Can We All Get Along?

Sadiq Ahmed ponders peace, regional cooperation, and poverty reduction in South Asia



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EVENTS in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and most recently in Pakistan, show that the constraints to development mainly relate to internal governance; the enemy is within, and not an external force.

Yet, it still remains fashionable and convenient for politicians to blame external agents or forces for the those countries' social and economic problems. Continuing this old-fashioned approach has led to hostile and very complex intra-regional country relationships in South Asia, where trade, investment, connectivity and mobility of people are lowest among global regions. Scarce resources are often deployed to enforce border restrictions and finance cross-border conflicts. The result is a lose-lose situation for South Asian citizens, especially when one compares the outcomes in the European Union or the Asean countries.

This is not to deny or wish away a number of genuine cross-border issues and challenges. The most important of which is the long-standing dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, which has continued to strain relations between these two large South Asian neighbours. Afghan-Pakistan relations are also constrained by allegations of support for Talibans from sources in Pakistan.

Similarly, tackling the immigration and security issues in the India-Bangladesh border areas requires concerted efforts. Yet, focusing foreign and economic cooperation policies almost single-mindedly on these aspects, thus depriving them of the benefits of regional cooperation, has imposed a high cost both in terms of missed benefits and also in terms of diverting scarce resources away from internal uses with high development impact.

This point can be illustrated with a specific example. Imagine a scenario where Pakistan is at peace with both Afghanistan and India, and there are no cross-border