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Pakistan-Bangladesh: Time to reconcile, rebuild and resurge

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10 August 2020

Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan

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For too long, Pakistan and Bangladesh have suffered from the vicissitudes of a relationship that is marked by intense attraction between the two nations and, at times, feeling of agony rooted in painful events of the past. Attraction is natural and radiates from the core of shared history, religion, culture and common struggle against religious majoritarianism and British colonialism. Sense of loss and associated pain are legacies of the events of 1971. Time has come for the leadership of the two countries to break the stalemate and gradually put bilateral relations on a track that actually moves on its own steam.

Pakistan's creation, in large part, became possible because of the vision and struggle of the politically conscious, educated and sophisticated leadership of Muslim East Bengal. It was they who first fully comprehended the benefits of modern education and training and produced first South Asian Muslim graduates from the western education institutions. They wholeheartedly joined Sir Syed's movement of mass education and later played a major role in the creation of All India Muslim League to fight for the rights of Muslims in South Asia.

Unfinished Memoire, personal diaries of Sheikh Mujib ur Rehman published by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina mentions that while All India Muslim League had supported Suharwardy-Bose Pact of keeping Bengal united leaving its future status to the wishes of Bengalis, leadership of the then Indian National Congress particularly Vallabhahi Patel wanted otherwise. They wanted not only to divide Bengal but also keep Calcutta for India. No wonder, Patel is admired by the present day anti-Muslim Hindu fascists and terrorists such as RSS and its subsidiaries and their leaders.

Unfortunately, since the beginning there were many inspired and genuine political issues between the two wings of Pakistan. The politicians failed to address

those political issues and chasm between them led to the tragedy of 1971. After the creation of Bangladesh, both Sheikh Mujib ur Rehman and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto began the healing of the wounds. The people in both the countries rejoiced at the prospects of closer relations between the two nations. The relations have since been on track despite some obstacles jutting out of the past tragedies.

Bilateral relations between the two countries cannot remain hostage to the bitterness generated in the past. We all must act maturely in the interest of our peoples and in deference of their desire for closer relations. Statesmanship lies in rising above all emotions and reaching out to each other for peace and friendship and for healing the decades old wounds. We all must mourn for all those who left us during the tragic events of the past and must express our gratitude to God for what we still have with us i.e. goodwill and affection for each other. Let us work together to rebuild, reconcile and resurge. Both Prime Minister Imran Khan and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are historically fit to kick start this process. However, the legacy of reconciliation and friendship has to be passed on to the succeeding generations of politicians too.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has many a time expressed his deep affection and respect for Bangladesh. He has appreciated its economic achievements and always wished Bangladesh well in its endeavours. In October last year, he called Prime Minister Hasina in order to wish her a speedy recovery from an illness. He once again called Prime Minister Hasina on 22 July to discuss the impact of Covid-19 and the situation after floods in Bangladesh. During conversation, the Prime Minister briefed Prime Minister Hasina about the situation in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir as well as exchanged views on the transforming regional security situation.

As regards Jammu and Kashmir, Late Sheikh Mujib ur Rehman was also aware of the Indian injustices to the Kashmiri people. In his diaries, he has recognized the importance of just resolution of the issue for durable peace and security.

Today, it is not merely Jammu and Kashmir that is being targeted by the Hindu fascist government of RSS-BJP. It is the whole Muslim community in India that is at the target of Modi's bigoted thugs. All this has implications for both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In order to move forward, the two sides need to start frequent exchanges at all levels. They must revive high level political consultations bilaterally and, as in the past, strengthen collaboration at multilateral fora.

Restrictions on visas need to be removed. Pakistan has already upgraded Bangladesh to category A as far as visa is considered. A similar action by Bangladesh will go a long way in creating goodwill and building confidence.

There is a need to promote people to people contacts too. The two countries can begin by promoting cooperation between their respective business communities. For this, new platforms can be established. Similarly, collaboration in other relevant fields such as culture, pharmaceuticals, fisheries and agriculture as well as consultations on strategic issues can be enhanced.

SAARC is an important forum which is dysfunctional due to India's subversive attitude towards regional cooperation. Pakistan and Bangladesh may work together to bring SAARC back on track by discussing ways and means to promote regional collaboration including by incorporating collaboration on BRI projects in it. China, in any case, maintains productive and mutually beneficial relations with almost all regional countries.

The telephone call has opened new avenues. The leadership on both sides should now tread steadily along this path and with a sense of commitment to better bilateral relations. Let the two countries move past wounds and hurts and let the two nations build a relationship based on mutual respect and commonality of vision for peace and prosperity within South Asia and beyond.

**The writer is a senior researcher at Islamabad Policy Institute.*