

Tenets of India-Bangladesh Relations

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Geo-politically, the British colonial masters had restructured the Indian subcontinent into multiple sovereign political entities. The Partition was the super-imposition of European style nation-state boundaries on a geographically proximate cultural landmass and economic space in the region. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947, with the creation of Pakistan on the basis of religion and, subsequently, the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 on linguistic-cultural lines led to the drawing of the contemporary boundaries in the region. Despite its historical, ethno-religious and cultural linkages as well as geographical proximity, India has been struggling to maintain stable and strong relations with these two neighbours. In fact, post-independence ruling elites have shaped the distinct nationalistic political discourses within the “liberal-secular-cultural” ideas (closer to India), and “religious nationalistic tendency” with “Islam at its core” (distancing India). These distinct national political leanings have been used for regime security by both democratic and undemocratic forces, time and again.

This paper is an attempt to assess India’s relations with Bangladesh since its independence instead of only in the context of India’s present Neighbourhood First Policy. This essay deals with two aspects: first, the basic tenets of India-Bangladesh relations viz. “cultural identity”, “religious identity”, and “small state imperatives”; and second, their emergent structural and functional variables. Thus, this essay analyses the relationship under five sub-variables: a) structural variables, b) political variables, c) functional variables, d) framework of cooperation, and e) assessment of Neighbourhood Policy.

Structural Variables

The India-Bangladesh relationship is a journey of civilisational spreads to sovereign entity. Both the countries have close socio-cultural, linguistic, and

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racial commonalities, which have evolved from shared historical legacies and civilisational affinities. These geographically proximate countries share a long land border (about 4096 km), which is porous in nature. (Bhardwaj, 2013) In fact, the two countries are part of a common organic ecological system, though they are politically different sovereign entities and, therefore, imprisoned in the discourse of resource nationalism. As a result, issues like territorial and border demarcation, water and other resource sharing have become contentious.

Besides the common cultural bonds and shared borders, the memories of shelter, sacrifice, and the cooperation of India during the liberation war of 1971 have not been enough to maintain warm relations. Rather, these have been turned into fear psychosis, usually dubbed as the “India factor” (Hassan 1989: 44-61; Ahmed 1984; Hossain 1981). In fact, the post-independence political discourse in Bangladesh has been engulfed in the nationalist construct amidst the adherents of 1947 partition and believers in the spirit of 1971 War. The political forces with religious ideals continuously construct the discourse within a security perspective by saying ‘Hindu India’ has territorially surrounded ‘Muslim Bangladesh’. Bangladesh is bordered by India on three sides: the west, the north, and the northeast. The “India locked” position of Bangladesh, implicitly or explicitly, makes India a factor in traditional, non-traditional, and human security challenges of the country (Kodikara 1984; Chakraborty, 2016). Bangladesh’s location and small state-fear psychosis impinges upon these challenges, making Bangladeshis fear that it is easy for India to alter the political situation in their country. Hence, they are not only sceptical of India’s intentions but are also critical of all of India’s recent ‘developmental initiatives’ in Bangladesh.

However, the location of Bangladesh in the region has also given an opportunity to be a partner in development. India’s quest to connect its own “Bangladesh Locked” North Eastern states with Southeast Asian countries through its Act East Policy makes Bangladesh a significant partner in India’s policymaking. Bangladesh is connecting India to ASEAN countries through Myanmar, and the Bay of Bengal opens the countries up to the Indian Ocean for offshore opportunities.

Political Variables

The India-Bangladesh relationship has been determined along the political constructs of Bangladesh, and has experienced many ups and downs over the last five decades, and more. The “India factor”, as either a positive or a

negative connotation, has remained an influencing factor in the making of Bangladesh's foreign policy. In Bangladesh, the general trend is that when Awami League (AL), along with the progressive left-wing political parties, forms the government, India and Bangladesh usually maintained cordial relations; when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), along with other religious right-wing political parties, come to power, the country has generally maintained an attitude of mistrust towards India, and has constantly adopted an anti-Indian foreign policy stance as a counter-balancing strategy. Thus, Bangladesh's relations with India are determined by its domestic political constructs, impinged upon by the type of political power in place.

These forces in Bangladesh have striking characteristics, functionalities, and idiosyncrasies. These can be combined into three distinct strata: the liberal, the radical, and the rational.

The Liberals are a group identified by their belief in the principles of mutual respect, co-existence, brotherhood, and friendly ties with neighbours with whom they share ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural bonds as well as historical legacies. They are moderate and liberal, and believe in the ideas of secularism, democracy, and regional cooperation. They share common values, and stand by each other in the time of need (India supported the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971). They consider India as their ally, and look forward to having amicable ties with it.

However, as has been seen in many rhetorical proclamations, even India's unintended but stray attempts to emphasise common ethnic and cultural affinities with the neighbours for fostering cooperation have been misconstrued in Bangladesh. Indeed, they have eventually backfired as they are perceived as threatening the status of a hard-earned national identity. Thus, at the other extreme are the Radical forces, who construct an exclusive nationalist discourse in state and foreign policy formulations. They possess and promote the sentiments of religious fanaticism; and carry the heavy baggage of the memories of the 1947 partition of India based on the two-nation theory. They maintain an anti-India, ethno-religious nationalist posture in their political discourse. The old Muslim Leaguers bear these ideals (Islamic state).

Many of the political constituents in Bangladesh have started resenting India's overpowering presence in the region and, in the course of time, India often becomes one of the central issues around which the domestic politics of Bangladesh revolve. India baiting has become one of the most effective ways of burnishing one's nationalist credentials in Bangladesh's domestic politics, and political parties make full use of this tactic. This section of the

ruling elite attempts to forge alliances with China, USA, or Saudi Arabia for political mileage to balance India. They are hegemonic, fundamentalist, and promote religious extremism and unilateralism in their actions.

In between these two poles is an educated, moderate, and development centric younger generation. They could be called the rationalists or the realists. This generation considers education, trade, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic liberation as the core of all political and diplomatic action. They believe in a better lifestyle, employment opportunities, and feel inspired with the spectacular growth of industries like the IT/ITES (Information Technology/ Information technology enabled services) in India, and other parts of the world. These rationalists believe in resolving all outstanding bilateral issues on the principles of parity and equity. At the same time, they are also strong critics of India's unilateral actions while dealing with the issues like water, borders, and trade.

This cohort is keen to be a partner in the process of economic growth and development, and is also not sceptical of having alliances even with China or the USA. It is this young, educated, middle class that has created an intrinsic force in South Asia and India. It is proactive in its approach, and desires to channelise its strength in working towards the broader objectives of political and economic stability, and not just be caught up in the myopic aim of promoting the cause of religious fundamentalism. This generation gave a massive mandate to the Awami League (AL) led coalition government in the 2008 general elections in Bangladesh on its promise of focusing on development. In India, Modi is also supported by a similar minded young generation. Thus, in today's political scenario, the realists have become the key determinant of the power equations in both India as well as Bangladesh.

Functional Variables

The memories of the freedom struggle have been a primary factor in shaping the foreign policy of Bangladesh in the post independence period. The desire to maintain the greatest possible relations with India was a sentiment that pervaded the country just after its independence. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman told the newly independent nation, "Friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh" (Bhasin, 2003). Even in India, the same mood prevailed then, which could be well understood from Indira Gandhi's speech in the Lok Sabha in 1972 when she stated, "In future, the governments and people of India and Bangladesh, who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect for each

other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit (I. Gandhi's Speech, Lok Sabha, 1972).

However, Sheikh Mujib's policies of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and close friendship with India at the international level, and secularism, democracy, and nationalism at the national level underwent tremendous change under the military regimes (Bhardwaj, 2003). The successive military regimes established good relations with Pakistan, China, and other Islamic countries at the cost of the country's relations with India. The tension over border disputes and the sharing of Ganga waters brought new realities in the relationship.

After the restoration of democracy in 1991, the BNP came to power on an anti-India plank. In terms of foreign policy, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's ideas seemed to resemble the policies of the previous military regimes. However, with the adaptation of non-reciprocal (the Gujral doctrine) approach of India, the relationship between the two countries seemed to be improving during the premiership of Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001). A landmark treaty on the sharing of the Ganges water was signed. The bus service from Kolkata to Dhaka heralded a new dimension to the bilateral relationship, and represented a significant step in facilitating people-to-people interaction.

In Begum Khaleda Zia's second regime (2001-06), the politico-religious elites started to align with militant activities, not from the perspective of producing terror, but from passionately calculated domestic political gain. These centre-rightist and pro-Chinese forces in Bangladesh have been depicting India as an imperialist, expansionist, and hegemonic Hindu state (Chakraborty, 2016). Therefore, the two countries could not progress much on bilateral issues during their tenure. However, the second tenure of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (since 2009) set the tone against growing militancy and terrorist activities. She has revived the gesture that Sheikh Mujib wanted to maintain in the domestic and foreign policy front. She has also recognised that constructive engagement with a rising Indian economy will bring a developmental wave at least in the eastern South Asian region.

China's increasing engagement in the region has also influenced the foreign policy of Bangladesh towards India. Increasing dependence of Indian neighbours on China has positioned China in the regional power equation as one that directly challenges India in the region. China is playing a pivotal role by its infrastructural development projects under its Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) in both the continental and maritime spheres. That it has entered the Indian Ocean region in a big way is significant. Time and again, Bangladesh has also

played its China card to counter balance India, irrespective of the political regimes that are in power in Dhaka.

Framework for Cooperation

The bilateral “Framework for Cooperation” agreement between India and Bangladesh has raised the partnership to new heights. Under the Agreement, both countries are committed to taking strong measures against any form of terrorism, state support, finance terrorism, violent conflicts, and arms-drugs-human trafficking. However, in order to prevent illegal activities, including anti-national activities from across the border, India sanctioned the construction of border fencing with floodlights. Years of painstaking work paid off by August 2011, when a protocol to the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was signed. Finally, with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government, the 100th Constitutional Amendment Bill was adopted in May 2015. The operationalising of LBA has now become a game-changer for India-Bangladesh relations. The Indian government has given non-reciprocal concessions on LBA, 2015.

India has recognised the rights of lower riparian populations in a big way through the generous Ganges water sharing treaty of 1996. However, the Indian federal structure has adversely impacted the issue of Teesta water sharing. West Bengal has been utilising the river Teesta to serve its own interests, and refused to release more water to Bangladesh. The need is to find new ways of both expanding the supply and curtailing demand in the total river basin. This requires an entirely different approach, with better understanding and trust between the two countries as both have competing interests.

Neighbourhood First Policy vis-à-vis Bangladesh

Since a long time, India has recognised the importance of close ties with Bangladesh not only for a stable neighbourhood but also to forward the agenda of developmental cooperation. This has been elucidated by the extension of multiple lines of credit to Bangladesh. India first extended a LOC worth US\$ 1 billion towards Bangladesh in 2010. This was subsequently transformed into a grant of US\$ 200 million, alongside a LOC of US\$ 800 million which, in 2015, was enhanced to US\$ 862 million by means of an amendment to the agreement (EXIM Bank of India, 2015).

Importantly, the total concessional credit extended by India to Bangladesh

was later augmented by a credit line of US\$ 2 billion announced in June 2015, and at US\$ 5 billion, It stands as the largest LOC ever extended by the Indian government to any country till date (see Lok Sabha question, 2017).

The two governments have also proposed jointly developing the Ganges Barrage on the river Padma in Bangladesh. The operationalisation of the Coastal Shipping Agreement, and the commencement of the transhipment of goods through the Ashuganj River Port under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) has resulted in the desired objective of improving connectivity and enhancing bilateral trade. The two countries have also continued progress towards the restoration of the erstwhile railway linkages and cargo trains. The signing of the road connectivity agreement with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBIN-MVA) may boost India's sub-regional initiatives. However, Bhutan has now some reservations to implement. The need for sorting out such problems becomes much more significant when one takes into consideration China's growing economic influence in Bangladesh. A credit line worth US\$ 24 billion is reported to have been signed by China. This is a good example of Chinese rigorous efforts to push forward its BRI plan.

In terms of trade, India is the largest single source for Bangladesh's imports, ahead of China and Singapore - approximately 15 percent of total imports. As part of the concessions under the SAARC framework-SAFTA, India has granted Bangladesh duty-free, quota-free access on all items, except tobacco and alcohol. Several instruments for facilitating bilateral trade and economic linkages are in place, including the Convention for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion (DTAC), the Bilateral Investment Protection & Promotion Agreement (BIPPA), and the Agreement on the Establishment of the Joint Economic Commission (JEC) (see Lok Sabha Question, 2015).

The two countries have underlined the need for bringing about the greater integration of power and energy supply networks as well as cooperation in the field of energy efficiency. India had agreed to supply 2100 MW electricity to Bangladesh. With respect to energy cooperation related to hydrocarbons, the setting up of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal in Bangladesh, supplying diesel from the Numaligarh Refineries Ltd. oil pipe and gas pipe line is significant. Over 22 agreements have been penned, in addition to Reliance Power promising an investment of over US\$ 3 billion to set up a 3,000 MW LNG-based power plant (Bhardwaj & Bhardwaj, 2019). Thus, the two countries have recognised the advantages of sub-regional cooperation in the areas of power, water resources, trade, transit, and connectivity for mutual benefits.

Conclusion

In the imperatives of politico-security constructs and socio-economic constraints, both India and Bangladesh have understood the significance of partnership for their development. Therefore, in the last decade, both the governments have intended to proactively work under a cooperative framework. They believe in a similar ethos of liberal democracy, secularism, and inclusive socio-cultural nationalism. India being the largest functional democracy in the world, and Bangladesh the second largest functional democracy in the region, both countries aspire to resume a status in the region by re-emphasising their economic development and democratic credentials.

From being significant partners in the liberation war, to phases of indifference, and to eventually emerging as cooperative neighbours, the two countries - with their mosaic of connectivity projects and several other joint initiatives - have set out on a path hitherto un-travelled in this region. This spirit of bilateral engagement between India and Bangladesh is also advancing the eastern South Asian region towards sub-regional partnerships. The framework for cooperation between India and Bangladesh has been signed keeping Atal Bihari Vajpayee's statement in mind - that "you can change your friends but not neighbours".

In the process of trust and confidence building, the two countries have strengthened their cultural exchanges. India has made remarkable shifts in its neighbourhood policy, moving from reciprocity to non-reciprocity, unilateralism to constructive unilateralism, and bilateralism to a sub-regional framework and resource sharing. A Muslim majority country, Bangladesh has become India's closest development partner, and has also addressed Indian security concerns and issues related to the development of its North Eastern states.

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