

Strengthening Cooperation and Reducing Irritants: India-Bangladesh Relations Today

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The India-Bangladesh relationship has historically been based not only on a shared socio-cultural heritage, mutual respect, and multifaceted cooperation, but also on civilisational ties which have continued unhindered, and even strengthened over the past several decades. Political pragmatism, cooperative approach, and positive attitudes towards each other, especially at the highest level, have played an important role in preserving and strengthening the friendly bond between the two countries. Given the history of the Indian subcontinent, the people on either side of the border have enormous respect and goodwill for each other. Their way of life and practicing values have tremendous similarities with ours. One can easily recognise these similarities in their socio-cultural and religious practices, language, and their respect for modern values of secularism, pluralism and democracy. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote the national anthem of both the countries, is revered equally by people across the border.

The India-Bangladesh 4,096 km long porous border runs through rivers, ponds, agricultural fields, and sometimes homes - wherein the entrance of the home is in one country while the exit is in the other. Five Indian states - notably West Bengal (2,217 km); Assam (262 km); Meghalaya (443 km); Tripura (856 km); and Mizoram (318 km) - share borders with Bangladesh. Given this unique geographical proximity, the two countries face common challenges, and appear to be bound by a common destiny. The geographical location of India and Bangladesh is unique in the sense that many Bangladeshi analysts believe that their country is India-locked. However, by the same token, India's north-eastern region could be considered Bangladesh-locked. Bangladesh is crucial for the stability of India's north-eastern region on the one hand, and can work as a bridge to South-East Asia on the other.

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It is important to note that, since 2009, Bangladesh has helped India crackdown on various militant groups that were creating problems in India's north-eastern region. It also took action against some of the militant outfits operating from Bangladeshi territory. This year, the two countries are completing five decades of victory in the Liberation War and the establishment of diplomatic relations. It is now time to analyse the various components of this multifaceted relationship, and its prospects in the future.

The Liberation War

About five decades ago, when the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), were fighting for their political rights and democratic aspirations against a highly repressive military regime in Islamabad, India provided refuge to millions of people escaping inhuman treatment at the hands of Pakistan's armed forces. The Indian Army also joined the *Muktijodhas* (freedom fighters) shoulder-to-shoulder in what came to be known as the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The golden memories of this extraordinary cooperation got revived recently when 122 soldiers of the Bangladesh Armed Forces boarded Indian Air Force's C-17 Globemaster aircraft in Dhaka, on 12 January 2021, to join India's 72nd Republic Day Parade in New Delhi.

Vikram K. Doraiswami, Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, tweeted pictures of the Bangladeshi contingent with the IAF aircraft, saying "Bangladesh Armed Forces boarding IAF C-17 Globemaster to join Republic Day Parade 2021. First time ever to host this contingent in our Parade. Together We Fought, Together We March, proud of 50 years of a friendship beyond strategic partnership." It was both a mesmerising and an emotional moment to see the soldiers of India and Bangladesh marching together on the historical Rajpath in New Delhi, on 26 January 2021. The contingent, composed of members of the Bangladesh Army, Navy and Air Force, was led by Lieutenant Colonel Abu Mohammed Shahnoor Shawon, and his deputies Lieutenant Farhan Ishraq and Flight Lieutenant Sibat Rahman. The contingent of the Bangladeshi armed forces participating in the Republic Day parade of India is unprecedented. The event showcased the level of trust and friendship between the two neighbouring countries.

Neighbourhood First and Bangladesh Foremost

Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia, and figures prominently in the Indian scheme of things regarding its immediate as well as

extended neighbourhood. Ever since 2011, Bangladesh has been enjoying Duty Free and Quota Free (DFQF) access to Indian markets under the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) for all tariff lines, except alcohol and tobacco. It has also offered Bangladesh up to US\$ 8 billion as a Line of Credit (LC), which is the largest amount offered by India to any single country. Giving importance to its immediate neighbours is part of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy. During her visit to Dhaka in October 2017, the then External Affairs Minister (EAM), Ms. Sushma Swaraj, categorically stated that, "India is following a policy of neighbours first, and among the neighbours, Bangladesh is foremost."

The two countries often cooperate with each other in addressing common challenges, and do not hesitate in taking the required measures to address each other's genuine concerns. Given its ability, strength, and resources, India never shies away from taking asymmetrical responsibilities, and providing necessary help and assistance to her smaller neighbour in time of need. It is important to note that, when the Rohingya Muslims who fled Myanmar, created a refugee crisis in Bangladesh, India was among the first few countries reaching out to it. It launched "Operation Insaniyat" in September 2017, to supply relief materials consisting of rice, pulses, sugar, salt, cooking oil, tea, ready to eat noodles, biscuits, mosquito nets, and other items for about 300,000 people.¹

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, India was at the forefront in offering help to Bangladesh to cope with the fast spreading health crisis. As early as 25 March 2020, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Ms. Reeva Ganguly Das, handed over 30,000 surgical masks and 15,000 head covers to the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, A. K. Abdul Momin.

The same was the case with the supply of Hydroxychloroquine to Bangladesh. Further, on 5 November 2020, the Serum Institute of India (SII) signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Government of Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi Company, Beximco, to supply 30 million shots of Covishield, the Indian version of Oxford-AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine. As per the MoU, the SII agreed to provide 5 million shots of the vaccine, after the approval, to Bangladesh every month. India lived up to the expectations of the people of Bangladesh, and on 21 January 2021, it supplied 2 million shots of the anti-Covid vaccine to the friendly neighbour under grant assistance. Dr. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister, tweeted "Touchdown in Dhaka: Vaccine Maitri (friendship) reaffirms the highest priority by India to relations with Bangladesh."

Warmth and Goodwill

The warmth, goodwill, and cordiality of this friendly relationship is often showcased during the frequent mutual high-level visits. When Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, came to India for a four-day state visit in 2017, her Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, ignored all protocol, and went to the airport to receive her. During her October 2019 visit to India, Sheikh Hasina was the chief guest of the India Economic Forum which was organised by the World Economic Forum (WEF). Although the outbreak of COVID-19 has negatively affected the frequency of these high-level visits, it did not stop the Indian Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, from embarking on a two-day visit to Dhaka on 18 August 2020.

During this visit, the Indian Foreign Secretary met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and conveyed a special message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi: that India's relations with Bangladesh were special among the other countries of the neighbourhood, and there was a need to further consolidate ties between the two countries. He also discussed the importance of the 100th birth anniversary of Bangabandhu, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the 50 years of the liberation of Bangladesh as well as the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and Bangladesh. Later, on 17 December 2021, the two countries held virtual summit to comprehensively discuss bilateral relations, and exchanged views on regional and international issues.

Amicable Resolution of Contentious Issues

In the past few years, the two countries could amicably resolve many complex issues, such as the land and maritime borders. In 2014, when a Hague-based international court ruled in favour of Bangladesh, following which India agreed to give up its sovereign rights over 19,467 square kilometres of the disputed 25,692 square kilometre area in the Bay of Bengal. The verdict, by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), was broadly accepted by the two parties as a positive development, with a view to consolidating friendly relations further. Next year, the Indian parliament passed the historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) Bill on 7 May 2015 which allowed India to sign and ratify the agreement with Bangladesh.

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka in June 2015, India and Bangladesh exchanged the LBA documents, paving the way for settling the 41-year-old border dispute. As per the agreement, 51 Bangladeshi

enclaves were later physically transferred to India, and 111 Indian enclaves to Bangladesh. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) press release on 20 November 2015 mentions that the enclaves “were physically transferred to the other country with effect from the midnight of 31 July 2015.” At a time when major powers in the contemporary international system refuse to accept any adverse verdicts regarding their territorial claims and tend to take unilateral decisions, India’s approach towards Bangladesh was well appreciated, both within the region and beyond.

Improving Bilateral and Multilateral Connectivity

Connectivity has always been an important aspect of India’s relations with other South Asian neighbours. Bangladesh’s cooperation was required to give a boost to the developmental activities in India’s north-eastern states. In this respect, India and Bangladesh have taken several meaningful initiatives in the past decade which, on the one hand, allowed India to improve connectivity within the north-eastern region and, on the other, restore pre-partition connectivity links. Bangladesh also met India’s longstanding demand of providing the free transit of goods to its north-eastern region through Bangladesh. The permission to use Bangladesh’s inland, along with the Chittagong and Mongla ports for transporting goods to the north-eastern states is remarkable in many ways.

On the issue of improving bilateral connectivity, the two countries, after a gap of 43 years, restored the railway link between Kolkata and Dhaka in 2008. This resulted in the inauguration of the *Maitri* (Friendship) Express on 14 April 2008. Initially, the train started running twice a week; however, later it was increased to six times a week. The success of the Kolkata-Dhaka route prompted the two countries to inaugurate a second train, restoring the Kolkata-Khulna route. With the passage of time, demands to open other routes gained momentum, and the two countries worked to open up routes connecting Petrapole-Benapole, Gede-Darshana, Singhabad-Rohanpur, and Radhikapur-Birol. Recently, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and his Bangladeshi counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, restored the 10.5 kilometre railway link between Haldibari in West Bengal and Chilahati in Bangladesh. The Haldibari-Chilahati route was closed after the 1965 India-Pakistan war.

Bangladesh has also been a cooperative partner in India’s attempts towards sub-regional and multilateral connectivity in the region and beyond. It is a well established fact that Bangladesh played an important role in the formation

of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and is an active member of other sub-regional groupings, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and, more recently, the BBIN initiative. It is important to note that when SAARC failed to endorse the Regional Agreement on Railways and Regulation of Passenger and Cargo Vehicular Traffic in South Asia due to Pakistan's non-cooperative attitude, India floated the idea of having a similar agreement between the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN). Bangladesh actively supported the initiative, and the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) was signed in the Bhutanese Capital Thimpu, on 15 June 2015. The joint statement issued thereafter categorically mentioned the 30 identified priority transport connectivity projects, having an estimated cost of about US \$ 8 billion.

Of late, Bangladesh has expressed its interest to be part of the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway project. The 1,360-kilometre long IMT trilateral highway project was conceived way back in 2002, with the aim of getting a land route to connect with the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The project starts from Moreh in India, and goes on to connect with Mae Sot in Thailand, via Myanmar. India has already taken up two projects in Myanmar under the IMT. Bangladesh's participation in the IMT would boost connectivity and multilateral cooperation between South and Southeast Asia.

Virtual Summit 2020

On 17 December 2020, India and Bangladesh held a high-level virtual summit in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to Bangladesh as a "key pillar" of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. His counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, called India a "true friend" of her country. During the summit, comprehensive discussions were held on all aspects of bilateral relations, and the two parties emphasised that the relations were based on fraternal ties, reflected an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust and understanding, and thus transcending the strategic partnership. The two sides also exchanged views on regional and international issues. Prime Minister Narendra Modi thanked his counterpart for supporting India's bid to become a non-permanent member at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The two countries also agreed to work in areas of UNSC reform, combating climate change, attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the protection of minorities, etc.

The 39-point Joint Statement issued after the summit, underlined important points that were discussed, and agreed upon. Regarding border management and security cooperation, the joint statement mentioned that the two sides agreed to hold an early meeting of the Joint Boundary Conference so that a new set of strip maps could be prepared to finalise the delineation of the boundary. Besides, the two sides also agreed to fence the border at all the pending sectors at the earliest.

On the trade partnership, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appreciated India for providing Duty Free and Quota Free (DFQF) access to Bangladeshi exports under SAFTA. On his part, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised on addressing the contentious issue of Non-Tariff Barriers, and other procedural bottlenecks. The two leaders also directed officials “to expeditiously conclude the ongoing joint study on the prospects of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)”. Besides, the two countries signed seven bilateral documents, notably: the Framework of Understanding (FOU) on Cooperation in Hydrocarbon Sector; the Protocol on Trans-boundary Elephant Conservation; an MOU regarding Indian Grant Assistance for Implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) through Local Bodies and other Public Sector Institutions; an MOU on the Supply of Equipment and Improvement of Garbage / Solid Waste Disposal Ground at Lamchori Area for Barishal City Corporation; the Terms of Reference of India-Bangladesh CEOs Forum; an MoU between Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Memorial Museum, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the National Museum, New Delhi, India; and an MOU on Cooperation in the field of Agriculture.² The above agreements would further strengthen the friendship bond between the two South Asian neighbours.

Potential Irritants

India-Bangladesh relationship appears to be one of the best examples of bilateral relations in the world. However, one needs to ponder a little deeper to understand certain issues that have the potential of become stumbling blocks in this otherwise friendly relationship. Many in India are sceptical about China’s increasing involvement in Bangladesh. In the recent past, China has emerged as the largest trading partner, an important source of investment, and a major supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh. Dhaka has, so far, been smart enough to balance its relations with both New Delhi and Beijing. However, given China’s growing role in the South Asian region, it is not going to be easy.

There is a growing perception among the people in Bangladesh that India has failed to address some of the genuine concerns of their country. The sharing of river waters is one such issue about which Bangladeshis feel India has let them down. The Teesta water treaty was drafted long ago in 2010, after a thorough discussion between the two countries. It has been almost a decade now, but the draft treaty is yet to be signed and come into force. The Indian state of West Bengal is openly critical of the water sharing formula as it feels that the interests of farmers in Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, South and North Dinajpur, and Darjeeling have not been taken into account.

A prominent section in Bangladesh feels that, besides offering humanitarian aid, India did not support Bangladesh on the issue of the Rohingyas. Maj. Gen. (Retd) Muniruzzaman, who heads the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BISS), categorically stated that, “Given our close ties, we did not receive the cooperation we had hoped for from India regarding the Rohingya crisis. While the whole world is condemning the Myanmar Army for committing genocide, India had grown close ties with the Myanmar army”.³

Many observers and analysts believe India could not do so due to her own interests in keeping good ties with Myanmar.

The other important issue is the killing of Bangladeshi citizens at the border by the Indian armed forces. Despite repeated attempts by both sides to bring the killings down to zero, it has not been achieved. Then, there are also concerns about the utilisation of the Line of Credits (LCs) offered by India to Bangladesh. Many blame tough conditionalities and bureaucratic hurdles on the part of India behind the poor utilisation of LCs.

Conclusion

In 2021, India and Bangladesh are celebrating 50 years of their diplomatic relations. Starting modestly soon after the Liberation War and the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Indo-Bangladesh relationship has matured over the years, and developmental cooperation has grown, both in its size and coverage. Given their geographical location in South Asia, the two friendly neighbours have often cooperated in addressing some common challenges and some genuine concerns of each other. Bangladesh is not only India’s biggest trading partner in the region, but it also figures prominently in India’s Neighbourhood First policy.

Given the fast changing geo-political and geo-strategic environment, the nature of the common challenges faced by the two countries are also undergoing changes. This requires the two countries to strengthen their cooperation further, and address whatever potential irritants are left.

Notes :

- ¹ “Operation Insaniyat: Humanitarian Assistance to Bangladesh on Account of Influx of Refugees”, Press Release, MEA, 2017, 14 September 2017.
- ² “Joint Statement on India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit”, MEA, 2020, 17 December 2020.
- ³ Ejaz, Raheed, “India Wants Bangladesh by its Side in the Geopolitical Scenario,” *Prothom Alo*, 3 September 2020.

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