

Bangladesh-India Ties: 50 Years and Beyond

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Bangladesh and India marked the 50th anniversary of “Bijoy Dibosh” or Victory Day on 16th December 2020 (that ended the War of Liberation in 1971), and a virtual Summit meeting (on the following day on 17th December) between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Shaikh Hasina to set the agenda for 2021, and beyond.¹

In a historic first, a 122-member tri-services contingent of the Armed Forces from Bangladesh was flown in by an Indian Air Force aircraft to participate in India’s Republic Day parade on 26 January 2021, marking 50 years of Bangladesh’s independence and the establishment of diplomatic relations. The Bangladeshi contingent was given a place of honour in the parade as the leading contingent of serving military personnel.

Prime Minister Modi is scheduled to travel to Dhaka to join the 26th March celebrations of Bangladesh’s 50th year of Independence, and the 100th birth anniversary of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, revered as the father of the nation in Bangladesh. The two leaders have imparted renewed traction to the upward trajectory in bilateral ties that began in 2007, during the term of the Army-backed Caretaker government and thereafter, gathered momentum under governments led by Prime Minister Hasina since 2009.

The December Summit was a continuation of the high-level political compact to pursue the vision of deeper engagement, opening of new vistas of cooperation, and building strong neighbourly ties “based on shared bonds of history, culture, language, and other unique commonalities that characterize the partnership”. The two leaders reiterated that “relations between Bangladesh and India are based on fraternal ties, and are reflective of an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust, and understanding that transcends a strategic partnership.”² Aiding the growth

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in bilateral ties is the political consensus in both countries to expand ties in all areas, covering diverse sectors of engagement - Connectivity, Energy, Trade, Investment, Development Cooperation, Educational and Cultural exchanges, Cyberspace, Defence, Security and Intelligence, and building on the increased trust and confidence between the two countries.

Neighbourhood

The development in bilateral ties with Bangladesh owes much to India's "Neighbourhood First Policy", articulated by Prime Minister Modi's government to give buoyancy and vigour to the ties between India and its neighbours. Policy options to find productive ways of developing cooperative ties are being pursued vigorously. The hostile China-Pakistan axis against India has been the exception. Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism, overtly supported by China and the latter's expansionist policy, have stymied all attempts to find durable peace with these two neighbours. Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism and China's border provocations have led to contestation in South Asia as well as other theatres in the region, at the expense of peaceful engagement and productive cooperation.

India's pursuit of its "Neighbourhood Policy" has traditionally lavished disproportionate attention on Pakistan. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee boarded a bus to Lahore, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (whose family's origins are Gah, now in District Chakwal in Pakistan, yearned to make a nostalgic trip which eluded him during his years as Prime Minister. He had also articulated the desire of having breakfast in Delhi and dinner at Lahore, a sentiment that has underlined India's policy for a *modus vivendi* and normal relations with Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi made an unannounced trip to Lahore to visit Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and also hosted him at his oath taking ceremony in Delhi.

Despite all such attempts, undertaken with the best of intentions, the normalization of ties with Pakistan has been elusive. Nawaz Sharif was hounded out of Pakistan by the country's Army-led "deep state" for daring to dream about normal ties with India. Pakistan has hitched its wagon to China as a client state, and continues to be the epicentre of global terrorism. If only half the attention that Indian Prime Ministers have lavished on Pakistan had been directed towards Bangladesh, India would have accomplished much more in its bilateral ties with this country and on the Look East policy, subsequently renamed as Act East Policy.

Connectivity

Arguably, during the last decade of this century, more progress has been made in bilateral ties with Bangladesh than in the past, since it became independent. Upgraded connectivity with Bangladesh has reached such a level that one can dare to plan breakfast in Delhi, Lunch in Kolkata, and dinner in Dhaka. The day is not far away when a passenger train will run from Delhi to Dhaka, and beyond to Agartala, seamlessly crossing borders. A high-speed train, ferrying passengers directly from Delhi to Dhaka and Dhaka to Delhi, with immigration and customs procedures completed at the point of origin/ departure should not be in the realm of fantasy. This is possible, if the two governments show the political will to cut through the bureaucratic maze. Progress in the infrastructure for railway connectivity will be available in a few years to make this prospect a reality, especially when the Akhaura-Agartala multimodal transport link becomes operational. The last span of the Padma Bridge has been put in place.³ This multi-purpose bridge will change connectivity within Bangladesh and with India, cutting distances, time, and costs for the movement of goods and people. The bridge will be opened in June 2022, and is expected to boost Bangladesh's GDP by 1-2 percent.

During the December 2020 Summit, the two Prime Ministers inaugurated the 5th railway connectivity between Haldibari in north Bangladesh and Chilaihati in West Bengal. Partial railway connectivity was restored after Bangladesh became independent. The first direct train between Dhaka and Kolkata, the "Maitri Express", was started in April, 2008; and the "Bandhan Express", between Khulna and Kolkata, started in November, 2017. Major trans-boundary railway nodes at Petrapole-Benapole, Gede-Darshana, Singhabad-Rohanpur, and Radhikapur-Birol have been connected after the necessary alignment of gauges. There are several other trans-border railway connectivity nodes that will be restored, facilitating the movement of goods, containers, and passengers. Railway connectivity is going ahead, as per the agreed bilateral decision to restore pre-Partition railway connectivity. Multi-modal Connectivity is also a priority sector for both countries.

Bangladesh also wishes to join the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project, which will provide the much needed connectivity between South Asia and ASEAN countries. There is a rising demand from the business community for reducing the cost of transportation and travel as trade and tourism are gradually regaining their pre-COVID volumes and numbers. Bangladeshis continue to be the largest number of foreign tourists visiting India.

Waterways

A Bangladeshi proposal for “innocent passage” for riverine traffic which will enable boats to enter India and re-enter Bangladesh, and *vice versa* while using the river, *without* undergoing formal procedures for crossing borders, is being considered by India. A section of the Ganga [Padma in Bangladesh] forms part of the riverine boundary. The river meanders, entering Bangladesh and then India, adjacent to the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. This creates problems for fishermen and passenger traffic on the river, because they have to cross the international boundary while moving from one river port to another in either country.

Riverine routes for trans-border transportation have been expanded periodically. There are 54 trans-boundary rivers and these, where navigable, provide riverine connectivity under the bilateral Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit Treaty [PIWTT]. The transshipment of goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong port, together with the Sonamura-Daudkani additional riverine route, will facilitate trade in goods. Operationalising the BBIN [Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal] Motor Vehicles Agreement [MVA] awaits the finalisation of procedures. This will help vehicular movement between the countries seamlessly. Other connectivity projects have been planned, including connectivity between Hilli [West Bengal] and Mahendraganj [Meghalaya] - both via Bangladesh.⁴

Economic Growth

High GDP growth rates in the last two decades have made Bangladesh’s economy one of the top performers in the world and, if the growth rates in India slacken, Bangladesh is poised to overtake India in per capita income in the next few years. This in itself is an amazing story of determination and leadership, banishing forever the pejorative classification of Bangladesh being a “basket case”, soon after its independence. Measured through the prism of macroeconomic indices - like poverty reduction, export performance and human development indices - Bangladesh has left Pakistan behind by quite a distance. Having overtaken Pakistan in per capita income, Bangladesh is poised to graduate out of its LDC status. The LDC graduation criteria will be met by Bangladesh twice in a row, and the UN’s Committee for Development Policy is set to review this status. It may recommend Bangladesh’s re-classification as a Developing Country, though for aiding the post-COVID economic recovery, Bangladesh may ask for the retention of international economic

support measures for LDC countries for 5 years, in order to make the transition smooth and without hiccups.⁵

The COVID Pandemic

Immediate health care measures and economic recovery, as a result of the Chinese-origin COVID-19 pandemic, are challenges that can be tackled by bilateral cooperation. As the world's largest vaccine producer, India has geared up to supply millions of doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to the world. India has also underlined its firm commitment to her 'Neighbourhood First' policy by shipping out consignments of the COVID Vaccine to her neighbours, with Bangladesh receiving the largest number of doses. The first consignment is free of charge, as part of India's "Vaccine Maitri" diplomacy. Bangladesh received the first supply on 21st January 2021. Private sector collaboration is underway in therapeutics and vaccine production. Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs commented (in a seminar) that Prime Minister Modi had set a "brilliant example" by providing vaccines to India's neighbours.

Removing Barriers

Though connectivity has become the bedrock of strengthening bilateral ties, leading to greater facilitation of trade and people-to-people movement, bilateral ties have to now go beyond hard connectivity into soft connectivity issues. Para-tariff and non-tariff barriers, long waiting time for goods trucks at border check posts, immigration/customs clearances, and delays in the phytosanitary certification for goods continue to cause trade bottlenecks. Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, with total trade volume of around US\$ 9-10 billion. Both sides are resolved to remove non-tariff barriers and other impediments to facilitate trade. Bangladesh is an important market for essential food commodities exported from India, and policy measures taken by India impact the domestic food market for which Bangladesh has sought consultation to mitigate any shortages. The textile sector is crucial for both countries, since Ready Made Garments [RMGs] constitute almost 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports. Negotiations on an MOU on Textiles have been fast-tracked.

Border Management

The challenge of managing the 4097 km long shared border will remain a major bilateral preoccupation. After the Land Border Agreement [LBA]⁶ was

finalised in 2014, follow up implementation measures to prepare maps along riverine boundaries are underway. There are several sectors along the border where rivers form the boundary. Since rivers in this deltaic region tend to change course, the challenge of delineating fixed borders will be discussed at the Joint Boundary Conference. The LBA's full implementation must be given the highest priority. The Coordinated Border Management Plan [CBMP] has enabled the border guards of both sides to interdict and reduce the smuggling of weapons, narcotics, fake currency, and human trafficking. Terrorism remains a perennial threat to both countries, and security and intelligence cooperation have been intensified. Facilitating the legitimate movement of people via land ports along the common border is being streamlined, and the remaining restrictions will be eased in a phased manner. Work relating to border fencing and fixing the shifting riverine boundaries has been mutually agreed. These are part of the ongoing border management agenda. The removal of existing restrictions on the cross-border movement of people via established border check-posts will be undertaken. A new forum for dialogue and cooperation between the police forces has been announced for better coordination of security and anti-terrorism measures.

Smuggling of synthetic drugs, mainly into Bangladesh, which is both a recipient and a transit country, has become a menace to society. The synthetic drug, Methamphetamine, popularly known as "Yaba", is entering Bangladesh in large quantities, mainly from Myanmar. A small quantity also enters from India. The drug is manufactured in Myanmar from the chemical smuggled in from China and Thailand. This drug trade is worth crores of rupees, and seems unaffected by the COVID pandemic, in spite of the crackdown by Bangladeshi authorities, as well as the anti-narcotics legislation of 2018, which included the death penalty for drug-related crimes. The Rohingyas are deeply embedded into the drug running business. In some sections along the border with India, drugs and cattle smuggling go hand in hand. The drug lords in these countries subvert and corrupt politicians and border forces, undermining security for all countries. Armed insurgent groups are also involved in drug production and smuggling, especially for raising funds for their activities.

"Border killings" have remained an issue on the bilateral agenda. For a variety of reasons, primarily a concern for its citizens, Bangladesh is, naturally, sensitive to occasional fatal casualties of its citizens, crossing over illegally into India. Citizens of India, engaged in cross-border smuggling, are also victims - although Bangladeshi citizens form a bulk of the fatalities since they are the ones lured into becoming couriers for the mafia, as well as being

involved in cross-border smuggling and human trafficking. Complex socio-economic factors - like poverty, lack of employment, and an easy source of income - push people living along the border into the smuggling trade. Bangladesh's position on this issue is also driven by media outcry, fuelled by the powerful smuggling mafia on both sides of the border. The mafia's entrenched vested interest is to reduce border killings, which deter smuggling. This lucrative cross-border smuggling generates a huge amount of money which enables mafia leaders to buy influence at the political level, and in the media.

Bangladesh and India have to put in more efforts on each side of the border to interdict and prevent smugglers from their illegal activities. The Indian government has cracked down on cattle smuggling. Recently, a kingpin of the cattle smuggling mafia was arrested in West Bengal. Reports of his wealth running into thousands of crores, and alleged links with politicians, have surfaced in the Indian media. Bangladesh's default position of blaming India and absolving itself of responsibility is not sustainable. Both sides must take responsibility to tackle the fundamental causes of cross-border smuggling which requires long-term planning. This must also include a crackdown on corruption within the border forces.

Trade and Investment

Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia. However, current levels of bilateral trade and investment are not commensurate with the potential estimate.⁷ A joint task force to examine and recommend measures to increase trade has become necessary. The power and hydrocarbon sectors are beginning to attract private sector Indian investments. It has been agreed that the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which is under negotiation, will be fast-tracked to facilitate the seamless movement of goods. The electricity generation sector has attracted Indian private sector investment in Bangladesh, and a framework of cooperation among BBIN countries in electricity generation is being worked on. Bangladesh's Special Economic Zones [SEZs] for Indian companies have to be expedited for these to take off quickly.

Water Sharing

Sharing of river waters is a long haul. The Teesta water sharing agreement has been stuck for quite some time. Whether any government in West Bengal

will agree to the water sharing formula depends on which party comes to power in the state elections. Meanwhile, it would be prudent to finalise the Framework of Interim Agreement on the six trans-boundary rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar. Just as the archaic 1974 border demarcation agreement had to be modified to reach the Land Boundary Agreement [LBA], the sharing of river waters will require much more than simply agreeing to a fixed share of a dwindling flow. Climate Change, demographic explosion, pollution, and water-intensive agriculture have irreversibly changed the paradigm of water sharing. Multiple aspects will now have to be factored in any discussion planning for the future.

Migration

The issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh has got even more complicated after the enumeration exercise of the National Register of Citizens [NRC] in Assam, and the Citizenship Amendment Act [CAA]. In Assam, politics, especially electoral politics have revolved around the issue of illegal migration, and the attempt to fast-track citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants. Bangladesh's apprehension of large-scale reverse migration of illegal Bangladeshis in Assam, and elsewhere in India, may not come true - but it is a possibility howsoever improbable. While India has extended assurances to Bangladesh, this remains a friction point.

In India, the forced migration of Hindus has also become a sensitive political issue. The population of Hindus in Bangladesh has steadily declined over the decades after partition. Even after Bangladesh became independent and adopted a secular polity, Hindus have continued to migrate because of harassment, as well as laws like the Vested Properties Act [VPA], earlier known as the Enemy Properties Act. From being around 15 percent of the population in 1972, Hindus in Bangladesh have been reduced to around 9 percent. The adoption of Islam as the State religion further undermined the confidence of Hindus. While the government in Bangladesh may not be directly culpable, except for periods of military rule and during the tenure of the BNP-Jamaat government from 2001-2006, it has to take responsibility for the non-implementation of the VPA as well as law and order. While India has absorbed these Hindu refugees, the CAA is an attempt to give them citizenship since they will never return to Bangladesh., Hate speeches by Islamic clerics have given encouragement for the harassment of Hindus, with the aim of grabbing their properties. Bangladesh has begun to act against hate speeches only after the *Hefazet* started a campaign demanding the removal of all statues from

public places, and destroyed some statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

To counterbalance the Indian narrative on illegal migration, Bangladesh often refers to - as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina did in her speech at the 17th December Summit - the fact that many Indians are gainfully employed in Bangladesh, and send back remittances to India, and Bangladeshi tourists travel to India in large numbers. She was hinting at the financial contribution of these people to the Indian economy. While this may be true, Indians working in Bangladesh are not illegal migrants, and tourists from Bangladesh are also legal travellers. Both these categories are different from illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

The Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya refugee issue has burdened Bangladesh, and cast a shadow over her ties with Myanmar. Bangladesh's expectation that India will take the lead in solving the issue has not been met, and China has tried to play the role of a facilitator without much success. There is no immediate resolution on the horizon, and Myanmar is in no hurry to accept the refugees back, though agreements have been worked out for their repatriation. Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary recently went on record to say that to repatriate over a million refugees will take several years, as more children have been born in the refugee camps, and have added to their numbers.⁸

Domestic Politics and Religious Radicalism

The future direction of politics and the growth of Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh are sectors that will impact bilateral ties. The molycoddling of the *Hefazet*, and some other Islamist outfits like the *Islami Andolan* and *Khilafat-e-Majlis*, with the political objective of building up a pro-government Islamist front, has given the impression that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has allowed space to these groups for keeping the extremists at bay. Though known as a moderate Islamic country, Bangladesh has gone through a phase of Islamic militancy and extremist violence, leading to brutal murders of atheist bloggers, liberal intellectuals, members of the Hindu minority community, and some foreigners. Emboldened by policies of appeasement, radical Islamic organisations, like the *Hefazet*, have upped their demands and want more *Sharia* compliant policies.

Recent terrorist attacks by the ISIS-inspired young and educated youth from middle class families have shattered the belief that religious radicals

came from madrassas, Islamic organisations, and Islamist political parties. The leaders and cadre of the earlier generation of religious radicals were from organisations like the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen-Bangladesh [JMB], the Jagrata Muslim Janata-Bangladesh [JMJB], and the Harakat-ul Mujahideen-Bangladesh [HUJI-B]. They matured via Islamist organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami [JeI], and honed their terrorist tactics in the Jihad in Afghanistan.⁹ The Army-backed Caretaker government from 2007-2008 started a concerted campaign against them, and arrested several leaders of these organisations. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been unwavering in her determination to prosecute them. Several have been convicted and executed, and these actions have had a deterrent effect. Religious radicalism remains an ever-present danger for both India and Bangladesh since insurgents and terrorists operate across borders.

The China Factor

China's role, and Bangladesh's propensity to leverage the China card, has become far more relevant in the current situation than ever before. China's "unpeaceful rise" has led to muscle flexing and aggressive forays into South Asia for influence, riding on the back of its financial muscle. Political elites in South Asia are amenable to financial inducements, and China has not hesitated to utilise its cheque book diplomacy to buy influence. China's objectives are driven by hegemonic ambition, mercantile interests, and reducing the space for India in her neighbourhood. The client-patron Pakistan-China relationship is the leading example. The convergence of interest vis-à-vis India has helped to build the hostile China-Pakistan axis. This axis is also keen to use Bangladesh for its objectives against India.

China is now keen to extend this "successful" model to other countries in South Asia. The China factor can be a potentially damaging for Bangladesh-India ties, especially if Bangladesh starts leveraging this to undermine India's security interests. Bangladesh has been cautious so far about not getting entangled in China's debt-trap diplomacy which might allow the latter to grab more space for its anti-India moves. The sensitive geo-strategic situation in the area of the Siliguri Corridor will always remain a concern for India in any Bangladesh-China joint infrastructure project. Already, China has a strong foothold in the Armed Forces of Bangladesh, as the primary supplier of defence hardware which inhibits engagement with India's defence forces, except in the training sector. Engagement in the Defence sector is important in the context of the Bangladeshi Army's history of intervention in politics, though it

has become more professional, and has distanced itself from politics.

Conclusion

For historical reasons, India's bonds with the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina will remain durable. The future course of leadership of the main political parties and, inevitably, the question of succession will crop up. Succession issues will dictate trends in domestic politics. Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have alternated as Prime Ministers since 1992. Will the leadership of their parties remain within the family? Or, will other leaders emerge from the next generation? Khaleda Zia is ailing, and is probably unfit for active politics. Her son, Tarique Rahman, the acting head of the BNP, cannot return from exile in London for fear of imprisonment and the death penalty, having been convicted in massive corruption cases, and planning the murder of Awami League leaders.

Going beyond the rhetoric of the golden phase in bilateral ties, the critical question facing India today is: how far will Bangladesh align itself with China? Recent moves to normalise ties with Pakistan, and China's growing ability to pump funds into infrastructure projects, could ultimately lead to political pressure on Bangladesh to adopt policies that are aligned to China's anti-Indian strategic goals in South Asia. However, India has considerable leverage to counterbalance Chinese moves in Bangladesh, and this balancing act will determine the future course of bilateral ties. If the counterbalancing remains within the bandwidth of acceptability, then bilateral ties can be insulated from disruption. Mutual interests should dictate that India and Bangladesh manage bilateral ties with sensitivity, and prevent any backsliding.

Notes :

- ¹ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/modi-hasina-virtual-summit-celebrating-bond/> accessed on January 17, 2021.
- ² https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33306/Joint_Statement_on_IndiaBangladesh_Virtual_Summit accessed on January 17, 2021.
- ³ Details at: <http://www.padmabridge.gov.bd/cstatus.php>, accessed on January 28, 2021.
- ⁴ <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/culture/waterways-can-boost-india-bangladesh-ties/#:~:text=Of%20the%204%2C095%20kilometres%20of,kilometres%20fall%20under%20riverine%20boundaries.&text=This%20will%20enable%20greater%20coordination,the%20Mongla%20port%20in%20Bangladesh> accessed January 15, 2021.
- ⁵ <https://www.adb.org/countries/bangladesh-main> accessed on January 14, 2021.

- ⁶ <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/35526382/24529-lba-mea-booklet-final> accessed January 12, 2021.
- ⁷ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-partnership-in-post-pandemic-on-January-19,2021>.
- ⁸ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2021/01/19/tripartite-talks-on-rohingya-repatriation-on-tueda> accessed January 22, 2021.
