even by a percentage point, they could very well take care of the big gaping holes in their social welfare programmes for health and education. But the fact remains that many Track Two diplomacy efforts involving people-to-people contacts along both sides of the border notwithstanding, the hawks and hardliners seem to be winning the day.

And the bigger players in our neighbourhood and those at the top of the international pecking order are not helping matters by their selfish and motivated interventions aimed at guarding their own vested interests. The bigger players embroiled in the international power game of one-upmanship and in a bid to keep their massive military-industrial complex well-oiled, deliberately try to keep the conflicts zones of the world alive and on the boil. And the India–Pakistan conflicts are no different. With the heavy loss of precious human lives, they are still locked in belligerent posturing with the overall quality of life suffering in both the countries.

With Pakistan still vowing to bleed a democratic India through thousand cuts and continuing its proxy war against us, the situation looks bleak unless the resurgent democratic forces in the former assert and prevail over a deeply entrenched militarist mindset, there does not seem to be much hope for a new beginning. While India conferred the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status on Pakistan more than a decade back, Pakistan is still to take a call on that. While South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was supposed to be a reality more than a decade back, it is still beholden to the sanguinary rivalry of the two titans with heavy financial losses accruing to every country of the Indian Sub-Continent in terms of tariffs, taxes and duties. The trade, which could occur across the border in an organised manner, now happens through a third country or in an underhand manner (read smuggling) resulting in manifold jacked up prices for the citizens.

While it is more than advisable for the leadership of the two countries to continuously engage each other to resolve the outstanding issues including intractable boundary disputes, the *Tulbul* barrage project, the *Siachen* problem, cross-border terrorism and such other cognate issues, the big daddies of international politics should also desist from backroom meddling into the longstanding disputes between the two classical rivals. The active peddling of their selfish interests stems from the presumed apprehension of a rising South Asia (read India) to threaten their super status and is targeted at tying India down to South Asia.

But the reigning and rising super powers have to understand that they can't flourish amid a sea of problems surrounding them. They can no longer continue to be an island of affluence without bothering about the similar problems elsewhere. The international division of labour is so entrenched that an unresolved problem in one country comes back to haunt others, more so if these countries happen to be as huge and as important as India and Pakistan. They

also have to understand that the luxurious quality of life in their own countries shall suffer heavily if these countries continue to remain disturbed as also exemplified by the growing tentacles of Taliban which is an offshoot of a disturbed Afghanistan and which has hurt the rich North time and again with unceasing regularity.

Like the fictional cat eating the entire bread of the two fighting monkeys, we should not allow outsiders to sit in judgement over our fate. While there definitely is a need for a positive facilitating role for big players to ensure peace in South Asia, we should also see the writing on the wall in our own enlightened interests otherwise it would be too late. In fine, the economic and social prosperity in South Asia is very much beholden to the successful conflict and dispute resolution between India and Pakistan. Other members of the South Asian countries are just awaiting a positive outcome to get onto the prosperity bandwagon but we two have got to come forward to show the way forward.

We can no longer afford to move forward with our hands and legs tied down by the baggage of history, not to speak of that proverbial millstone and albatross round our neck. We shall require ourselves to tear off and throw away that millstone of distrust and untie ourselves through positive engagements. If England and France can come together after more than a hundred years of internecine and sanguinary conflicts, if US and Russia could come together after a bloody Cold War of more than four decades, if all the regions of the world are benefiting through mutual economic engagements a la APEC, ASIAN, NAFTA, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and European Union, can't we also come together to make a new beginning for our people. If we don't learn from history, we shall be doomed to repeat the same at our own cost and history shall not forgive us. Let's see the writing on the wall.

Salient Points

- South Asia including India is grappling with the problems of terrorism and economy.
- A problem in one country today does have its positive or negative impact in other countries.
- Bigger players in our neighbourhood are not helping matters by their selfish and motivated interventions
- SAFTA was envisaged a decade back, yet to see the light of the day.
- Indo-Pak should continuously engage each other to resolve the outstanding issues.
- Reigning and rising super powers have to understand that they can't flourish amid a sea of problems surrounding them.
- If we don't learn from history, we shall be doomed to repeat the same at our own cost.

Glossary

Pall: anything that covers

Ratcheting: a steady progression up or down

Internecine: mutually destructive

Belligerent: of war-like character

Posturing: a mental or spiritual attitude

Sanguinary: bloody

Cognate: related by birth

Albatross: something burdensome