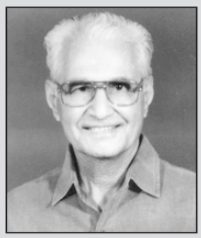


# A South Asian century?



**M B NAQVI**  
writes from Karachi

The timing of this idea may be a trifle questionable: India's general election has been scheduled. There is a BJP led government in power in Delhi. The paper is known to have links with both BJP and Sangh Parivar. And the Prime Minister of a BJP government will inaugurate it. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things. Only, some can entertain a suspicion that the whole exercise may be calculated to benefit BJP in the polls. Even that is not a sin. But these considerations can detract from the seriousness of the debate on such an appropriate and necessary subject. Anyway, let us concentrate on the merits of the idea.

One agrees with the notion that South Asians should develop so fast and so much that the whole 21st Century should become notable as the one when South Asia arrived. The current state of this region, that nature intended as a unit with plenty of resources, is, all told, dismal. Most of its resources remain unexploited or insufficiently utilised; most South Asians are

poor, some very poor; the region is home to the largest number of illiterates or only nominal literates; state of public health leaves much to be desired in most of the constituent countries; the region is the largest reservoir of unemployed, feeding into poverty's vast numbers; only India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are

achievements, above all, by India with its industrial-scientific basis being wide and strong. Bangladesh and Pakistan have also some economic achievements to their credit. But a hell of a lot of necessary development remains to be achieved. One way of making rapid economic progress is through creating a customs

unions; they are still not normal, as they should be between friendly governments. More needs to be done both for this limited normalisation and the wider promotion of regional cooperation and friendship.

Let it be clearly said that even the normal inter-governmental

that stands ultimately for the benefit, being empowered or vague religious wishes being fulfilled. So long as the governments do not work for the improvement of the lives of all the people in a countable or measurable way without distinction, popular participation will not be possible or make sense.

ceived as not valuing such achievements enough. They, or some of them, hanker after the old European notions of great power status: an excess of military power. The world recognizes India's greatness in sciences and culture. But New Delhi is more concerned with purely military muscle. Why?

South Asia if it has to grow optimally and for the benefit of its masses in the manner desired, it has to follow the EU model: Europeans have evolved elaborate mechanisms to offset the natural weight of Germany's power potential. In part, it is neutralized by Franco-German partnership - from grassroots up. In part, the others keep EU on its preferred pacific course. Are Indians prepared to assign high enough importance to SAARC, the way Franco-Germans promote EU and pay the necessary price of regional cooperation? Maybe they will have to weigh the value of the sword vis-à-vis the ploughshare.

Finally and more concretely, South Asia's progress in regional cooperation has been held up mainly by the Indo-Pakistan quarrel on Kashmir. Do the two have enough wisdom to either resolve this problem or to isolate it enough to allow the regional cooperation to proceed at a rapid pace? Much depends on that.

## PLAIN WORDS

**South Asia if it has to grow optimally and for the benefit of its masses in the manner desired, it has to follow the EU model: Europeans have evolved elaborate mechanisms to offset the natural weight of Germany's power potential. In part, it is neutralized by Franco-German partnership - from grassroots up. In part, the others keep EU on its preferred pacific course. Are Indians prepared to assign high enough importance to SAARC, the way Franco-Germans promote EU and pay the necessary price of regional cooperation? Maybe they will have to weigh the value of the sword vis-à-vis the ploughshare.**

working democracies, with others struggling to make democratic institutions work; observance of the rule of law remains patchy in most countries.

One has no desire to paint only a negative picture. There are

union in South Asia, expand the market and create an economic union with common tariffs and region-wide free trade. South Asia has happily crossed one major hurdle: free trade in the region is now an agreed proposition, though it remains to be implemented.

Next stages in common economic endeavour is inter-governmental cooperation in planning for optimum development, especially an integrated regional infrastructure, chiefly modern communications, so as to integrate South Asia with the generally visualised intercontinental rail and road systems. Sky would be the limit to such common development provided there is political will. Is it there?

Now that stern necessity has led Pakistan rulers to a policy mix that induces them to befriend India and give more importance to SAARC, it is a welcome and timely development. It enabled Islamabad to host the much-postponed SAARC Summit that produced helpful results, especially the SAFTA. One hopes that Islamabad will coordinate with New Delhi to take the expected negotiations and the normalisation process between India and Pakistan forward. This normalisation has so far been confined to relations between the two gov-

ties are insufficient; something more is needed. That something is the normalisation of relations between the two peoples leading to people-to-people reconciliation that will create a desire for a common vision for ensuring civilized living standards for all people in South Asia - going well beyond the current unsatisfactory results of what is called poverty reduction in the region. The present is clearly unsatisfactory. Far more is needed. In an important way, political will is not there. There are many causes for it.

The first cause is the structure of major states in the region is not adequately democratic even where elections are regularly or frequently held. Decision-making is in the hands of well-recognized elites that decide on key political and economic issues in a way that leaves a majority of their citizens unempowered, often unemployed and generally poor. That democracy is more than regular elections or even a division of powers. There has to be some participation of common folks in important decisions so that purposes of economic development are not channeled to only enriching the rich further.

Then many governments in the region are identified with a religion or religious community

Hitherto South Asia has been blighted by the quarrel between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the roots of which go back to communal politics in the 19th Century. The historical bitterness between Hindu and Muslim communalists in the 20th Century needs to be purposefully counteracted and isolated in the politics that must aim at common people's fundamental rights being actually respected, their economic well-being guaranteed and their religious rights and security of all protected.

Despite past rivalry and ill will between Pakistan and India, ordinary Pakistanis do not really wish ill of India or feel frightened by a Shining India or by its great power status per se. Let it be preeminent in South Asia. After all it is so big and so developed. That would be natural. But how does the enhanced status of India affect others? is the question. If others' legitimate rights or shares in benefits are not affected, India's regional preeminence will not be opposed by anyone in the region and that will include Pakistanis also. We in Pakistan wish well to India that does shine, though most South Asians will wish it go on excelling in sciences, technology, economic development, in philosophy, arts, literature and cultural pursuits. Indians are however per-

The region's political will for coming closer for new economic growth is crucially dependent on its view of India's military prowess and what it is meant to achieve. No Pakistani or any other South Asian would be found wanting in appreciation of India's greatness in arts, culture, sciences and technology, new thought and economic achievements, as noted. India's military build up however requires explanation. Insofar as it has been acquired as old-fashioned currency of influence and status, it will be viewed as less lethal but... But, still how have European nations used their power, influence and status in history? It was only to take what was not theirs by right.

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