European Peacebuilding

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When is South Asia going to learn?

Can Peace be built in a society? Yes, the process of accomplishing prerequisites and sowing seeds for sustainable peace is known as Peacebuilding. The European model of Peacebuilding, driven by the core liberal values advocates for mutually beneficial partnerships, interdependence, democracy, structures of peace and intergovernmental liberal institutions. Europe, economically and socially devastated by the two world wars, had an across-the-board realization of the horrors and price of prolonged instability and conflicts. The collective efforts of key political figures of the time including Sir Winston Churchill, Konrad Adenauer and Paul-Henri Spaak led to the

formation of the Council of Europe in 1949, aiming to preserve human rights and democracy. What the European leaders envisaged for posterity in 1949, South Asian leaders failed to do so in the 21st century. South Asia has had at least 7 decades of protracted crises and conflicts.

With a population of more than 2 billion people including millions under poverty, Major South Asian states including Pakistan and India spend billions of dollars on militaries and nuclear arsenal. This is because both nations live under preconceived notions of existential threats, mixed with hyper-nationalism and religious radicalism, this is what sells in elections as well because fear always works. Pakistan, almost turned into an authoritarian security state, with an IMF debt of more than 100 billion dollars, still decides to keep the highest number of nuclear warheads after China and defence to GDP ratio in South Asia.

The fault lines in South Asia include geographical disputes, cross-border infiltration and religious/ideological conflicts. The territorial disputes between Pakistan, India, China and Afghanistan have been a consistent source of contention, and have led to various phases of heightened tensions. The states involved have suffered more losses as a result of these tensions simultaneously than they would have gained by winning the conflicts. Basically, the policymakers in South Asia, particularly the subcontinent, have failed to evolve with modern diplomacy and the concept of soft power. This leads to the refusal of the fact that one can utilize or benefit from a tract by means other than conquering it. Meanwhile, in Europe, territorial disputes like the town of Olivenza, Gibraltar and Rockfall Island still exist but the states involved, conceding the importance of peace and stability, chose to seize the status quo.

What to do?

It is time-tested that increasing people-to-people interaction can mark a turning point in such scenarios, just as it did in Europe. This serves as a confidence-building measure and enables the common man to dive beneath media-constructed stereotypes and "Us" vs "Them" framing, people start highlighting commonalities and building personal connections. Student and Cultural exchange programs, and encouraged religious tourism can be highly effective, as India has multiple Muslim Shrines while Pakistan controls religious sites of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

It is only a matter of time before South Asian leadership understands that no country is in a state to militarily annex any disputed region and assent to the status quo as international borders, perhaps just for a decade, to focus on the economy. This would open multiple doors of cooperation and connectivity from Indo-Pak-Afg trade to Indian access to the energy-rich Central Asia and Iran. For it to be sustainable the cooperation has to be, what is known in Peace studies as "Mutually beneficial partnerships" and "Positive sum game". The aforementioned scenario will naturally make

cross-border infiltration and terrorism undesirable, as why would one want to disrupt peace at a place, when they do business there?

But all this depends on the probability of sense prevailing in the leadership across South Asia at the same moment, which in current circumstances and status quo looks like a fairytale. But with rising populations, frustrating means of resources and the emergence of common threats like climate change, it is high time for the academia and youth of South Asia to accentuate the Cost-Benefit analysis of conflict situations and push for alternative solutions.

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