

Conference Reports

Towards an Asian Century: Future of Economic Cooperation in SAARC Countries

Islamabad, 20–21 November 2013

Socio Economic Cooperation between India and Pakistan

Lahore, 25–27 November 2013

Two conferences in Pakistan have been remarkable, not so much for their academic insights, but for their political significance, attendance and style: the International Conference Towards an Asian Century: Future of Economic Cooperation in SAARC Countries in Islamabad, organized by The Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) with assistance from the German Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF), and the International Conference Socio Economic Cooperation between India and Pakistan, organized by the Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Both conferences can be seen as new attempts by the Pakistan government to improve the country's relations with its South Asian neighbours in general and with India in particular.

IPRI is a think tank close to the army; its president, Sohail Amin, is a retired ambassador. Apart from the resident representative of HSF, Kristof Duwartes, and the rapporteur from Germany, participants at the Islamabad conference were drawn almost exclusively from the civil services of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, China and Sri Lanka. According to the programme, the conference was dedicated to the future of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which raised a number of pertinent questions: 'What are the drivers of mutual cooperation? What are the extra regional incentives which could encourage SAARC countries to unite and boost economic cooperation in South Asia? What are the real impediments, how could they be overcome and how should they be prioritized? In which areas could immediate cooperation help to hasten mutual economic collaboration? And in what ways can political issues and differences be resolved so as to create a better environment for economic cooperation?'

When India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives created SAARC in 1985, the idea of institutionalized cooperation had been around for many years. SAARC was created as a forum to discuss

the difficult relations between neighbours on a subcontinent, where one of the member states, India, is several times as big as all the others taken together. At the time, only India shared land borders with other members, none of the others members shared a border with any other. Border issues, however, are not to be discussed by SAARC, as 'bilateral and contentious issues' are excluded by the charter. Later, a South Asia Preferential Trade Area (SAPTA) and a South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) were added. And although India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were founder members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), intra-regional trade has remained at the original low level of four to five percent of aggregate foreign trade for the last four decades. The main hurdle, as the presentations made clear, has been and still is the strained relationship between India and Pakistan. It has not changed since Afghanistan joined in 2007: Afghanistan is allowed to ship goods to India across Pakistan, but India has still not got any transit rights to Afghanistan. Transit trade from Karachi to Chaman and Torkham, the two main entry points to Afghanistan, has also been difficult; there are claims of abuse (drugs, weapons and tax fraud) on both sides. Despite the conference's focus on economic cooperation, it was clear that everything depends on the politics in Islamabad and New Delhi. A difference from previous discussions was China's eminent role in South Asia affairs. China has been Pakistan's most important ally for half a century. Now that India has abandoned its policy of self-reliance and liberalized its foreign trade, China has become India's most important trading partner, as was pointed out by Dr. Liu Zongyi of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) in his talk on 'China's growing economic relations with South Asia: A positive development'. The conference was well covered by state TV and reputable dailies. A review of the conference can be found in IPRI's newsletter no. 6, available on their website (<http://ipripak.org/>). IPRI plans to publish the proceedings as a book.

The Lahore Conference, organized by Professor Iqbal Chawla, differed in several ways. Firstly, it was limited to the all-important stumbling block of South Asian cooperation, i.e. the relationship between India and Pakistan. Secondly, organised as it was by the oldest university in the country, it was a more academic discussion, with hardly any participants from the military-political establishment, but open to students. Thirdly, with a strong contingent of participants from India, almost all of them from (Indian) Punjab, it was more a meeting of the two Punjabs, and as such an indication of the Pakistan's new (old) government's declared policy to seek better relations with its neighbour. The focus on the economy, as in Islamabad, did not necessarily mean that it was less political, as the issue of water distribution,

although often overlooked, is a major bone of contention between India and Pakistan: Pakistan depends totally on the Himalayan waters for irrigation, and the major streams enter Pakistan via Kashmir.

The Indian delegation, 18 professors from Punjab and one from Kashmir, was unusually large; some were even allowed to travel via Wagah/Atari, the border crossing on the old Grand Trunk (GT) Road that connects Lahore with Amritsar. It is open to foreigners, but not necessarily to Indians and Pakistan, who need a special permit as well as a visa. With so much local knowledge at hand, problems and prospects of closer cooperation could be discussed in depth. For the students it was a rare and welcome experience: interactions were possible even in their mother tongue (Punjabi). It was announced that the proceedings would be published.

The hosts did their utmost to make their guests feel comfortable: an excursion to Lahore Fort; the Samadhi (tomb) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh; the Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Arjun Dev, where the fifth guru was tortured and killed by Emperor Jehangir in 1606; the Mazar (tomb) of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the national poet of Pakistan; the Badshahi Mosque and a cultural evening. At the reception given by the vice chancellor of the university, the most senior member of the Indian delegation requested the lifting of travel restrictions and asked – in the name of all vice-chancellors in the (Indian) State of Punjab – for a memorandum of understanding between the two Punjabs. However, the offer to take the whole delegation to Nankana Sahib, one of the holiest places for the Sikh community, had to be withdrawn in the last minute: visas for Indians and Pakistani visiting the other country are explicitly restricted, and permission to visit Lahore district did not include visiting Nankana Sahib in the neighbouring district. The Punjab government had obviously given their clearance, but Islamabad objected.

A few days earlier, in a similar incident, the visit of a group of around 100 university teachers and students from India to Lahore was cancelled just before the buses started, despite the fact that visas already had been granted. The reason: the leader of the Pakistan Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, had been killed by a US drone hours before direct talks were to start with the Pakistan government. A major strike by the Taliban in revenge was expected. A large group of young Indians would have been difficult to protect. The Nankana Sahib excursion, however, would have been a sign that Pakistan was ready for closer relations with India.

The rapporteur left Pakistan for India by road and could see for himself how both countries have upgraded their border installations in expectation of much more travel and transport. The road to Amritsar is now a four-lane highway. A fleet of trucks carrying bulk cargo, most probably cement and

food-grains, were headed for the border, where a new complex of passport and customs buildings was recently erected. This might not be welcome in all quarters. Pakistan has seen a change in almost all top positions in 2013, including president, prime minister, army chief of staff and chief justice; the head of the mighty ISI changed the year before. It has to be seen whether the prime minister is allowed to proceed with his new policy. It also depends on the new Indian government, which was elected in May 2014.

The two neighbours have taken a number of bold steps to improve bilateral relations: a direct bus link between New Delhi and Lahore was opened in 1999; Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee travelled to Lahore on its maiden journey and the Lahore Declaration was signed. In 2006 the railway link between Sindh and Rajasthan was reopened. In late 2013 it was expected that Pakistan would grant India most favoured nation status and change from a positive to a negative list of items allowed for bilateral trade. Unfortunately, this has not happened: whereas India granted Pakistan MFN status as long ago as 1996, Pakistan has yet to reciprocate.

All this requires that relations are no longer disturbed by terrorist acts: India has a long list of claims concerning terrorist acts that it believes were instigated by the Pakistan ISI. Hopes for a nuclear dividend after India and Pakistan became nuclear powers in May 1998 and attempts of the United States to punish both countries with economic sanctions may have led to a rapprochement and hopes for a de-escalation of relations in South Asia. However, it turned out that at the same time Pakistan was encouraging 'Kashmiri freedom fighters' to cut Indian supply lines. It is doubtful whether Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's current prime minister, has the army's consent for his policy of opening up his country to trade with India. Nor should it be forgotten that the USA and their allies are reducing their involvement in Afghanistan, and maybe also in Pakistan, and lifting some sanctions against Iran.

This political background was not discussed at the two conferences, but everyone was well aware of it. What was discussed to some extent was China's new role and China's plans for an economic corridor between Kashgar and Gwadar. As a result, China's role in South Asian affairs in general, and in Indo-Pak relations in particular should not be underestimated.

Wolfgang-Peter Zingel

**Creative Economy, Creative University
and Creative Development. Ideas, Knowledges and Paths
towards Sustainability, Happiness and Wellbeing.
3rd Creative University Conference**

Thimphu, 14–16 April 2014

Creativity was the central theme of an international conference organized by the Institute for Gross National Happiness Studies (GNHaS) of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB, Thimphu), together with the International Creative University Network (ICUN), the Centre for Global Studies in Education (CGSE, University of Waikato, New Zealand), and Future Education Groups and Organization Studies (FUEGOS, University of Marburg, Germany). It was supported by the Commission of Organizational Education of the German Educational Research Association (GERA-OE).

The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) had invited academics from around the world for an exchange of concepts and ideas with the growing group of Bhutanese scholars. Originally founded by a Jesuit priest as a secondary school in Tashigang, a small town in Eastern Bhutan, in 1964, it subsequently became Sherubtse College in nearby Kanglung, one of the dozen or so colleges of what is now RUB. Established by royal charter in 2003, RUB has 8,500 students taught at campuses spread all over the country. The number is expected to rise to 13,500 within the next few years. The venue of the conference was the National Institute of Traditional Medicine, the core institute of the University of Medical Science of Bhutan, founded in 2012.

In their Concept Note the organizers expressed their fear that the university is turning into “an economically shaped institution to advance and promote the production of market knowledge”. An alternative development agenda addressed the interconnectedness of the creation of academic economic and social knowledge and higher education. Therefore, “[c]ombined with traditional academic approaches, the conference [was to] enable the participants to engage in a transformative learning process through dialogue, introspection and self reflection”.

The general theme of the conference covered a wide range of topics in four fora and corresponding workshops: 1) Creativity and the Educational Mode of Development – Creating Developmental Spaces and Supporting Modes of Change; 2) Creative University: Strategies of Creation and Creative Development of the Future – Developing and Discovering Mindfulness Approaches to Teaching, Learning, and Development; 3) Methodology and Methods of (Action) Research – Using Action (Research) for the

Transformation of Society; 4) Creativity, Open Science & Travelling Ideas – Ideas and Practices of Partnerships, Co-operations and the Development of Academic Programs. Participants were requested to stay in their respective groups; panel hopping was not encouraged. Given the aim to include Bhutanese scholars, mostly young and still working on their MA and PhD theses, this was a perfect approach.

They could be seen interacting more and more actively and competently as the conference progressed. The fact that English is the medium of instruction in the country facilitated this; moreover, advanced studies abroad are preferably pursued in English-speaking countries.

Participants were welcomed by the Vice Chancellor, DASHO (Dr) Pema Thinley, shown the Men-jong Pharmaceutical Unit (part of the Institute of Traditional Medicine), the Institute's museum and Men-lha Lhakhang (altar room). Plenary sessions included meditation. Finally, all were invited to join a traditional dance, before the farewell party turned disco style.

Altogether there were 57 foreign participants from 14 countries, mainly from the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Germany. This impressive attendance was due to the fact that it was already the third international conference of its kind, the previous two having been held in New Zealand and Germany. The concept of creativity was developed mainly in Australia before becoming an international topic.

Participants had to cover their own expenses plus a conference fee. Instead of paying the obligatory 250 US dollars per day, only a nominal visa fee was charged. The rapporteur made use of the opportunity and, with a colleague, went across the country (with a special permit) to visit three more colleges, especially in Kanglung, where the university started, and where one of the rapporteur's students could be placed, to our knowledge the first German student formally admitted to RUB.

Compared to the rapporteur's first visit to Bhutan 14 years ago, tremendous change had taken place. Then TV and internet had just been introduced; now it can be found everywhere. The number of foreign tourists has risen 20-fold (excluding Indians visiting Bhutan). Parts of the country that were off-limits can now be visited.

The country still pursues gross national happiness, but also sees the concept's limitations: the academic sector is developing so fast that the country no longer can guarantee employment and has started sending graduates abroad as migrant workers. Conferences like this one, so far the most ambitious in the country, not only are a good means to acquaint young Bhutanese scholars with current international ideas and trends, but could also establish Bhutan as a venue for international academic exchange. It is still a dream destination for many and can be reached without much dif-

faculty, although there are no cheap flights and travelling overland is time-consuming. Bhutan enjoys excellent international relations, but has to take account of Indian sensibilities. Opening up without being swallowed by any of the neighbouring Asian giants is not easy for a small country with a population of a few hundred thousand people. It certainly needs creativity.

There are plans to publish the proceedings under the editorship of Professor Susanne Maria Weber, one of the organizers of the conference, and her team at Marburg University. The next conference will be held either in New Zealand or Australia. More information on the conference, RUB and ICUN can be found on the internet under www.rub.edu.bt.

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