

The India-Pakistan imbroglio

Can a bioregional approach end decades of conflict?

31 MAY 2025, ASHISH KOTHARI



India-Pakistan conflict has threatened ecosystems crucial for South Asia's water security @ Ashish Kothari

In the first two weeks of May, I was in Ladakh, not far from the armed conflict that occurred then between India and Pakistan. We had sirens, shutdowns, and blackouts and were bombarded with daily news of drone attacks, of defensive and offensive maneuvers, and of people dying or being injured. As I write this, there is a ceasefire (reportedly and ironically mediated by the USA, one of the worst violators of peace in history!), a welcome relief. Hopefully it will last long enough to give a chance to the two countries to negotiate a lasting era of peace, if not a mutually agreeable solution to the decades-long issue of national borders with the region of Kashmir at the epicenter.

In the current context, a vision I wrote about a couple of months back of South Asia having achieved an era of bioculture-regionalism¹, securing ecological peace and social justice by 2100, seems very far-fetched. It was already somewhat utopian and seems even more so now. But then, however impossible it may appear, surely this is also the time when such a vision becomes even more crucial, providing inspirational goals to work towards? It is not very different from the dreams and plans that

movements of independence have had when struggling against brutal colonial regimes or what surely a few visionaries must have imagined of the future of Europe even in the midst of a 'world war' that was claiming the lives of millions. At the time these were dreamt of, they would have seemed impossible.

The India-Pakistan region: a view in 2100

Building on the article mentioned above (which was based on visioning processes undertaken by the South Asia Bioregionalism Working² Group and a couple of us as editors of the book 'Alternative Futures: India Unshackled'³), here are key points of what the India-Pakistan region of South Asia could look like in 2100:

- Recognizing the enormous importance of ecological, cultural, and economic flows in the region, and having engaged in a series of dialogues and peace-building processes, armed forces on both sides have been withdrawn, and fences taken down.
- Obstructions to rivers that are shared by multiple nations, including Pakistan and India, have been removed, and the Indus Water Treaty renegotiated to ensure equitable distribution of water for the tens of millions of people dependent on the rivers in the Indus basin, as well as to re-establish their ecological integrity, thriving of their biodiversity, and respect as entities with their own rights.
- Wildlife populations earlier threatened by conflict, stoppage of migration routes, and habitat destruction have rebounded as ecological flows are re-established and the rights of nature enshrined in custom and law; these include animals like snow leopards, black and brown bears, markhors, and Indus dolphins, as well as threatened plant species.
- The entire border area has been declared a Peace Park, one of the longest in the world. This is largely governed and managed by mountain, desert, and coastal communities, empowered by relevant laws that recognize their collective territories, with help from civil society groups and government bodies when necessary. Such communities have become thriving settlements (sedentary and nomadic), with many young people who had migrated out in the early 2000s having returned to take up dignified hybrid livelihoods combining traditional occupations (farming, pastoralism, fishing, crafts, etc.) with new ones (ecotourism, information services, trade, small manufacturing, etc.).
- Some old trade routes (e.g., part of the Silk Route) have reopened, with traders from local communities taking goods (and news!) back and forth, using sustainable modes of mobility.

- Hyper-nationalism based on hard nation-state boundaries has given way to multiple civilizational identities, respected as part of the diversity that makes South Asia so dynamic, and based on both traditional ethnic identities and also new ones based on the intermixing of cultures.

These remarkable transformations are a part of similar trends across South Asia as a whole, as also in many other parts of the world, including what were once hard boundaries between India, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (glimpses of this are contained in the article mentioned above).

Can we get anywhere close to this vision?

Without underestimating the enormous hurdles in the way of achieving such a vision, I'd like to stress that it is not an impossibility. Regions with conflicts as serious or worse have managed to find resolutions, each unique to suit the local context but with some common features such as constant and regular dialogue, neutral forums of arbitration such as the UN or a group of third-party countries, citizens' participation and institutions that can put pressure on governments, integration of economic and social objectives into the plan for peace and co-existence, etc.

Europe through the first half of the 20th century was ridden with conflicts and two wars that killed millions of people, but it then forged a union that did away with visas and embarked on regional economic cooperation (it appears to have lost its way more recently, and below I'll mention what I think are two strong reasons for this). Ecuador and Peru fought over territorial disputes for two centuries before agreeing to an accord in the late 1990s, one that has prevented further conflicts until now. So why can't India and Pakistan achieve a resolution?

Several factors and steps would be crucial in this. Given the half-century of attrition and the failure of successive governments on both sides to achieve a resolution, third-party mediation appears to be important. The UN would be the most preferable—certainly not nations like the USA, which have a terrible record of violence of their own and who would be eyeing their own economic and political interests in any act of mediation.

The Shimla Agreement of 1972, in which both countries had agreed to work out their differences and not in any way violate each other's territorial integrity, states that "the two countries are resolved to settle their differences by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means mutually agreed upon between them." So third-party mediation or arbitration is not ruled out (though this has been the stance especially of India while insisting that Kashmir is an internal matter, which it may need to reconsider).

However, a major complication in this is the weakness Pakistan's government has vis-à-vis its army (it has even been under military rule several times), its proclivity to violate the Shimla Agreement, and its support or encouragement to organizations that have committed acts of 'terror' in India. Bilateral negotiations or negotiations with mediators will have their work cut out to deal with this issue.

As a build-up and foundation for this, a bioregional perspective backed by strong people's advocacy and dialogue process is crucial. Such a perspective, key elements of which are in the article mentioned above, has to integrate the ecological, cultural, and economic uniqueness and fragility of the border areas between the two countries—from the high Himalayas to the hot deserts of the Rann of Kachchh and Thar, and the Sir Creek and contiguous portions of the Arabian Sea. All of these characteristics have suffered immensely due to the conflicts—migration paths for pastoralists and wildlife have been cut off, fishers on both sides have been 'illegalized' for venturing into areas they have traditionally used, and ancient economic trade routes and cultural flows have stopped.

Many Indian citizens don't realize how much of their cultural and food traditions have evolved in dialogue with what people from Central Asia brought across what is now Pakistan. Many or most are not even aware that the terms 'Hindustan' and 'Hindu' come from the Sanskrit name (Sindhu) of the river Indus, the basin of which is now under such contention. Many are not even conversant with the colonial roots of the divide, which need to be recalled to dispel the myth that there is something inevitable in the conflict.

Gaining and making widely available an understanding of these flows and connections across Pakistan and India would be a foundation for people-to-people and intergovernmental dialogue. Only when 'both sides' know how the lives and livelihoods of tens of millions of people, and indeed the long-term security of South Asia as a whole, are dependent on the re-establishment of such flows will they get priority over short-term considerations. Such an understanding could be built on long-standing knowledge, science, and wisdom of communities living in the border areas, combined with insights and information that modern or formal science can provide.

It would also be built on the recognition of the respect for nature as its own right and of 'earthy governance⁴,' in which humans take decisions in consultation with the rest of nature. These collaborations amongst humans and with nature would be especially crucial for dealing with the uncertainties of climate change, needing rapid responses based on real-time feedback from what is happening on the ground.

Possibly most important will be a high level of sustained people's pressure on both governments. This can happen through movements of local communities worst affected by decades of conflict (and by actions such as upstream countries blocking river and silt flows), supported by civil society groups working on social and conservation issues, academic institutions that can provide some knowledge back-up, legal practitioners who can take matters to court if necessary, that part of the

media that is sensitive enough not to exploit the situation for ratings and pandering to shrill hyper-nationalism, and sensitive sections of the political and bureaucratic establishment.

Youth groups, linking across borders, could play a crucial role in this; children could mobilize to demand that elders who make up governments behave more responsibly towards their future. In moments of daydreaming, I even imagine thousands of youth from both sides of the border marching towards each other, demanding that their respective governments and armies work out a peaceful resolution.

Equally important is the rise of moderate voices from within the major religions of the region, especially Hinduism and Islam, to challenge and counter hard-liners, accompanied by widespread public education to dispel misunderstandings about the fundamental nature of these religions. There are a number of syncretic traditions across South Asia whose inspiring stories could be highlighted, for instance, functionaries of each religion looking after one another's places of⁵ worship or people of multiple faiths collectively celebrating religious festivals.

Even during the dastardly attacks in Pahalgam, many Muslims helped tourists (regardless of religion), risking their own lives (a pony ride operator even died in the process), and subsequently prominent Muslim organizations condemned the attacks. The heroically sane stand of Himanshi Narwal, wife of one of the naval officers slain in the attack, asserting that Muslims and Kashmiris should not be blamed and appealing for peace, should be a beacon of hope amidst a tsunami of irrational hatred that was spread by hard-liners after the attack.

Educational institutions also need to play a crucial role in creating mindsets of coexistence in the youth, especially to counter the efforts of hate-mongers. Greater intercultural understanding could also be generated with responsible, ecologically sensitive, community-managed tourism and exchange visits in border areas. A fuller understanding of history will also show that in all the major religions, there have been moments and leaders who have promoted such interfaith coexistence, as well as those who have tried to destroy or undermine it. Hard-liners, at times backed by the state, in both India and Pakistan have distorted this history, uniformly demonizing their minority religions.

Since Kashmir is a principal bone of contention (with religious undertones) and a reason or excuse for a lot of the cross-border terror actions, its territorial integrity is an important part of the resolution. For a long time, and especially in the last few years, the Indian government has looked at Kashmir as a 'security issue,' making it one of the world's most heavily militarized regions, and never seriously addressing local rights, demands, and aspirations. Since the 2019 revocation of Kashmir's special status in the Indian Constitution, the feeling of second-class treatment amongst its residents has only increased. Reversing the sense of alienation⁶ is absolutely essential if a lasting solution is to be found.

This includes honoring the long-standing demand for self-determination, including a referendum or plebiscite overseen by neutral mediation, with assured arrangements for its security if indeed it opts for autonomy from both Pakistan and India (especially against takeover by China). Viable options for dignified employment of its people, especially youth, also have to be promoted—and there are many of these, including combinations of traditional occupations with new ones like community-led tourism, decentralized manufacturing, and services that respect and build on the biocultural region's ecological and cultural uniqueness. The area's extreme militarization, coupled with frustration amongst the youth and the recent opening up of its lands for external exploitation, has to be reversed. Most important, the quiet dignity of its people, which (along with generous hospitality, its justly famed *mehmaan-nawazi*) I have witnessed firsthand on trips there, has to be respected.

At the current juncture, such transformations seem like a pipe dream, with advocates of harmony, genuine autonomy, and so on pushed to the sidelines. But history is replete with examples of people's movements cropping up and pushing for dramatic changes that even a few years before would have seemed unthinkable—including, for instance, the fall of dictators, the defeat of powerful colonial empires, the extension of universal suffrage to include women, or the re-establishment of ethnic and religious coexistence. Nature, too, sometimes expresses its own agency, such as with dam bursts and cloudbursts, demonstrating that humans are not necessarily the masters of the planet. We have forgotten how to listen to it, but this ability can be relearned, especially from those Indigenous (Adivasi) farmers, fishers, forest dwellers, and pastoralists who still have it in their ways of life.

I am fully aware that achieving a peaceful, biocultural vision for the India-Pakistan region is not likely to happen in the lifetime of my generation (I'm now in my 60s!). But by 2100 – with several baby steps to start with now – why not? Humanity is capable of miraculous transformations – so why not envision one for South Asia's most troubled region?

References

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An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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2. Most of Kashmir's people want peace, secure livelihoods, and harmony - not war @ Ashish Kothari
3. The Indus River originates in the Tibetan Plateau, near Lake Manasarovar in China
4. Pastoral communities across border areas are worst sufferers of conflict @ Ashish Kothari
5. The Indus flows through the Ladakh region in northern India, carving deep gorges and valleys
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