

## ***India-Bangladesh Relations: Some Issues Need Deft Handling***

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After a series of ups and downs in the past, India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship seems quite stable now. This stability has come about because of a number of positive developments that took place after the Sheikh Hasina led Awami League government came to power in Bangladesh in January 2009. While it is true that India and Bangladesh are going through one of the best phases in their bilateral relationship, there are still some irritants which need to be resolved carefully. Besides, there are also some regional as well as extra-regional powers that would like to upset this relationship.

The assumption of power by Sheikh Hasina in January 2009 brought a paradigm shift in the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh. Though Sheikh Hasina was also in power in Bangladesh from 1996-2001, the same vigour in the bilateral relationship was not seen. This was because the Awami League, at that time, shared power with its alliance partners. These did not allow Sheikh Hasina to take major decisions and, consequently, only some minor improvements were seen.

Things have, however, become different now, with the Awami League enjoying a two-thirds majority in parliament since 2009. This has allowed the government to do all those things which it could not do in its earlier tenure. Sheikh Hasina has shown clear intent in taking action against the anti-India terrorists and insurgents who have taken shelter in Bangladesh. She has also decided to take action against the Islamist radicals active within Bangladesh. Some of them, like the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI), have been operating even inside India, using Bangladesh as a base. Pakistan based terrorists, like the LeT and JeM, have used Bangladesh as a transit point.

Sheikh Hasina was determined to take action against them, as these groups were in alliance with the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP),

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especially when it was leading the four-party coalition government. BNP actually used Mufti Hannan, a HUJI leader who, in association with some Indian insurgents like ULFA, attacked Sheikh Hasina's Dhaka rally, in which she was grievously injured, and some of her close associates died. Perhaps, this was the turning point for her; it made her go against these elements in a serious way. These steps have actually helped both India and Bangladesh. Though Islamisation is on the rise in Bangladesh, terror groups are on the defensive as law enforcement agencies are acting against them. Sheikh Hasina's action against Islamists, insurgents, and terrorists has been appreciated by India. It has helped to bring peace in the Northeast India. However, it has also made anti-India elements in Bangladesh unhappy. They think that by her actions against terrorist and insurgent groups, Sheikh Hasina has given up an important leverage against India.

If the action against Islamists and terrorists was an important confidence building measure, then the resolution of both the land boundary dispute as well as the maritime border dispute were important steps taken by India to consolidate the relationship. To resolve the land boundary dispute, India accepted loss of 10,000 acres of land. The maritime border dispute was also resolved at a considerable disadvantage to India. India could have easily ignored the verdict of UNCLOS - as China did in the case of South China Sea. But it chose to abide by the ruling in the interest of good neighbourly relations.

India has helped Bangladesh in the power sector. Like many other countries in South Asia, Bangladesh was a power deficit country in 2009. Industries in Bangladesh were running with great difficulty, using oil based power generators. Though India itself is a power deficit country, it chose to help out Bangladesh. Instead of appreciating India's generosity, the anti-India section in Bangladesh looked at it from a negative perspective. They argued that it was strategically not advisable for Bangladesh to depend on Indian electricity. Later, India-Bangladesh signed an agreement to build a power plant in Rampal. This power plant of 1320 MW capacity is based in Bangladesh. However, the detractors even criticised this on environmental grounds. This approach of the anti-India section is in stark contrast to how they view Chinese infrastructural projects. While they try to invariably appreciate Chinese projects, they find fault with Indian ones.

India and Bangladesh are also making major progress in the area of connectivity. Goods are being transported by road, rail, and river routes using Bangladeshi vessels, trucks and the railways. This progress in connectivity

will further help to bring both countries closer. Generally, there is a trend to view this progress in connectivity working in favour of India by Bangladesh. There is a need to rectify this. While the improved connectivity through Bangladesh is important for the progress of Northeast India, its importance should not be over-emphasised. The larger purpose of the connectivity is to integrate the economy of the two countries, and improve the people-to-people relationship. For instance, a large part of Indian exports to Bangladesh are intermediary products which are used by Bangladesh to export to other countries. This helps the export-driven economy of Bangladesh. The improved connectivity through rail has helped Bangladesh import essential commodities in a short period of time, and keep their prices under control during the COVID-19 pandemic. This helped the Bangladeshi people during a difficult time, and helped the government in maintaining political stability. In fact, Bangladesh has turned out to be one of the few economies in the world which grew despite the pandemic.

The transit through Bangladesh will bring multiple benefits to the country. Its Chittagong and Mongla ports will be better utilised. Trans-shipment will generate employment and revenue for Bangladesh and its people. The anti-India section would like to ignore these benefits, and prefer to condemn Sheikh Hasina for establishing friendly relations with India.

The Bangladesh media has not highlighted important concessions made by India in sorting out the land boundary dispute and the maritime boundary dispute, but has focused too much on the unresolved Teesta water sharing issue. This gives the impression that India has not done enough to improve the bilateral relationship, and that it is only Bangladesh that is making unilateral gestures. They have criticised Sheikh Hasina for making unilateral concessions. This is, however, far from truth.

The issue of the Teesta river waters could not be solved because of the non-cooperation of the West Bengal Government. Water is a state subject in India. Hence, for a bilateral agreement on the sharing of the Teesta waters, the support of the West Bengal Government would also be needed. The West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, appeared unwilling to oblige the Central government in this regard. She backed out from the agreement during the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government, and has taken the same stance with the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government.

Meanwhile, there has been an important development too with regard to the management of the Teesta waters on the Bangladesh side. As no

agreement with India on the sharing of the Teesta river waters has been reached, the Bangladesh Government now wants to explore an alternative solution. It wants to manage the water on its side by building a reservoir so that it can use it in an optimum manner, throughout the year. In early August 2020, Dhaka sought financial assistance of nearly US\$ 1 billion from Beijing to complete this project.

Bangladesh enjoys a close relationship with China, and there is bipartisan consensus over the approach to be taken towards it. China is Bangladesh's main arms supplier, investor, and trade partner. It has invested large sums in Bangladesh on a string of power and infrastructure projects. Between 2008 and 2018, China supplied weapons worth US\$ 1.93 billion to Bangladesh. This constitutes 71.8 percent of Bangladesh's military acquisitions over this period, and makes China the biggest supplier of arms to Dhaka. Despite this dependence on China for its arms supply, Bangladesh has tried to balance its relationship with India so that no misperception is created either in China or India. The Awami League Government has shown sensitivity to India's security concerns, and avoided projects that have such implications.

The deadlock over the sharing of the Teesta waters has, perhaps, prodded Bangladesh to improve the management of the Teesta waters within its own boundaries. This decision is being perceived by many as Dhaka turning away from India. However, this may not be true. It appears that there is a tendency at present to see everything in the light of recent Chinese incursions in Ladakh, or in terms of Sino-Indian competition in South Asia. India should not have problems if Bangladesh wants to manage its side of the water of the Teesta River. If an agreement is reached between India and Bangladesh at a later date, it would only make the situation better for India. However, even if that does not happen, Bangladesh would feel less aggrieved as it would have water on its side at its disposal.

The funding of this project by Beijing would, however, make it difficult for Bangladesh to protest over the damming of the Brahmaputra. In any case, it is unlikely that either India's or Bangladesh's protests will have much impact, and stop China in its endeavour. It is also possible that the pro-Chinese constituency in Bangladesh might use it to present Beijing in a positive light.

Earlier, India was the largest trading partner of Bangladesh. This position has now gone to China. The trade deficit of Bangladesh with China is growing at a fast pace. Interestingly, some people in Bangladesh resent a much smaller

trade deficit with India; however, they have no problem with the trade deficit with China. Bangladeshis now also resent restrictions imposed on their FDI by India. They are demanding that the FDI from Bangladesh should be given much more freedom, and it should not necessarily come only via the Government route. It is true that Bangladesh is still under the same act as Pakistan, and the amount of FDI coming from Bangladesh is not likely to be great. Moreover, in genuine cases it can be through government. It is highly unlikely that the Indian government would discourage genuine FDI investment from Bangladesh. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from India to Bangladesh is US\$ 3.11 billion. This includes Reliance's US\$ 642-million 745 MW gas-fired project and Adani's US\$ 400 million in the Mirsarai Economic Zone. Indian FDI is in critical sectors, like power. This helps other sectors of Bangladesh economy to do well.

Another allegation of the Bangladeshi side is that, despite the agreement on Coordinated Border Management Plan to avoid the use of lethal weapons except in self-defence against terrorists or smugglers, a certain number of Bangladeshis are killed every year by the Border Security Force (BSF). They argue that, despite the infamous narcotics trade on the United States-Mexico border, a lesser number of people are killed on that border. The killing of innocent people is always regrettable. However, what needs to be pointed out to the Bangladeshi side is that people who are killed on India-Bangladesh border are often smugglers and cattle traders. The India-Bangladesh border is a difficult border. It is difficult to manage because of its riverine nature, and the fact that people in many places live right up to the border.

Generally, it has been pointed out that the Teesta water dispute is the only remaining dispute between India and Bangladesh, and its solution would make the bilateral relationship smooth. What is conveniently forgotten is the long-standing issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh. A report of the Group of Ministers on National Security, submitted in 2001, estimated that, post-1971, approximately 12 million Bangladeshis have illegally migrated into various states of northeast India. However, this number is expected to be much larger if one includes the illegal Bangladeshi population residing in other parts of India. Moreover, the Bangladeshis have been illegally coming to India even after 2001.

While it is important for India is to take note of issues that concern Bangladesh, it is equally important for Bangladesh to be sensitive about issues that impact Indian interests. Illegal migration is one such issue. This is

something which the Bangladesh Government has to deal with sooner than later in the interest of better bilateral relations. This is necessary to make the government-to-government relationship between the two countries more sustainable.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no desire in Bangladesh to solve this issue to mutual satisfaction. In the past, successive governments in Bangladesh have denied the very existence of this problem. One of the country's top diplomats once even said that if Bangladeshis would have to illegally immigrate, they would rather swim to Italy than walk into India. The total denial of such a phenomenon only hardens sentiments in India over the issue.

It is true that Bangladesh's economy has seen an unprecedented growth - at the rate of almost eight percent in the last few years. While this has helped in improving the living standards of people in some parts of Bangladesh, a large part of the country still remains poor. These poor people cannot afford the cost of illegally migrating to Italy. Ironically, only the relatively better off people are trying to illegally migrate to Europe. Most of the poor ones simply walk into India. This was clearly highlighted when some illegal migrants were recently deported from Karnataka.

Illegal immigration from Bangladesh, comprising both Hindus and Muslims, is an important issue from the national security perspective of India. A large number of Bangladeshi immigrants are illegally living in India. While Hindus are said to have migrated after facing religious persecution, most of the Muslim migrants are termed as economic migrants.

The issue was further complicated some time ago when the Rohingya refugees, originally from Myanmar, started infiltrating into India through Bangladesh. It was suspected that the Bangladeshi authorities were consciously pushing these refugees into India. Some observers feel that Bangladesh probably hoped that the presence of Rohingyas in India would force India to take Bangladesh's side against Myanmar. Moreover, Dhaka could also get rid of the thousands of Rohingyas living on its territory.

It is well known that the minorities face violence and religious persecution in Muslim-majority countries in India's neighbourhood like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. They are often dispossessed of their land and property and, on many occasions, are even forced to convert. Their womenfolk are abducted, and married off after being converted. Unfortunately, no international condemnation is expressed on these issues.

The government of India plans the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), first in the state of Assam and, subsequently, in the whole

country. There is no doubt that the implementation of NRC is a complicated issue; but if properly implemented, it would make the India-Bangladesh relationship more sustainable. Bangladeshis have also negatively reacted to India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). They have argued that the NRC and CAA are not internal matters as they have ramifications across the border.

The Indian Government has clarified that the issue of NRC and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA are internal to India. The CAA is intended to provide expeditious consideration of Indian citizenship to the persecuted minorities - those who entered India on or before 31 December 2014 - from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan. It does not affect the existing avenues which are available to the other communities to seek citizenship. Nor does it seek to strip anybody of citizenship.

As India-Bangladesh relationship is currently strong, and the trust levels on both sides are high, this is the right time to deal with the issue of illegal migration. Bangladesh has already documented its citizens, and maintains their biometric records. The National Identity Registration Wing (NIDW) was created within the Bangladesh Election Commission for that purpose. The country has now also distributed machine-readable smart national identity (NID) cards among 10 crore citizens, replacing the earlier paper-laminated cards. India, too, is justified in undertaking a similar exercise. This will help India get a grip on the problem. Once the documentation of citizens is done in India, both sides can share their database. This will help manage the problem in a more amicable manner.

The confusion created by the NRC and CAA has given both China and Pakistan an opportunity to exploit the situation to their advantage. China tried to lure Bangladesh by offering certain concessions to goods being exported from Bangladesh. This was an attempt to weaken India's position in South Asia at a time when Indian and Chinese forces are in a stand-off situation in Ladakh. Pakistanis are also trying to woo Bangladesh, hoping to capitalise on the confusion created by the CAA and NRC. With this hope, Pakistan's High Commissioner to Bangladesh recently met the Bangladesh Prime Minister, and evinced his desire to improve bilateral relations. But the Bangladesh wounds inflicted by Pakistan are too deep to be filled by shallow opportunistic gestures.

To strengthen the position of Sheikh Hasina in the domestic politics of Bangladesh, it is important to highlight the concessions made by India. The anti-India section would always like to undermine the position of Sheikh Hasina

and the image of India within Bangladesh so that they can make political capital out of it. At the same time, it is equally important to deal with some controversial issues of the bilateral relationship. Actually, it is right time to make progress on such issues, especially when the confidence level between the two sides is high. These issues, however, should be handled with great sensitivity and, perhaps, by taking the Bangladeshi side into confidence, so that no misperception is created. These issues cannot be swept under the carpet forever. A mutually acceptable solution could actually create a sound footing for the relationship.

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