One hundred years after Indian and Pakistani independence, a region-wide compact and community will have turned one of the world’s most explosive theatres into a peaceable, prosperous commonwealth.

Following a series of bilateral meetings between India’s and Pakistan’s prime ministers and foreign ministers during the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the Maldives last fall, Indian leaders and journalists remarked on the shrinking trust deficit between the two nuclear-armed rivals.

The era of decolonization began with the twinned independence of Pakistan and India in August 1947. Their sibling rivalry has sabotaged India’s tryst with its global destiny as a major power, and also Pakistan’s ambition to be the leading light of the Islamic world. Will 2047 mark 100 years of solitude and impasse in their bilateral relations – relations on which hinge the fates of all other countries and peoples in their neighbourhood? Or can they surprise the world by sublimating their conflict to the vision of a shared regional future of prosperity and stability?

As a region, South Asia is defined by sharp natural borders and topography, as well as by shared histories and considerable economic and administrative coherence inherited from the British Raj. Yet regionalism was progressively weakened after the departure of the British, as the independent countries went their separate ways – politically, economically and in foreign policies. To date, inter-state tensions have inhibited the rise of region-wide South Asian identity, institutions and interactions.

The South Asian region comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with at least Afghanistan and Myanmar as ringside observers. Its combined population represents one-fifth of the world’s people. It is also a population characterized by poverty, illiteracy and low life expectancy. South Asian countries do not fare well on these measures even by developing-country standards. Most are also wracked by problems of internal security and economic scarcity that threaten them with political destabilization and territorial disintegration. The region is home to one of the most concentrated groupings of fragile and failing states. Yet, on the positive side, South Asia too has been infected by the general worldwide movement toward greater democratization and market freedoms – even if the global financial crisis may well instill some hesitation on the latter front.

India by itself accounts for some three-quarters of South Asia’s total population, land area and economic
product. This has a triple consequence. First and most obviously, India is the natural hegemon of South Asia. Second, other countries find it difficult to imagine existential threats to India. Third, if India were ever to suffer from state failure and breakup, the impacts on all other countries in the neighbourhood would be catastrophic as well.

India’s position in the region is distinctive also for the fact that all other states – save the Maldives – share a land or maritime border with India and not with any other state. This too has three important consequences. First, all other states have every prospect of strained relations with India, but little chance to develop friction in their limited relations with each other. Second, having India as a common problem neighbour encourages the other states to team up against the regional giant. Third, India is open to major social and political forces that may at any point consume any one of its neighbours. Whether it be civil war in Afghanistan, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh and Pakistan, or Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka, the turmoil will spill over into India.

By size, location and power, India is and will always be the principal actor – indeed, the hub, with spokes running to all other states – in South Asian international relations. To be sure, India has not been free of difficulties in bilateral relations with any of its neighbours: demographic overspills from Bangladesh (the latter itself can be flooded by refugees from Myanmar); the flow of goods across India from landlocked Nepal; the use of water from shared river systems with Pakistan, the knock-on effects of ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka; maritime boundary disputes with Bangladesh and Pakistan; and the perennial problems in general relations with Pakistan in particular.

India has considerable military capacity to influence the outcomes of varying levels of conflict in South Asia. But it lacks the economic underpinning and diplomatic finesse to bend regional affairs to its strategic will. Consequently, its self-appointed managerial role in the region remains flawed. Its aspirations to regional leadership are continually thwarted by the stubborn refusal of other South Asian countries to learn the art of followership. The smaller countries, for instance, were especially emboldened to challenge the preeminence of India by the humiliation inflicted on the country by China in 1962.

The fact that India has sometimes had disputes with all of its neighbours simultaneously suggests that India itself might be the centre and cause of some regional disputes. Anxious to project itself on the world stage, the country has at times appeared irritated by regional obstacles in its path to acquiring the status of a world power. In a remarkable tribute to flawed foreign policy, the country finds itself without a network of useful friendships in its own region. Instead of realizing that its potential lies first and foremost in its neighbourhood, India has frightened all of its neighbours at one time or another.

The search for a regional security structure remains elusive. Clearly, the pivot of South Asian regional geopolitics is the India-Pakistan rivalry. On the one hand, Pakistan is everyone’s favourite basket-case – constantly on the brink of state failure and collapse, and suspected of complicity in cross-border terrorism. Its bloody birth, the history of unremitting hostility with India, the bitter legacy of the loss of its eastern half to India-assisted secession in 1971, the decades of civil war with international entrapments in Afghanistan, the military capture of the commanding heights of national public policy – economic and security-related – and cultivation of Islamists as instruments of state-sponsored terrorism, the rise of Islamism as a global phenomenon, and the stranglehold of corruption on the country’s institutions, have together yielded an extremely fractured society and polity. Having said all of this, Pakistan has a middle class that is as well-educated as India’s, a vigorous and inquisitive print and electronic media, an independent and assertive judiciary, and per-capita income that is comparable to that of India.

South Asia’s diffidence in moving toward open economic regionalism stands in marked contrast to the trend toward free-trade agreements in several parts of the world. For all South Asian countries, prosperity will
require the flattening of regional borders, free markets, property rights, the rule of law, the state limited to its elemental functions of underwriting the public goods of law and order, health, education, physical infrastructure, and defence and foreign affairs, and an abandonment of dirigisme.

Like the dramatic changes in Europe after 1945 that converted historical enemies Britain, France and Germany into firm allies within robust institutional structures, the turnaround in India-Pakistan relations will have to be based on a grim appreciation of the costs of continued enmity, as weighed against the gains from cooperative friendship. Prime Ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh both showed an almost religious belief in the need for peace with Pakistan. In this sense, they sometimes found themselves ahead of their officials and people in the risks that they were prepared to take in order to reassure Pakistan about India’s peaceful intentions.

For positive trends to be initiated, accelerated and consolidated, the key Pakistani leaders will have to recognize that India’s gestures are based on self-confidence and goodwill – not weakness. The continued deterioration in, and economic cost of, Pakistan’s domestic security situation (the jihadists challenging the state, as well as worsening relations with the US and other Western powers over Pakistan’s unwillingness-cum-inability to end Pakistan-sourced attacks in Afghanistan) will sap the country’s resolve to keep alive the enmity with India. Put simply, both the military and the civilian leaders must conclude that the long-term gains – national, regional and international – from reciprocating India’s goodwill gestures will be higher than the losses suffered from taking on the jihadists and Islamists. Unable to fight its many enemies on all fronts at once, Pakistan will instead choose to learn to live at peace and in friendship with India.

But let us now imagine the year 2047 – 100 years after Indian and Pakistani independence. First and most obviously, there will be a complete, region-wide economic union: a single market with no tariff or non-tariff barriers to the movement of goods, services, capital and labour; a common external tariff; South Asia-wide regulatory norms, instruments and institutions to ensure a level playing field for producers, manufacturers and consumers; cross-recognition of qualifications, skills and certifications, with common professional governing bodies for tradesmen, engineers, doctors and lawyers; domestic supplier status for businesses in procurement tenders for all countries, regardless of the country of origin of the firms bidding for contracts – except perhaps in such sensitive sectors as defence; comparable labour and industrial laws and policies among regional countries in order to facilitate entry and exit of workers and firms, with market forces determining business decisions; and so on. There will be a common regional currency – most likely called the rupee. A powerful and independent South Asian Central Bank will have the responsibility to ensure that member countries’ monetary and fiscal policies do not stray outside of agreed bands. There will also be tough enforcement of competition and anti-corruption laws and norms, and indeed common prudential and surveillance instruments to stop the market from running amok, as it did in the US and Europe from 2008.

Economic integration will spur market efficiencies, scale economies, specialization based on factor and other comparative advantages, and a shift to more productive, innovative and balanced national economies. By 2047, therefore, all South Asian countries will fare very well in the World Bank’s ease-of-doing-business rankings. The size of the aggregate regional market will attract considerable investment capital; and the advanced infrastructure, good governance norms and institutions, and highly-skilled, educated and mobile labour force will underpin rising productivity and prosperity. At the same time, government policies will have kept in check inequalities between individuals (bottom- and top-ten percentiles), groups (castes, religions, regions) and countries. In other words, South Asia will have a region-wide free market combined with a social welfare ethos that provides affordable social security safety nets for the poor and underprivileged. South Asia will have, as a consequence, climbed dramatically up the human development ladder.

The advances in human security will be matched by a highly progressive human rights machinery that seamlessly integrates national and regional norms and institutions – including a South Asian Human Rights
Commission to advocate and defend human rights, and a South Asian Human Rights Court to enforce human rights laws and verify that national laws and practices comply with regional norms. (Few Asians are amused at being lectured on universal human values by those who failed to practice the same during European colonialism, and who now urge them to cooperate in promoting ‘global’ human rights norms. The solution is to focus on human rights at the regional level.) In the South Asian context, economic, social and religious rights are as critical as civil and political rights to safeguard the rights of the poor, the marginalized, the tribals, the illiterate, the migrant and itinerant workers, the outcastes and women. South Asian values and sensibilities are also highly attuned to the balancing between rights and responsibilities.

There will be an appropriately mandated and adequately resourced High Commissioner for National Minorities and Tribal Peoples, who will ensure that the rights and interests of Tamils in Sri Lanka, Muslims in India, Hindus in Pakistan, Adivasis and tribal peoples across South Asia, among other minorities, are properly protected by laws that are enforced by the civil servants, the police and the judiciary. Other regional institutions will include variations of a South Asian parliament, commission, president and foreign minister. The South Asian regional university will, by 2047, have been reinforced with a network of applied science, technology, social science, strategic studies and peace research institutes.

To be poor and female in South Asia is to be doubly cursed. Women can confront insecurity that is direct – for example, honour killing – or rooted in structural and cultural violence. While men suffer from the public violence of criminality and wars, the violence inflicted on women is mainly in the private realm of the household, and is mostly suffered in silence – from sex-selective abortion and female infanticide, to incest, acid attacks and dowry deaths. By 2047, policy measures in response to this state of affairs will include strengthened state capacity to monitor and enforce laws against women-specific violence, national implementation machinery for international commitments signed by states, and regional compacts to protect women and promote their welfare and empowerment.

Like women, children are acutely vulnerable to abuse. They are forcibly recruited as child soldiers or sex slaves. They are vulnerable to death caused by disease and starvation. They have the right to be protected by their own government and, failing that, by regional and international actors. The national, regional and global machinery for enforcing laws and norms for protecting the rights of children will have been strengthened still further by 2047.

Human trafficking – to service the sex trade, the adoption industry, the begging-for-alms industry – is a problem across South Asia, with children as its biggest victims. National performance lags behind international norms in combating the problem. The dominant national security paradigm today treats human trafficking as a crime against the state. In 2047, however, this will be considered a crime against the individual person within the normative framework of human security. Trafficked persons will be treated by the police, immigration and criminal justice system as victims, and the focus of prosecution will have shifted to where it really belongs: the buyers and sellers, and the corrupt officials who collude with them.

South Asia is also a major source of migrant workers to many Middle Eastern countries – for example, as maids, as workers. These workers often lack legislative and police safeguards in countries of destination, and are very vulnerable to abuse. In 2047, South Asian countries should have common norms and investigative and advisory services to protect the rights and ensure the welfare of each other’s citizens working and travelling abroad.

They should also have common environmental norms, laws and institutions backed by a South Asian Environmental Protection Agency. Moreover, there will be South Asian regional bodies to regulate waterways, manage river systems, establish water usage and distribution norms, monitor water tables and pollution indices, control deforestation and oversee reforestation, encourage biodiversity and preserve
Progress on South Asian regionalism was held hostage for over six decades by the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir. The ceasefire line (Line of Control) – that is, the de facto border between India and Pakistan running through the spine of Kashmir – had barely moved between 1948 and 2012. But the conflict had exacted huge costs from both countries, and even more from Kashmiris. Sensibly, all sides agreed that, in the modern age, what matters is not who formally controls a given territory, but how free all people are to move within, and in and out of, that territory. They worked hard and successfully to make the line separating Indian- from Pakistan-administered Kashmir irrelevant – for all practical purposes – as a daily reality.

With the Kashmir logjam broken by 2047, both countries’ regional roles will have acquired enhanced credibility. Afghanistan – the site of decades of strife, volatility, international interventions, and murderous civil and regional wars – will be at peace, and will gradually be regaining political order and economic health. The key to its remarkable transformation will have been cooperation between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan will be able to engage in normal relations, as well as reduce defence expenditures substantially – without any security derogation. Their defence forces will be engaged primarily in the tertiary sector of national, regional and global constabulary, peacekeeping and disaster relief operations. Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal having all been major contributors to UN peace operations, there will, in 2047, be thriving South Asian institutions for training and educating regional and international soldiers, police officers, civilian personnel and even NGOs in the skills, requirements and obligations of international peacekeeping. Indeed, South Asia will be a major node of peacekeeping best practices and lessons learned.

A universal Nuclear Weapons Convention will have been signed and come into force. By 2047, the world’s nuclear weapons stockpiles will have been verifiably destroyed, and the peaceful nuclear energy programmes will be overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency – itself in charge of an international nuclear fuel bank. A South Asian Atomic Energy Commission will work in close collaboration with the IAEA to ensure that the energy needs of South Asia are met in accordance with global safety, security and non-proliferation standards.

South Asian countries will also have stopped being the haven for basing, financing or arming each other’s terrorists, and instead will have initiated measures of regional cooperation against terrorism and drug trafficking. They learned that it is better for them to cooperate against the common menace of cross-border terrorism than to use it as a weapon against each another. Their anti-terrorism collaboration will embrace the full range of responses – social, economic, political and security-based. And they will all be party to bilateral, regional and multilateral regimes for regulating and controlling the production, storage and cross-border transfer of terrorism-related materials, skills and technology.

Furthermore, the region’s countries will collaborate in tackling the underlying or root causes of terrorism: lack of democratic institutions and practices, political freedoms and civil liberties; group grievances rooted in collective injustice; intractable conflicts; poverty; and religious suspicions. They will have learned from bitter experience that terrorism flourishes amid repressive, inept, unresponsive and dynastic regimes that spawn angry and twisted young men who take recourse to lethal violence. Consequently, their anti-terrorism campaign will be anchored in the norms of accountability, the rule of law and non-derogation from core human rights and civil liberties – including life, liberty and due process.

The abatement of the risks of terrorism and India-Pakistan warfare will have led to a boom in South Asian tourism. No other region in the world can compare or compete with South Asia – with its wealth of natural wonders and historical legacies, architectural monuments, and human diversity – for internal and international tourism. By 2047, there will be an active and highly visible South Asian Tourism Development and
Marketing Board to promote joint tourism. Such tourism – and business more broadly – will have been greatly facilitated by the adoption by SAARC of a regional equivalent of the Schengen Agreement in Europe to usher in passport-free travel throughout South Asia. Tourists from within South Asia will also flock to the annual regional sporting competitions, where performance standards will have risen to world class by 2047.

It may well be that South Asian regional institutions – and South Asian governance more broadly – will assimilate global norms. On the other hand, the region’s weight and gravity (and ‘soft power’) may be such that South Asian institutions could well shape global governance and international norms – at present, mainly of Western intellectual origin – through the export of South Asian values and worldviews. To be sure, if regionalism is elevated to the status of a major plank of the SAARC countries’ foreign policies, it would enhance the countries’ global influence and role, enable states to exercise a moderating influence on India as the regional hegemon, and also promote the economic development of all states in the region.

For such an ambitious vision to be realized by 2047, South Asia will require a quality of national leadership that is still missing in 2012 – but that, it should be stressed, may well be around the corner.

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