

Special Issue on
India-Bangladesh Relations @ 50:
The Way Forward

In 2021, Bangladesh will celebrate the 50th year of its independence. Bangladesh's War of Liberation remains an inspirational saga of valour, determination and sacrifice. Since India played a vital role in this war, both countries annually commemorate 16th December as "Bijoy Dibosh" and Victory Day. To mark this historic milestone, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual Summit on December 17, 2020.

Bangladesh's emergence on the international stage as a free, sovereign and independent country was a significant geo-political event that changed the political geography of South Asia. This significant event was underscored by the fact that it occurred at the height of the Cold War, when a non-ideological alignment in big power relations was underway, with the USA seeking to open up to China when the latter fell out with the Soviet Union. Capitalist America courted Communist China, and today, the result of this courtship is an expansionist and aggressive China which is threatening all countries in Asia, and want them to submit to its hegemonic ambitions.

During the last fifty years, Bangladesh's achievement on the economic and social development fronts should shame those who once branded her an "international basket case", when she began her journey as an independent country. In almost all aspects of macroeconomic metrics, Bangladesh has overtaken Pakistan, outperforming the country in poverty reduction, export performance, and human development indices. Having overtaken Pakistan in per capita income, Bangladesh is also poised to graduate out of its LDC status. High GDP growth rates in the last two decades have made Bangladesh one among the best performing economies in the world.

Bangladesh-India bilateral ties have benefited from the political consensus in both countries to expand relations in all sectors. Bilateral cooperation has developed a dynamism that has added heft to the diverse sectors of engagement - Connectivity, Energy, Trade, Investment, Development Cooperation, Educational and Cultural exchanges, Cyberspace, Defence, Security, and Intelligence cooperation. As a result, one witnesses increased trust and confidence between the two countries.

Inter-country connectivity has vastly expanded, with more railway connectivity across trans-border nodes, larger number of waterway routes, more Integrated Check Posts [ICPs] at Land borders, facility for goods to use the Mongla and Chittagong ports for destinations in the north-eastern states of India, the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, the Coastal Shipping Agreement dovetailing with India's SAGARMALA project, energy projects, the pipeline for hydrocarbon supply, Internet connectivity via Cox's Bazaar to India's north eastern states among several other connectivity projects. Bangladesh's desire to join the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project has boosted prospects for greater connectivity between South Asia and ASEAN countries manifold. For India, Bangladesh has emerged as the pivot for her "Act East Policy". Shipbuilding is a sector that is ripe for joint projects, wherein Bangladesh's technical and manufacturing capacity can be harnessed.

Bangladesh is today the top destination for India's development partnership funding, in terms of Lines of Credit and Grants. India-funded development activities have been targeted at community projects in village clusters and smaller town - schools and medical clinics - and is directly benefiting the people. In urban centers, development funds are going into garbage management. More such granular domains have to be identified for directing development funds that directly improve the lives of the people.

While impressive progress has been made in bilateral ties, there are traditional and new emerging challenges. Planning for strengthening bilateral ties for the next 50 years demands the attention of all stakeholders.

In addition, the sharing of river waters needs a new paradigm of engagement. Demography, Climate Change, water guzzling rice cultivation, and increased consumption with rising prosperity has reduced the availability of water per capita. River water-sharing on old principles cannot solve the issue. The augmentation of water during the January-May lean season, and a holistic approach to river water-sharing based on river basin management, involving the sub-region as a whole, has to be considered in the future.

Border management methods must also be modernised. The trans-border movement of goods, services, and people will require further improvement of infrastructure at border crossing nodes, and the increase in such nodes along the border. Remnants of cumbersome bureaucratic procedures that hamper the smooth flow of cross-border trade have to be removed. More multi-modal connectivity nodes have to be created to deal with existing bottlenecks. The cross-border illegal movement of people as well as smuggling

cannot be prevented completely with hard power. Despite the fence and the occasional interdiction of illegal intruders, smuggling has continued. Better and improved avenues for formal trade is the alternative. What new methods can be adopted?

While cooperation between the defence forces has increased, Bangladesh's overwhelming dependence on Chinese-origin defence hardware makes the Bangladesh military reluctant to engage with India's defence forces, except in the training sector. There is reluctance to acquire Indian military hardware because of doctrinaire reasons. Bangladesh's military doctrine is theoretically based on the possibility of war, howsoever improbable, with India and Myanmar - the only two countries with which she shares borders. This fosters an inbuilt inhibition in the defence forces which may have increased in the light of India-China relations heading towards their nadir. Chinese pressure to deny spares for military hardware can be a real threat for Bangladesh's defence forces.

China's increasing role in South Asia is a challenge for all countries, and will require deft management by Bangladesh and India. This factor should not become a cause for discord. China, however, will push hard to establish anti-India bridgeheads, and will not stop at interfering in domestic political affairs, as it is currently doing in Nepal.

The situation is further complicated by the Pakistan-Turkey axis, that could spill over to Bangladesh. During a recent visit to Dhaka, the Turkish Foreign Minister offered to sell military hardware and technology to Bangladesh - egged on no doubt by Pakistan. There are signals of a thaw in Bangladesh-Pakistan ties, and Turkey's role has to be seen in this context.

The future of bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh lies in integration, interdependence, and creating common structures for greater economic growth and human development. Cooperation in the Defence, Security, and Intelligence sectors need strengthening to provide a secure ambience for further strengthening bilateral ties.

During the visit of Sheikh Hasina to India in October 2019, Prime Minister Modi said this was the golden phase ('*Sonali Adhyay*') of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. At the December 2020 virtual summit, he said that "Bangladesh is a major pillar of our '*Neighbourhood First*' policy. From the very first day, strengthening and development of relations with Bangladesh has been a special priority".

Hence, this golden jubilee year may be the right time to take stock of the state of bilateral relations between the two countries. What have been the

positive aspects of these relations? Where have been the hurdles and hiccups? What lessons can we draw from the experience of the past five decades? What steps, both conventional and based on out-of-box thinking, can we adopt to push these relations to greater heights?

This Journal has, periodically, published ‘debates’ on India-Bangladesh relations. The last one was two years ago, in 2018.* For this special issue, the Journal had invited nine expert analysts on the subject to comment on the above issues. Their views are being published in the following pages of this special issue.

(The Joint Statement, issued at the end of the ‘India - Bangladesh (Virtual Summit’ held on December 17, 2020, is also being carried, as a backgrounder) 30 December, 2020

(The views expressed by the authors are their own, and do not reflect the views of the Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)

Notes:

* <http://www.associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Vol%2013/13.4/IFAJ-13.4-DEBATE-F.pdf>

★ ★ ★