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

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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>

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Towards a Durable Political Understanding: Fifty Years of Indo-Bangladesh Relations

Sreeradha Datta*

Presently, India and Bangladesh are enjoying an unprecedented multi-sectoral and multi-layered partnership. As Bangladesh becomes fifty, the five decades of the bilateral relationship have touched heights that reflect the golden hues of the milestone. Arguably, the friendship between *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's first Prime Minister, and the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, echoed a unique bond created by common ethos, values, quest for autonomy, and assertion in a global system that was not particularly kind to the less developed nations. The bilateral ties between the two growing Asian economies were premised on a cooperative framework enabling a regional platform, which provided opportunities for other neighbours to join the process too. Evidently, the relationship - which has faced many highs and lows through the past decades - is now enjoying a phase of peace and friendship reminiscent of the immediate years post the Liberation War. However, despite the apparent bonhomie, a few core questions remain. Is this bilateral engagement sustainable and irreversible? Does it ensure that the two countries will remain immune to the political vagaries of the region in the days ahead?

Arguably, from any historian's point of view, fifty years provides limited scope to understand state behaviour; but from the perspective of international studies, the five decades are representative of the various contours of the relationship, and can offer glimpses into some future trends. Similarly, the present juncture offers a window to the future of the Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral journey.

The present bilateral partnership has covered vast grounds, highlighting the changing times at every stage. From the political to the social, to the economic, to the developmental, and from defence to the strategic, the scope

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is widening to areas hitherto unexplored. India and Bangladesh have both grown remarkably in the past five decades and, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were the two fastest growing Asian economies. Significantly, Bangladesh's achievement in sustaining a high growth trajectory is a story of remarkable economic development despite periodic political instability, stark climate changes, and natural disasters.

Fifty Years of Bangladesh's Journey

Undoubtedly, the past 50 years is a story of a remarkable journey for Bangladesh. Bangladesh has overcome its humble beginnings and a very difficult political journey, to stand poised at a point which is coveted not only by its neighbours but also by others. Bangladesh started with less than 1 percent GDP growth and achieved 6 percent plus growth along with a remarkable performance in various developmental indicators, including those relating to the Millennium Development Goals. In 2015, it also achieved dual graduation - from a Low-Income Country to Lower Middle Income Country according to the World Bank criteria. In 2018, it became eligible to graduate from Least Developed Country status to Developing Country status, according to the United Nations criteria.

Indeed, the accomplishments of Bangladesh are significant and substantial, and it has given it confidence to undertake policies that could not be even contemplated in the past.

Break from the Past

Much of the success was possible because of the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of Awami League led government that came to power through the delayed 9th Jatiya Sangsad election of December 2008. India and Bangladesh began to work in earnest to address each other's outstanding issues under the able leadership of Prime Minister Hasina. Her political will to address India's security concerns was evident from the outset. Once Dhaka conveyed its intention to ensure that no anti-India activities were going to be carried out from Bangladeshi soil, New Delhi found ways and means to address some of Bangladesh's long-standing demands. Delhi agreed to dilute trade barriers, resolving boundary demarcation, and acceding to Bangladesh's demand for transit to Nepal and Bhutan - and all of these reflected an attitudinal shift on both sides. The Land Boundary Agreement signed by India and Bangladesh, in June 2015 helped take forward the bilateral ties to hitherto unexplored areas of common interest.

The historic ties that had evolved between Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the years preceding Bangladesh's War of Liberation later resulted in the Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation. But the assassination of Sheikh Mujib changed drastically not only the domestic situation in Bangladesh but also the bilateral ties with India. The political proximity that had existed between the two states henceforth ceased to exist. Successive military leaders in Bangladesh (1975-1990) deliberately undermined ties with India. With the return of parliamentary democracy in 1991, there was an attempt to restore normalcy in the relationship.

However, the real transformation in the bilateral equation began with Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujib, who assumed office in 1996. The signing of the Ganges Water Treaty in 1996 and the Chakma Agreement in 1997 removed the two main irritants that had plagued Indo-Bangladeshi relations for years. Although during this period the two neighbours had several unresolved issues between them, they were set firmly on a friendly track. Unfortunately, this momentum was lost after the next elected government of the BNP alliance which took over in 2001. Without much exaggeration, bilateral ties reached their lowest point between 2001 and 2006. However, with a technocrat Caretaker Government in Bangladesh, bilateral relations improved once again during 2007-08. The breakthrough occurred with Delhi granting Bangladesh tariff free access to its export of eight million ready-made garment pieces to India. A thaw was also visible in the Bangladeshi Caretaker Government's recognition of Indian security concerns which led to the handover of some Indian insurgents operating from Bangladesh.

The real turnaround happened with the signing of an Indo-Bangladeshi Joint Communiqué in 2010. This opened up the vistas of bilateral cooperation, leading to regional collaboration in many areas. India and Bangladesh decided to open up borders for the facilitation of bilateral trade, investment, and energy cooperation. It began with Bangladesh opening up its land and water borders to enable India easier access to its northeast; on the other hand, India agreed to Bangladesh's long-standing demand of transit to Nepal and Bhutan.

A significant portion of the first billion-dollar line of credit offered by India in 2010 was towards building transport connectivity and infrastructure development, such as laying railway infrastructure; supply of locomotives and passenger coaches; rehabilitation of the Saidpur railway workshop; procurement of buses; and dredging projects. The agreement also included the purchase of double-decker buses from India, the setting up of a power

grid between India and Bangladesh, and the establishment of state-run standards and testing institute facilities in Bangladesh by India. This subsequently grew to almost US\$ 8 billion (US\$ 1 billion in 2010; US\$ 2 billion in 2016; and US\$ 4.5 billion in 2017), and was the largest credit loan that India has offered to any state in the neighbourhood or beyond. This helped transform the cooperation landscape.

Indeed, many of the border developmental projects that Bangladesh undertook were also supported by India. Many of these projects are in various states of implementations. Moreover, the first land and air transshipment between the two countries took place towards the end of 2018. The first bonded container of 4.41 tonnes cargo from Bangladesh moved through the Benapole land border into India through the Petrapole border, to head towards Kolkata airport for air freight to Europe. This was the first instance of GPS enabled trucks moving across the border using the GPS tracking device, allowing officials from both India and Bangladesh to monitor their progress in real time. No doubt this measure will certainly change the contours of bilateral and regional trade also.

Interestingly, the first tangible takeaway of the 2010 agreement was the beginning of the energy trade, which was a priority for the Sheikh Hasina government, given its domestic shortfall. Drawing from a basket of types of trade in energy, the bilateral cooperation between the two countries has covered a large ground from the first trade in 2013 through the Palatana project in Tripura. The two energy companies - the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCI) - signed a 35-year agreement to establish energy trade through regional transmission systems. Further, the Indian Oil Corporation Limited and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation agreed to set up a LPG terminal in Chittagong (in 2016). This would make it possible for not only Bangladesh to receive gas but it would facilitate supply of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to the north-eastern Indian states, including Tripura, thereby benefiting both the countries. The Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the Indian State-run National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for improving and developing Bangladesh's power sector.

The idea of developing an energy grid has now got greater traction, and is under discussion at both the bilateral and regional levels. India is in the process of preparing a draft agreement for regional energy trade. Apparently, a more tangible initiative of energy trade seems to be in the offing from India,

Nepal, and Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also shown interest in signing a mutual Power Trade Agreement with Nepal, and has proposed to invest US\$ 1 billion in Nepal's hydropower sector. During the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's visit to India in 2019, New Delhi had expressed its willingness to facilitate this cross-border energy trade between Bangladesh and Nepal. An Indian company has already signed an agreement with the Nepal government to build the 900-MW Upper Karnali project in western Nepal, and is in the final stages of acquiring permission for constructing the 600-MW Upper Marsyangdi-II project in central Nepal. Bangladesh will import 200 MW from the Upper Marsyangdi-II project, and the remaining 300 MW will be imported from Upper Karnali. Bangladesh has been making several proposals with Nepal for the purchase of electricity, and India will provide the transmission lines needed to cross over to Bangladesh through India.

Cooperation during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The positive synergy in the relationship between India and Bangladesh was evident during the pandemic phase too. While trade and commerce were deeply affected, India continued to work on developing connectivity projects even during the pandemic. While land border trade between India and Bangladesh was halted due to the fear of the spread of the virus, the coastal shipping arrangements continued to work effectively. The first trial container ship from Kolkata to Agartala through the Chattogram Port of Bangladesh was flagged off during this period. The new route will reduce time as well as logistics cost for cargo movement, and connect North-East India to Bangladeshi ports. Earlier, in June 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Agreement, which allows goods to move by sea from Kolkata in West Bengal to the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh had reached an understanding on Standard Operating Procedures for the use of the Chattogram and Mongla ports for the movement of goods to and from India earlier in 2019. The Indo-Bangladesh Coastal Shipment Agreement, signed in 2018, led to the cargo movement on the first trial container ship, which started from Kolkata on 16 July 2020 and reached Chittagong Port (Bangladesh) before travelling via road on Bangladeshi trucks to Agartala.

Earlier, Bangladesh had agreed to the proposal of India using its waterways to the Ashuganj river port for carrying food grains from Kolkata to Tripura. Many Indian vehicles, including trucks and buses, are transported through the Mongla port into Bangladesh. The Indian company, Ashok Leyland, one of the main suppliers, opened a truck assembly plant in Dhamrai, Savar, in 2017.

This apart, the increased and extensive cooperation in the health sector has become a priority in the wake of the Corona virus pandemic. Bangladesh and India are perfectly placed to develop new areas of cooperation for research and development in this sector. The Corona vaccination drive in Bangladesh was possible due to India sending 2 million free doses that would support Bangladesh fight this pandemic resolutely.

Defence Cooperation

The 122-member contingent from the Bangladesh Armed Forces at the Indian Republic Day Parade in Delhi (2020) was another high point of the military cooperation that is growing between the neighbours. Indeed, cooperation in the defence sector has been a new element in the bilateral relationship.

The bilateral defence cooperation has strengthened over time with India extending a US\$ 500 million Defence Line of Credit to Bangladesh in 2019. The two neighbours continue with the joint training programmes and joint military exercises, apart from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Begun in 2010, the ninth edition of ‘*Sampriti*’, the joint counter terrorism exercise between the two armies was held in February 2020. The two navies have also held two exercise in the Bay of Bengal - ‘*Ex CORPAT*’ in October 2020 and ‘*Bongosagor*’ in Oct 2019.

Bangladesh and China

While the relations between India and Bangladesh hold much promise, in the wake of Sino-Indian hostility, China’s growing outreach to Bangladesh is not without implications for India’s political, strategic and, more importantly, economic interests. New Delhi’s anxiety over China’s apparent lack of respect and accommodation for India’s traditional role in the region is not unfounded. China’s economic diplomacy is well stamped in Bangladesh and, while Dhaka has not fallen into a debt trap, China’s intrusive projects in this country are manipulative.

Bangladeshi Apprehensions

While much has been accomplished over the years, some Bangladeshis still have reservations about unfolding relationship with India. Although India has been issuing the highest number of visas to Bangladeshis, questions are raised by detractors about Indian intentions. Is this disquiet in Bangladesh a reflection of domestic factors? Or is it because of the apparent Indian indifference over

some Bangladesh's core concerns? It could be a mix of both.

The issues of water sharing, border demarcation, and the continuing trade surplus in favour of India despite its unilateral trade concessions by India continue to fester apprehension in Bangladesh about Indian intentions. Water is one of the most emotive issues for Bangladesh. Although both sides have agreed to prepare the draft framework of Interim Water Sharing Agreements for the six rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla, and Dudhkumar - and to firm up the draft framework of interim sharing agreement of Feni River, none of these has been signed so far. The lack of any agreement over water sharing of the Teesta has been disappointing for Bangladeshis. With West Bengal citing its own water requirements, the lack of data about the present Teesta water flows, and an obvious political disconnect between New Delhi and Kolkata have thwarted any resolution of the issue. Both India and Bangladesh being heavily agrarian economies, there is deep concern about the flow of cross-border rivers, especially during the lean season. India being the upper riparian state, fears of India controlling the flow, especially during deficit times, looms large.

This apart, Dhaka has fears over India's implementation of the National Registration of Citizens in Assam and its ramifications for Bangladesh. Although there have been attempts by the Indian leadership at allaying these fears, the common people do not appear to be convinced. The mixed signals that come out from India over this issue tend to affect the trust in Indian assurances to Bangladesh. Similarly, India's inability to fully endorse the Bangladeshi position on the humanitarian Rohingya crisis, though India has urged early reparation of the refugees, has also been received with dismay. The reported border killings, regardless of the fact that international border practices are in place, create negative reverberations within the Bangladeshi population. Although the opposition remains scattered, a significant portion of the population remain dissatisfied with the present government. They view India's close linkages with the Awami League government through a critical lens and tend to transfer their dissatisfaction with their government on to India.

From Bilateral to Regional

The key to sustaining the Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral ties will remain hinged on the ability of the two neighbours to move forward quickly into the regional framework. India's neighbours, including Bangladesh, have often expressed greater comfort working through regional fora. Whether it is common water cooperation and river basin management, or cross-border connectivity leading

to regional trade and commerce, or building a regional energy grid - there is much to canvas for regional collaborative initiatives.

Significantly, this region has the largest working-age population, and a growing industry sector. With cross-border transport connectivity being put in place and, more importantly, with the right combination of resources to boost agriculture, industry, and investment, the possibility of developing regional value chains seem imperative. The thrust on developing efficient cross border multimodal transportation, as supported by multilateral institutions and development banks, has led to building of highway networks, cross country rail connectivity, and cheap coastal shipping arrangements, enabling a cobweb of transport networks in the sub-region of South Asia.

Bangladesh has a fast-growing domestic economy and the country shares borders with India's less developed regions. It also enjoys the benefits of labour cost arbitrage, and if it could increase its logistical efficiency, it can play a critical role in creating regional value chains. Further, the launching of the seamless cross border movement, envisaged through the Motor Vehicle Agreement signed by Nepal, India, and Bangladesh, will enable the various aspects of the regional cooperative framework to be fully effective.

Conclusion

India and Bangladesh have more in common than any two other countries in the Indian Sub-continent; yet the shared borders and cultural-linguistic affinities have not proved compelling enough for them to establish a durable political understanding. The two countries have overcome the chequered past in the last decades through many bilateral mechanisms, and are poised to partner in a larger regional cooperative framework. Through sustaining high-level political contacts, deepening engagement at various levels, strengthening the institutional framework for future engagements, and continual dialogue to work towards mutual good, the two countries can further strengthen the relationship. People on both sides of the border need to be invested in this idea of a common good to which each can contribute by transcending narrow domestic interests. This can ensure stable and cooperative ties, irrespective of who is in power in Delhi or Dhaka.



Bangladesh-India Relations: History and the Way Forward

Shamsher M. Chowdhury, BB*

As Bangladesh-India relations step into their fiftieth year following the emergence of Bangladesh as an Independent and a Sovereign state in 1971, it is fitting to take stock of the journey of these critically important and historic ties. It is equally important to look to the future with the shared goal of ensuring that this relationship grows in depth and dimension in the days ahead, and become a relationship that benefits the people on both sides of the border in equal measure.

The denial of the outcome of the elections of 1970, in which the Awami League (under the dynamic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) won a clear mandate to govern Pakistan, led to a situation that changed the political landscape of South Asia forever. War preparations were put in place by Pakistan's military leadership. It culminated with the Pakistan military launching a brutal and genocidal military campaign on the Bangali population just after midnight of March 25, 1971. The people of Bangladesh rose up in arms against the action of the Pakistani military that led to the breakup of Pakistan, and the eventual birth of independent Bangladesh nine months later, aided in very large measure by the government and the armed forces of India.

Bangladesh's Journey as an Independent State

Bangladesh's early days were exceedingly difficult. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had taken the reins of government with overwhelming public support, but had inherited a country in shambles. It was dysfunctional economically; and the infrastructure and transport system were badly damaged. At the end of the war, the country lacked almost every resource it needed for recovery.

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(This article was received from the author on January 19, 2021)

For Bangabandhu and his government, there were major challenges on the international front as well. This was the Cold War era, and the major global players saw things through the prism of the bi-polar rivalry that existed then. The major Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, refused to accept the breakup of Pakistan, and refrained from recognising Bangladesh as an independent country. The same was the case with the People's Republic of China. It was not until 1974 that China withdrew its objection at the UN Security Council to Bangladesh becoming a full member of the United Nations. But it stopped short of formal diplomatic recognition. Bangladesh joined the Commonwealth in early 1972, and the Non-Aligned Movement in the following year. In 1974, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in a dramatic diplomatic move laced with political undertones, took Bangladesh to the centre of the Islamic world when he accepted the invitation to attend the OIC Summit in Lahore.

Reports indicated that Bangabandhu's Lahore trip and joining the Islamic fold was apparently not seen favourably in Delhi, especially so soon after the traumatic events of the Liberation War. The decision of Bangladesh to join the OIC, and to do so by going to Pakistan, was seen by analysts at home and abroad as a calculated move on three counts: first, that formal recognition of Bangladesh as an independent state by Pakistan was a political necessity; second, as Prime Minister of a sovereign country, Sheikh Mujib was keen to demonstrate a measure of autonomy in making the country's foreign policy choices; and, third, it was a recognition that with the demographic makeup of Bangladesh as a Muslim majority country, it had a rightful place in this group. Whatever might have been the rationale, the move resonated well at home.

Bangladesh-India Relations: a Look at History

Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India are rooted in irreversible history and conditioned by the permanence of geography. India's direct role in Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971 has shaped the relationship between the two South Asian neighbours. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assumed the office of Prime Minister of Bangladesh on the backdrop of this remarkable piece of history. This relationship was more like a natural bonding between two peoples. The feeling of mutual goodwill was as real as it was pervasive.

On the bilateral front, three major events happened in this atmosphere of bonhomie between India and the new born country.

First, at the request of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, herself riding on a wave of popularity in India and goodwill in Bangladesh, agreed to withdraw Indian military personnel from the territory of Bangladesh. The event, loaded with political symbolism, happened as early as March 1972 during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's official visit to Dhaka. It was a manifestation of the wisdom and vision of the political masters at that time.

The second was the signing of the 25-year treaty titled "The India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace", in Dhaka on 19 March 1972 by Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on behalf of their respective governments. This treaty, however, did become a subject of controversy in Bangladesh, especially provisions (ix) and (x), which people saw as unequal, and as an imposition of excessive Indian influence. Dhaka felt that these undermined the sovereignty of Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, therefore, the treaty was not renewed after its expiry in 1997 even though Bangabandhu's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, was Prime Minister then.

The third event of significance was the signing of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 1974 by Prime Ministers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi. The agreement was aimed at resolving, once and for all, the bizarre anomalies in the land boundaries between the two neighbours, which included the demarcation of sections of the boundary between the two countries, the exchange of enclaves and lands in adverse possession in each other's territories, legacies left behind by the departing British colonial rulers. However, the delay in full implementation of the LBA was one of the two major issues that stood out as sore points. The other was the sharing of the waters of the Ganges River.

The Land Boundary Agreement

To any sensible mind, the very existence of such "enclaves" and "lands in adverse possession" between two neighbouring countries would sound bizarre. But, in the case of Bangladesh and India, this was one of the many territorial absurdities which was resulting in painful and uncertain consequences for many.

The signing of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between Prime Ministers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi (hence the coinage 'Indira-Mujib pact') for their respective countries was aimed at setting things right. For its part, Bangladesh delivered on its side of the deal

without any delay. This meant ratification of the LBA by the Parliament and the transfer of South Berubari to India. However, the delivery from the Indian side stagnated, and got caught up in a haze of legal, technical and, at times, political issues.

In 2009, the Awami League government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina brought this issue back to top of the agenda, and steps were taken for its resolution as a matter of priority. This was a major development. With the coming of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in office in Delhi, and his “Neighbours First” policy, concrete steps were taken in India for the implementation of something that has been long overdue. His deft handling of the political stakeholders in India and his careful manoeuvring of the issue in the Centre and in the States finally made this a reality. The euphoric jubilation that followed at midnight of July 31, 2015 was only to be expected.

Water Sharing

The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty between Bangladesh and India was signed in Delhi between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Deve Gowda on behalf of their respective countries on 12 December 1996. This was a major step forward. The Treaty is initially valid for a period of 30 years. This removed a major irritant. The failure to sign the Teesta water-sharing agreement despite having agreed on a draft in 2011, and despite several efforts from Bangladesh at the highest political level continues to cause resentment in Bangladesh. Notwithstanding the lack of progress on sharing of the waters of the Teesta River, both countries have moved forward to address the sharing of the waters of some other common rivers. Accordingly, Dhaka and Delhi have agreed to share data on water use or withdrawal from six common rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar - as both countries are working on a water sharing deal. Feni river water sharing is also under discussion. One hopes the process will gather momentum in the days ahead.

Border Killings

The killing of Bangladeshi nationals at the border by Indian Border Security Force personnel has been a major source of disquiet in Bangladesh. The figures have gone down somewhat, although it is yet to reach the zero figure promised by successive Indian governments. Some incidents of late have raised concerns again, and the problem needs to be addressed in earnest.

Challenges and the Way Forward

In a big-neighbour-small-neighbour-scenario, as is the case with India and Bangladesh, it is not unusual for the smaller neighbour to look for balance. This is an acceptable practice in diplomacy. India also recognizes that the smaller countries of South Asia (like Bangladesh) are today in a position to demonstrate a good measure of autonomy in pursuing their foreign policy goals which protect their political, economic, and security interests while balancing strategic friendships. However, given the special nature of the Bangladesh-India relationship, it is imperative for both countries to nurture it as such. It is also important for both to foster this relationship with a positive mindset, and ensure that it can be further diversified and strengthened in the future for mutual benefit. Dhaka and Delhi also must recognise the need to be sensitive to each other's political and security concerns and interests, and look for pragmatic ways to address issues, even on issues with divergent views.

In order for Bangladesh and India to maintain the momentum of positive relations, it is perhaps necessary to focus on a number of areas. These can be, but not limited to, the following:

1. Diplomatic interaction between the two countries should focus on addressing issues that remain unresolved, and fortifying those that have been resolved satisfactorily. Bilateral diplomacy should, therefore, encompass addressing all aspects of the relationship. Hence, there is need for consistent interactions between all the relevant government agencies, and not just be confined to the two foreign ministries.
2. In addition to more regular political contacts at all levels, the visible increase of people to people contact between the two countries must be a sustained exercise. The strength of the relationship between neighbouring states depends to a very large measure on the nature of relations between the people of the states. Strong people to people contact gives the relationship greater visibility, and enriches its substance. Similarly, regular, frequent, and broad based interactions between civil society groups of the two countries as part of public diplomacy should be encouraged to complement efforts at the government levels. This will give the ties greater breadth and clarity, and make the whole process more participatory. The Dhaka Global Dialogue of 2019 at the think tank levels - which was also endorsed by the political leadership of both countries - was an innovative construct. Such exercises should be a continuous process.

3. Increased and extensive cooperation in the health sector has become a priority in the wake of the Corona virus pandemic. No country, large or small, has been immune from the scourge of this deadly virus. Bangladesh and India are perfectly placed to develop new areas of cooperation for research and development in this sector, both bilaterally and regionally. This was emphasised by Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in the course of the virtual meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India on 17 December last year. The gesture of the Government of India to gift Bangladesh 2 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca CoviShield, Covid 19 vaccine was a perfect starting point. It was a reaffirmation of the closeness of ties between the two countries and their potentials for the future. This consignment was in addition to the 5 million doses that Bangladesh would source from India in the coming days. This gesture of India has been deeply appreciated all across Bangladesh. Cooperation in the health sector should now form an important element of our diplomacy.

4. Multi-modal and seamless connectivity between Bangladesh and India should go beyond the bilateral arena, and extend to the greater South and South East Asian region. Connectivity benefits the people the most. The socio-economic development of the people has always centred on the quality of connectivity and communication between countries.

5. Enhanced Defence and Security cooperation and interaction is another important area that needs attention. Unlike conventional defence cooperation arrangements that Bangladesh has built up over the years with other countries, the one with India is fundamentally different. This one was crafted in the battlefield, and is written in blood. During a visit to Bangladesh in 2019, the former Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, made a poignant reference to that part of our shared history. As it is, the exchange of visits at the highest levels of the Armed Forces of the two countries has helped strengthen ties. The Bangladesh-India joint military exercise “Sampriti” is a continuing process. This is an annual exercise, with the focus on counter-terrorism cooperation and boosting interoperability between the two militaries. India has also been holding direct Army-to-Army staff talks with Bangladesh since 2009. The Indian Defence Minister’s visit has created the potential for enhanced military and security cooperation between Bangladesh and India. The participation of a contingent from the Bangladesh Armed Forces at the Indian Republic Day Parade in Delhi this year (2021) will be a visible manifestation of the history of military cooperation between the two countries that can only be strengthened in the future.

6. Bangladesh and India need to work together beyond the bilateral context, and explore cooperation in the broader regional geo-political theatre. This has become all the more relevant in a multi-polar Asia. Geographically, Bangladesh sits on the top of the Bay of Bengal, and shares its maritime and land boundaries with India and Myanmar. It is the coupling in the chain that connects South and South East Asia, and is linked through the Bay of Bengal to the Indian, and by extension, the Pacific Oceans. It is this very location that gives Bangladesh its geo-political and strategic relevance. On its part, Bangladesh has much to offer, beginning with the fact that it is on the verge of graduating to a middle-income country. The country has recorded enviable and consistent economic growth in recent times. Bangladesh can rightfully boast of having a secular society, with a positive track record of the education of girls and women empowerment. In the area of foreign policy, Bangladesh believes in the principle of using diplomacy as the primary tool for protecting its national interests, and for resolution of disputes. It has been a strong advocate of mutually beneficial bilateral, regional, and trans-regional relationships. Its commitment to combating the threats posed by climate change and global warming has been consistent. Bangladesh's policy of zero tolerance on extremism and terrorism has been amply demonstrated. More recently, Bangladesh has earned universal accolades for providing shelter to more than a million Rohingya refugees fleeing extreme persecution in Myanmar.

Conclusion

The present state of relations between Bangladesh and India is one that is marked by positive intentions and actions, and has the promise of a brighter future. The resolution of contentious issues - like the land and maritime boundaries and the signing of a long term water sharing agreement on the Ganges - have played an important part in moving these relations in the right direction. People to people contact and cultural exchanges have seen an exponential rise. This is the right way to nurture these relations for sustainability and healthy growth. While Dhaka must remain sensitive to India's concerns, Delhi, on its part, should be able to recognise that many of those concerns are common to both, and need to be addressed as such. Of late, for instance, India's perceived ambiguity on the on-going Rohingya crisis has raised questions in Bangladesh. Here, Bangladesh would expect her closest neighbour and friend to recognise that the Rohingya refugee crisis is not just a bilateral humanitarian issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is one that can have broader ramifications, potentially threatening security and stability in the region.

It is the expectation in Bangladesh that India would use its leverage, and play a more proactive role in finding a solution acceptable to all sides. India's geo-political goals in the region must take the interest and concerns of Bangladesh into consideration, and not be followed at its cost.

Addressing the critical needs of a proven friendly neighbour, and not to subject them to domestic political interests is vitally important to sustaining trust. The issue of sharing the waters of the common rivers is a strong case in point here. Similarly, political leaders on all sides of the spectrum in Bangladesh must accept the reality that broadening connectivity in every sector has to be seen as an area of common interest. Connectivity is about connecting people and nations that goes beyond governments and politics. The element of interdependence and the spirit of mutual compromise must remain an integral part of the narrative.

Resorting to political rhetoric on both sides may serve narrow political gains in the short term; but in the long term, they will not create a climate of mutual trust and confidence. This is the path to building a relationship that has both history and geography on its side. It is happening now, and it needs to be sustained. The success of foreign policy lies in finding acceptable resolutions to outstanding problems, and not in just keeping them alive. There will always be distracters on the way that would find the glass half empty, no matter what. Overcoming such forces, and the readiness to look at the larger picture is the true test of political leadership.

The present augurs well for building a relationship between the two countries, both bilaterally and as part of an effort to establish a multi-polar Asia in an unpredictable world. Bangladesh has earned recognition as a responsible neighbour and an important regional player. Bringing a true friend and a trusted neighbour into a broader frame is in the interest of India as much as it is for Bangladesh, especially to find a rightful place in the greater Asian region.

Bangladesh and India can work as allies and partners in the emerging dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. Given the unique history of their relationship, and the economic potentials of its content, Dhaka and New Delhi should forge a robust partnership. In his very well written book, *The India Way*, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar has rightly described India's role in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a major success story in India's foreign policy, both in diplomatic and military terms. With that partnership forming a solid foundation, there is every reason to build on it and further strengthen it in the future.



Bangladesh-India Ties: 50 Years and Beyond

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty*

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 mollycoddling 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.



India - Bangladesh Relations: Enduring Challenges

Smruti S Pattanaik*

The year 2021 is significant for India and Bangladesh in many ways. Both countries are celebrating the fiftieth year of establishment of diplomatic relations. This is also the 50th year of Bangladesh's liberation, bringing with it memories of 1971 when the people of Bangladesh lived through a genocidal war. More than 2,000 Indian soldiers laid down their lives. Ten million refugees from East Pakistan were hosted by India. In fact, in a state like Tripura, the refugee population surpassed the population of the state. West Bengal was another state that hosted a large number of refugees. 2021 is also the birth centenary year of the founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

The creation of the new country not only brought hope to the 75 million people of erstwhile East Pakistan but also resulted in the creation of a friendly eastern neighbour in the new state of Bangladesh. Not surprisingly the war, that also had Bengali identity at the core, motivated the Bangladesh government in exile to adopt Rabindranath Tagore's '*amar sonar bangla*' - which had become a battle-cry during the liberation war - as the national anthem of the new nation.

The foundation of India-Bangladesh relationship was firmly established when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, after landing at Palam airport on 10 January 1972, on his way to Dhaka for the first time after the country's liberation, said that the two countries had "fought together in defence of human liberty".¹ He said he had come "to pay personal tribute to the best friends of my people, the people of India ... You all have worked so untiringly and sacrificed so gallantly in making this journey possible - this journey from darkness to light; from captivity to freedom; from desolation to hope".²

In a press conference on 14 January 1971, after taking oath as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he referred to the newly independent Bangladesh's relations with India, and said, "We have a very special relationship. The

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relationship is the friendliest. Our treaty of 'friendship' is in our hearts."³ Thereafter, during his first formal visit to India, as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he emphasised that the "geography of the region provided a natural basis for co-operation".⁴ It is unfortunate that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not live to translate this vision into reality.

It is essential to recount the progression of the relationship between India and Bangladesh which is based on sacrifice, empathy, and admiration. Soon after the liberation, the two countries took several steps to provide a framework to the bilateral relationship, drawing from the liberation struggle. In spite of the country being hemmed in by India on three sides, and taking into account the experience of Bengalis under the Pakistani regime, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not want to look at India through the security prism constructed by Pakistan's ruling elite. He did not perceive any security threat from India - a country that had extended unflinching support to Bangladesh's liberation. Perhaps, the 1972 Treaty of Peace and Friendship attested to the mood of that time.

However, the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, and the emergence of military governments - that ruled Bangladesh with the help of right wing political parties and the detractors of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime - brought back to the fore, domestic politics and narratives on several issues that had earlier dominated India- (East) Pakistan relations.

India in Internal Bangladeshi Politics

The new President, General Zia ur Rahman, without naming India, often alluded to the threat posed by the "*Baksalites*"⁵, and the need to "wipe out foreignism from the soil"⁶. The military regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad, that followed General Zia's regime, adopted a similar path. It needs to be noted that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was in power for too short time to adopt any major initiatives in addressing the issues that were left-over and, were earlier, a mere subset of India-Pakistan relations.

Most of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's detractors comprised the radical Left, Islamists, and supporters of the Pakistan regime as well as those from the Army who had lost privileges they had enjoyed earlier. They spread narratives on some real and mostly imaginary consequences of the 1972 treaty that included, debates on actual contribution of India to Bangladesh's liberation and the perceived 'real' Indian intentions towards Bangladesh. These dominated the Bangladeshi narrative, nurtured by forces opposed to India for various political and ideological reasons. The conflict over Ganges water sharing,

migration, and border fencing dominated the discourse - and some continue to do so even now. Bangladeshi nationalism, and later Islam as the state religion, has only fuelled this widening gap.

The bilateral relationship was not able to get out of this historical and ideological narrative for decades. Democratic contestation made the barrier even more pronounced. It was evident from the fact that for long, the two countries could not even restart the transport connectivity that existed prior to 1965. Only the inland waterways were operational and, during President Zia's term, this was renewed year to year. The Farraka agreement also followed the same trajectory, with only short-term agreements.

The restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 generated hopes of rebuilding bilateral relations with India. However, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) followed the party's founding father, General Zia's vision of foreign policy. Its ideological base was in centre-right ideologies, and electoral politics was based on anti-India sentiments and stances. Begum Zia, the BNP leader, even described insurgency in India's North-East as a freedom movement. The Farraka Issue - that was internationalised during General Zia's regime - continued to be raised by Begum Zia in the UN. It continued to oppose the Awami League's (AL) close relationship with India, and questioned various understandings the AL had reached with India during Sheikh Hasina's 2010 state visit. She accused the government of selling the sovereignty of the country by agreeing to the 51-point MoU, and reaching a secret agreement with India.

Yet, when Begum Zia visited India in 2012, she wanted to take a fresh look at the relations. For example: she said BNP cannot look at India 'in a rear view mirror' and advocated a forward looking approach. However, the anti-India lobby within the party felt that the Party's electoral base could suffer if it changed its approach to India. The Party soon went back to its old politics, and this was evident when, in 2013, Begum Zia decided not to meet the Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee, who was visiting Dhaka, by citing the *hartal* called by its ally, the Jamaat Islami. It was therefore not surprising that, in 2016, Begum Zia once again raised the Farraka issue, and was critical of the Ramphal coal power plant, a joint venture of India and Bangladesh. BNP's reluctance to give up its anti-India posture, and the memory of BNP's support to Indian insurgent groups who were sheltered by the establishment in Bangladesh, continued to reinforce the mistrust of the BNP in India. Some senior leaders of the BNP did try to reach out to India in 2018, but the lack of any clear indication from Begum Zia, and her son and successor in the party,

Tariq Rahman, continued to plague the relations.

The return of the AL government in 2008 restored the bilateral ties to earlier levels, and have shown a constant improvement thereafter.

Current Scenarios

Despite many challenges over the years, India-Bangladesh relations have moved forward. Both the countries have implemented the Land Boundary Agreement. The demarcation of the maritime boundary has also been resolved after international arbitration. The two countries are trying to restore the connectivity network that existed prior to 1965. India has extended a credit line and grant in aid worth US\$ 10 billion. The two countries have connected their grid for electricity trade. Bangladesh has offered a transit fee of 192 taka, though transit is yet to see commercial success since this will require other service sectors to make it more worthwhile.

Several institutional mechanisms have been put in place to move each aspect of the relations forward. While the two countries have introduced joint patrols by their border forces to implement the resolve to ensure zero killing at the border, much needs to be done to translate this policy into action. Firing incidents by the BSF at the border create adverse public opinion in Bangladesh, and lead to critics questioning the nature of the friendship between the two countries. Unfortunately, the failure of BGB to prevent its nationals from reaching the border especially in the wee hours is ignored by the critics.

Questioning the depth of friendship is, however, not new in the bilateral relations. Whether it is water sharing, India's trade surplus, transit, smuggling, NRC or CAA - each and every issue is evaluated in detail, and a judgment is passed on the nature of the bilateral ties. This is also used as pressure tactics on the Awami League government headed by Prime Minister Hasina. Many also use these issues to accuse her of selling out Bangladesh's interests and 'undermining Bangladesh's sovereignty'. Therefore, it is important that India needs to be extra cautious in its approach, and identify areas where it can build blocks to strengthen relations, and move the relationship forward. Broadly, the two countries have good bilateral relations, but firings at the border need to be addressed realistically, as the blame game does not help either side.

In the fiftieth year of their bilateral relations, the two countries have, to a very large extent, institutionalised their relationship. For example, within bilateral frameworks, there are annual talks between the Home Ministers/Secretaries,

Foreign Ministers/Secretaries; between the Border Guard of Bangladesh, and the Border Security Force of India; and between the District Magistrates and Superintendent of Police of the border districts on both sides of the border. There is Joint River Commission (JRC) whose mandate is to look at the common rivers; there are Joint exercises between the two militaries; and joint patrols between the coast guards of the two countries. Such institutionalisation is a step forward, and is an attempt to move the relations despite domestic political constraints, and away from individual regime interests. However, institutional frameworks have not always succeeded. For example, sometimes the JRC does not meet regularly. As such, if there are no meeting of minds on important issues, the agendas threaten to drag on with unending discussions.

Both the countries are moving forward with connectivity networks. Tripura opened the first waterway with Bangladesh - the 90-km long Sonamura-Daudkandi route - apart from other waterways that facilitate trade. 2020, witnessed the first container train that reached Bangladesh from India. There was also the first parcel train carrying chillies from Andhra Pradesh to Dhaka. In June, a record number of 100 freight trains ran between the two countries, carrying essential items like sugar, maize, spices, and finished products. The restoration of the Chilahati-Haldibari railway and the Agartala-Akhaura rail project which is under construction, have been supported with the Indian credit line.

Bangladesh is the biggest development partner of India today. According to news reports, 28 percent of India's development budget goes to Bangladesh - total outlay of India-backed projects in Bangladesh is close to \$ 10 billion⁷. Road and bus connectivity has opened up to facilitate travel between the two countries. Dhaka-Kolkata, Dhaka-Khulna, Agartala-Dhaka are a few bus services that run regularly. Restarting the Maitree Express, that runs between Dhaka and Kolkata, was a landmark decision. Rail travel is the cheapest mode of travel, and the two countries have also tried to ease the immigration process by completing it on-board, thus saving time at the border. The officials of the two countries meet twice every year to review the projects that are being implemented under the Indian LoCs. There are also regular border *haats* where the local products are sold.

Overcoming the Challenges

India issues the largest number of visas to Bangladeshis. It has established integrated check posts on the border, and has introduced separate windows for granting visas to those who travel to India for medical treatment as well

as separate queue for them at the immigration check on the land border check post. In spite of large numbers of Bangladeshis travelling to India, anti-Indian sentiment is spurred by suspicion and mistrust, and mostly coloured by pre-partition and post-partition narratives of the Muslim League. There is also the daily experience of border crossings and interactions which colour the opinion of India. Among prominent issues, firings at the border, cattle smuggling, etc. contribute to anti-India sentiments.

There is also a strong perception that Bangladesh has fulfilled all of India's security needs. While it allowed India to withdraw 1.82 cusec of water from the Feni river in 2019, India has not been able to deliver on Teesta, support Bangladesh on the Rohingyas, or completely stop casualties at the border. Though some of these expectations are natural, there is an under-appreciation of India's stand on various issues. Moreover, it needs to be mentioned here that during 15 years of military rule in Bangladesh, the rulers fed misinformation to a generation of people regarding India's role in the Liberation War of the country by attributing negative motives behind India's intervention.

The zero killing orders at the border will go a long way in strengthening the bilateral relationship. It will certainly help the Bangladeshi government in addressing the anxiety over its relations with New Delhi. However, the question that arises is: how can zero killings at the border be implemented? It is essential that the vigil on the border needs to be increased on the Bangladesh side to prevent its nationals from reaching the border even as the BSF needs to take action against the smuggling syndicates operating on the Indian side of the border. This would require local intelligence and cooperation with the state police. There is a need for cooperation between the centre and the Indian states to address the issue of cattle smuggling, fake currency, and the smuggling of Phensedyl. Observing night curfews on both the sides of the border, could be a good start to lower casualties. The government of Bangladesh also needs to review the practice of putting taxes on smuggled cattle. The introduction of non-lethal weapons has only emboldened the smugglers, and the BSF often complains of attacks by the smugglers who are well-armed. It is important that the two countries take appropriate steps and assume the responsibility to implement the zero killings initiative.

While India shares flood forecasting data on major rivers like the Ganga, Teesta, Brahmaputra, and Barak during the monsoon season, water sharing has remained one of the most controversial issues in the relationship between India and Bangladesh, often creating huge misunderstandings. Though the Ganges Water Treaty was signed in 1996, various disagreements, short term agreements, and the unilateral withdrawal by India earlier often revives bad

memories and creates acrimony over water. The politics of water also brings the Farakka treaty into question quite often. In fact, this treaty has its critics on both the sides of the border. The Teesta issue, which is an issue of difference between the Centre and the state of West Bengal in India, has not allowed a bilateral agreement to be achieved with Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh are now discussing the six trans-boundary rivers - Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar - to move away from the debate on the sharing of the Teesta river waters. Teesta will remain a political albatross that seemingly refuses to fade away.

Bangladesh has looked to India for support on the Rohingya issue, and expects a positive Indian reaction. However, being extremely cautious of not alienating Myanmar, Indian reaction has been muted. Myanmar's cooperation is an essential input for preservation of peace in the North East. However, India has extended humanitarian aid to the Rohingya refugees as well as to the locals living in Cox's Bazar. It has built 50,000 houses in Rakhaine state for the Rohingyas. The Rohingyas are not willing to go back without the domestic legislation in Myanmar being repealed, and until there is an international guarantee for their safety. The return of the refugees appears to be in a limbo, providing ammunition to those opposed to Sheikh Hasina.

India has also supplied 2 million doses of Corona virus vaccine to Bangladesh as first responder, and in keeping with its "neighbourhood first" policy.

Conclusion

How does the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh look after fifty years? It needs to be mentioned that both countries have crossed many hurdles, and have made significant progress in some areas that were unthinkable in the past. A good example is the issue of connectivity and transit which are now not seen from the perspective of sovereignty but from the perspective of economics. The two countries are trying to restore the connectivity network as well and go beyond it. Bangladesh is interested in participating in the building of the trilateral highway being constructed by India, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Bilateral trade has increased to ten billion dollars. The two countries have taken steps to address non-tariff barriers by establishing quality testing centres near to the border so that perishable goods are cleared faster. Border infrastructure has improved, and the two countries are cooperating to strengthen the Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute (BSTI) so as to address

issues of quality in export. Moreover, the two countries are now looking at reaching beyond bilateral relations and forging sub-regional and regional cooperation. Whether it is grid connectivity or transport connectivity in the eastern sub region of South Asia, the two countries are keen to take their relationship forward. They are not willing to see their bilateral interaction as a zero sum game. Rather than getting stuck with deliverable, the two countries are trying to explore new areas of cooperation. A relationship that has been built over fifty years is grounded on socio-cultural-linguistic-historical foundations, and provides the necessary grounding for further development of mutually beneficial relations. There are of course several challenges to overcome, but there are many achievements and progress that have been made which should not be lost in the clutter of items that are yet to find solution.

Notes :

- ¹ See the joint communiqué issued at the end of Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman’s visit to Calcutta, at https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi_doc/3.doc, accessed 9 February 2021.
- ² Avtar Singh Bhasin, “India Bangladesh Relations Documents 1971–2002”, Vol. 1, Geetika Publisher, 2003, p. 25.
- ³ Shakawat Liton, “From History’s Golden Chapter”, *The Daily Star*, 19 June 2015, at <https://www.thedailystar.net/wide-angle/historys-golden-chapter-99550>
- ⁴ See the joint communique issued at the end of Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman’s visit to Calcutta, at https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi_doc/3.doc, accessed 9 February 2021.
- ⁵ Refers to ‘BaKSAL’ (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League), a political front, created on 24 February 1975 by Sheik Mujibur Rahman and declared as the sole Political party by the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, on 25 January 1975. BaKSAL was dissolved in August 1975, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
- ⁶ Marcus Franda, “Ziaur Rahman and Bangladeshi Nationalism”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16, no. 10/12 (March 1981).
- ⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-bangladesh-explore-expansion-of-development-eco-partnership-as-hasina-meets-foreign-secy/articleshow/77618800.cms>



Re-Connecting Neighbours: India-Bangladesh Relations @ 50

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury*

The Republic Day celebration in India on 26 January 2021 has become a landmark event in the 50 years of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh. For the first time, a contingent of the Bangladesh Armed Forces, comprising 122 members from its tri-services, participated in the Indian Republic Day parade, commemorating 50 years of the country's Liberation War and the establishment of diplomatic ties with India. After France (2016) and the UAE (2017), Bangladesh is the third country which has taken part in India's Republic Day celebrations.

Prior to this event, in a virtual summit meeting held on 17 December 2020, both countries agreed to celebrate the 50 years' journey of their diplomatic ties. Speaking at the summit, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, stated that "it is a matter of pride for us to celebrate the historic victory of Bangladesh over the anti-liberation forces as their Victory Day. When Bangladesh is celebrating the year of Mujib (Mujib Borsho: 17 March 2020 - 16 March 2021), India pays homage to the martyrs of both the countries who sacrificed their lives".¹ The fact remains that India intends to use this occasion not only to show closeness with its immediate eastern neighbour but also to ease the prevailing misunderstanding with Bangladesh regarding issues of cross border illegal immigration, the National Registration Certificate (NRC), and the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) agenda of India.

It may be recalled that the Modi government's plans for a NRC and CAA have caused massive protests in Dhaka last year, ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh, which was subsequently cancelled. Consequentially, four ministerial visits to India from Bangladesh were also cancelled. The year-long celebrations of the 'Victory' of 1971, therefore, gave India an opportunity to strengthen its traditional ties with Bangladesh, which is a strong

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pillar in India's 'neighbourhood first' policy. In the Summit meeting,² both India and Bangladesh vowed to uphold and protect the cherished values of democracy and equality, in line with the aspirations of the people of the two friendly countries.

Indeed, India's ties with Bangladesh comprise various dimensions: they are civilisational; cultural/religious; social; and economic. As close associates, these two countries are organically linked - with their common heritage and shared history, common memories of tragic loss, and the separation of families on a massive scale following epic events in their contemporary histories. These historical ties have translated into multidimensional and ever-expanding bilateral relations between the two nations. The geographical locations of India and Bangladesh complement each other, and present an opportunity for both nations to further strengthen their connectivity and economies.

History reveals that, prior to the partition of India in 1947, the trade and commerce of India's north eastern regions with the rest of the country used to pass through the territories of what is now Bangladesh. Rail and river transit across the erstwhile East Pakistan continued until March 1965 when, as a consequence of the India-Pakistan War, all transit traffic was suspended. The only exception was river transit which was restored in 1972. Realising the fact that enhanced bilateral relations promise to provide exponential benefits to both countries, decision makers in New Delhi and Dhaka have become proactive in reviving this delinked physical connectivity. For India in particular, transit and trans-shipment across Bangladesh is important as it is expected to boost the economy of India's Northeast. On the other hand, land connectivity with India's Northeast, and its access to Southeast Asia through that region, may help Bangladesh to achieve its ambition to reach lower to middle income levels. Connectivity with India may also help Bangladesh earn money from the payment of transit fees, and may also provide access to the Indian market for its burgeoning middle class. Against this backdrop, this essay deals with developmental cooperation between India and Bangladesh in strengthening bilateral maritime connectivity and re-linking the routes of inland waterways.

Developing Short Sea Shipping

In view of the opportunities and challenges in the maritime space, both India and Bangladesh have revitalised their connectivity. India is keen to make SAGAR (the vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region)³ mutually reinforce the Sagarmala project,⁴ which is looking into the country's port-led

development through building or modernising port facilities, and easing port operations, including promoting ‘short sea shipping’ (SSS) or coastal shipping, amongst other measures. This is aimed at facilitating India’s vision of inclusiveness in the Indian Ocean Region, and can only be accomplished through increased connectivity.

Similarly, Bangladesh also deems it necessary to deepen its ties with India based on reciprocity and mutual respect. As a ‘maritime state’, Bangladesh has established a permanent Maritime Affairs Unit (MAU)⁵ under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to look after maritime-related issues exclusively. Consequently, the Unit has played a crucial role in formulating The Bangladesh Maritime Zones Act, 2018,⁶ which aims at “exploring and exploiting living and non-living resources, to provide for the suppression of piracy, armed robbery, theft, and to make provisions for punishment and for matters connected therewith”.

Of India’s 13 major ports, seven are located along her eastern coast, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; and of these seven ports, it is mainly the ports of Kolkata–Haldia, Paradip, Visakhapatnam, and Chennai which are crucial for her maritime trade with Bangladesh. In the year 2016-17, within the Kolkata port, the Kolkata dock recorded the highest export figure of 17, 79, 766 tonnes (dry, breakbulk, and containers), while the Haldia dock recorded the highest import figure of 17, 682 tonnes (general cargo and containers) amongst all the major ports on India’s east coast in terms of trade with Bangladesh. In both cases of export and import, the Kolkata/Haldia port was followed by Paradip (Export figure: 1041279 tonnes, and import figure: 4211 tonnes). The import cargo list includes petroleum, oil, and lubricants along with containers.

In Bangladesh, the Chittagong and Mongla (at Khulna) ports are the major ports that handle international cargo. The Chittagong port is the principal seaport located on the banks of the Karnafuli River. To meet the increasing demands of the economy, and reduce the pressure on these two main ports, a new port, Payra, has been inaugurated at Patuakhali. It is also expected that, like Payra, the port at Matarbari will also help to clear the tailback faced at the Chittagong and Mongla ports. Experts hope that, once completed, the Matarbari port can compete with Colombo in terms of transshipment. Further, there is a plan to build another deep-sea port (now stalled) at Sonadia under the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt, or the Big-B initiative.⁷

In the maritime domain, the signing of the Coastal Shipping Agreement⁸ (CSA) 2015 between the two neighbours has been a landmark step. Maritime

transport is the most cost-and- energy efficient mode of transportation in the world. Indeed, shipping industries play a key role in establishing and sustaining commerce and growth. Acknowledging this fact, talks for enhancing maritime connectivity between India and Bangladesh have been underway since 2012. The plan to develop a new container terminal at the Chittagong Port, along with the creation of a container terminal at Pangaon, will enhance bilateral maritime trade through short sea shipping arrangements. It helps to have port-to-port direct cargo movement as well as bypassing the process of having goods shipped via the ports of Colombo, Singapore or Klang - the process followed prior to the agreement. It has also made way for Indian goods reaching the Chittagong Port to be delivered to India's Northeast. For instance, cargo from Kolkata to Chittagong or Mongla can be delivered through multimodal transport (rail, road, or inland waterways) to either destination within Bangladesh or India's Northeast. Bangladesh has allowed the use of the following routes for such purposes: Chittagong/Mongla to Agartala (Tripura), Chittagong/Mongla to Dawki (Meghalaya), and Chittagong/Mongla to Sutarkandi (Assam). Like Pangaon in Bangladesh, the riverine ports of Farraka and Bandel on the Indian side have been designated as ports of calls under the CSA.

India and Bangladesh share a riverine boundary of 1,116 km., and hence, for both countries, maritime connectivity holds great potential for their economic and socio-cultural developments. Indeed, the resolution of the maritime boundary dispute has created a congenial atmosphere for maritime initiatives. However, the pace of development in short sea shipping is still sluggish. Bangladeshi vessels are registered in India as river-sea vessels, by virtue of which they are subject to some relaxations of the kind reserved for Indian coastal vessels. Though this has promoted trade between India and Bangladesh, the number of ships must be increased on the coastal shipping route. As of now, only container traffic is prevalent, and there is a need to introduce cargo ships as well, which will help in the reduction of prices and the pressure of the cargo load moving through road routes.

Connecting Inland Waterways with Maritime Connectivity

Though India and Bangladesh started direct shipping in 2016, the volume of cargo has not grown to expected levels. One of the main reasons remains congestion in the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. Recently, Bangladeshi shipping lines have started moving containerised cargo from Kolkata to the inland river port at Pangaon; but the volume still remains quite low. As of now, Pangaon

(26 km away from Narayanganj on river Sitalakkha) is the only inland container terminal (ICT) in Bangladesh. Currently, rice, crude oil, leather, cosmetics, medicines, and plastic is being ferried by Indian vessels to Bangladesh. The export of food grains and raw material for garments via sea routes may be explored by the Indian side to make the bilateral trade more dynamic. In 2016-17, 2,59,8023 mt of fly ash was exported to Bangladesh from India through the India-Bangladesh Protocol route.

The India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade,⁹ first signed in 1972, has been a pioneer initiative in this context. Initially, the Protocol was renewable every two years. In April 2015, the two countries decided to renew the Protocol automatically after every five years. Under the Protocol, India and Bangladesh have agreed to use designated inland waterways for the passage of goods between two places of one country through the territory of the other, as well as for inter-country trade. The Protocol provides for 50:50 ratio sharing on a tonnage basis for inter-country and transit cargo by Indian and Bangladeshi vessels.

On the Indian side, the designated inland water routes under this Protocol are as follows: Kolkata-Silghat-Kolkata; Kolkata-Karimganj-Kolkata; Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahil; and Silghat-Karimganj-Silghat. Under this Protocol, six ports of call in each country have been nominated for facilitating inter-country trade. The National Waterways Act of India 2016¹⁰ has made provision for certain inland waterways to be national waterways (NW) and, thus, provide for the regulation and development of the said waterways for the purposes of shipping and navigation. Accordingly, 106 such waterways have been declared National waterways, of which 19 are in the Northeast. NW 2 is the main Protocol route between India and Bangladesh - from Kolkata-Sundarban-Chalna-Khulna-Mongla, and Kauhali-Barisal-Narayanganj-Aricha-Dhubri-Pandu-Silghat.

Floating terminals for facilitating cargo movement have been provided and maintained at ten locations: Dhubri, Jogighopa, Tezpur, Silghat, Vishwanathghat, Neamati, Bogibeel, Dibrugarh, Panbari, and Oriumghat. Land for setting up terminals at Hatsingimari, Dhubri, Silghat, Vishwanathghat, Neamati, Dibrugarh and Oriumghat has been acquired. As far as connectivity between India's Northeast and Bangladesh is concerned, NW 16 (River Barak) has also become highly important, connecting India's Northeast with Kolkata through the India-Bangladesh Protocol route. It covers the hinterlands of Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura, in addition to Assam. NW 16 diverges from Narayanganj towards Bhairabbajar-Ajmerganj-Karimganj-Lakhipur. This is the new route which runs over the Kusiara and Barak rivers which are connected

to the Brahmaputra. However, these are seasonal routes. Further, for the development of connectivity through inland waterways, it has been decided that the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) would take initiatives to enhance the facilities at Bhanga (19 km upstream of Karimganj), and at Badarpur. Recently, the Sonamura-Daudkandi route on the Gomati river in Tripura, and the Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi route were added to the list of Indo-Bangladesh Protocol routes, along with four other new routes.

The cargo movement through these routes has not yet reached the desired mark. While Indian exports meet 11-12 percent of Bangladesh's total import needs (2016-17), India shares less than two percent of Bangladesh's export basket. In most cases, the vessels carrying goods travel from India to Bangladesh, return empty. This increases the cost incurred by private trading agencies. As a result, the involvement of the private sector from the Indian side in this segment remains limited. Recently, the Adani Group is considering connectivity with the Bangladesh market through small carrier vessels. However, many infrastructural issues are yet to be resolved.

The situation in Bangladesh is slightly different. Presently, the Bangladesh government has welcomed private sector investments in developing the ICT to ferry containers from Dhaka via river routes to seaports to avoid shipment delays caused by acute road congestion. The Rupayan Group and Summit Power have showed their interest in this, and have planned to start service shortly. Additionally, the government has approved the construction of two other ICTs 15 kilometres away from Dhaka, by the Meghna Group and the A. K. Khan group.

Moreover, Bangladeshi shipping lines have started moving containerised cargo from Kolkata to the inland river port of Pangaon; however, the volume still remains quite low. As of now, Pangaon (26 km away from Narayanganj on the river Sitalakkha) is the only ICT in Bangladesh. Presently, rice, crude oil, leather, cosmetics, medicines, and plastic are being ferried by Indian vessels to Bangladesh. This encourages economic linkage between the two countries. To increase the demand of using these waterways, sending cargoes like food grains and raw material for garments may be thought of by the Indian side.

It is also important to increase awareness among all stakeholders about the benefits of trade by waterways, for which a series of dialogues may be organised on both sides of the border. Bulk commodities, and large cargo used for industrial production and large-scale construction projects, can be transported through the inland waterways from Kolkata/ Haldia. The aim is to

connect India's Northeast with the mainland through the waterways of Bangladesh. The transit route from the Haldia port through Bangladesh to Assam and Tripura, and linking the Chittagong sea port with the southern tip of Tripura can be possible. The necessity of dredging, the lack of assured fairways, the lack of night navigation facilities, etc., are some of the pressing issues which have restricted the expected growth of cargo flow through the inland waterways.

Connectivity for Mutual Prosperity

West Bengal is positioned to be a major beneficiary of enhanced India-Bangladesh connectivity, both continental as well as maritime. Besides West Bengal, four Northeastern states - Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram - share international borders with Bangladesh. With the exception of Meghalaya, the remaining Northeastern states share both land and riverine borders with Bangladesh and, among them, Tripura and Mizoram have the longest land and riverine borders with Bangladesh. India's Northeast is connected with the rest of India by a 22-km-wide stretch known as the 'Chicken's Neck corridor', which passes through a hilly terrain, with steep roads. Agartala is 1,650 km from Kolkata via Shillong and Guwahati, while the distance between Agartala and Kolkata via Bangladesh is just about 350 km.

Given the delays in the operationalisation of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Trade and Transit Project between India and Myanmar, the Ashuganj port of Bangladesh may be utilised as an alternative to the Sittwe port to revitalise trade routes to connect with India's Northeast. Presently, the possibility of using the Ashuganj riverine port in a big way is remote as the multi-modal connectivity of the port is still very poor. India could extend its help to expedite the process of development to make the Ashuganj port functional, where work is already in progress on the four-lane road project, aiming to ease the transportation of cargo from this port to Tripura and the other Northeastern states of India.

It is time that both the governments become proactive to finish already ongoing connectivity projects. Once the rail connectivity between Akhaura and Agartala is completed, and the Ashuganj port connected with this rail network, the transport cost and time will be reduced and, thus, the Ashuganj port will emerge as an alternative link for the Northeastern region with the rest of India as well as other destinations in Southeast Asia.

Indeed, India and Bangladesh have developed several protocols, MOUs, and SOPs to facilitate the development of fairways, ease of movement of

vessels, and the use of ports. In the last virtual Summit meeting held on 17 December 2020, both leaders reviewed the situation of ongoing bilateral connectivity measures and welcomed recent initiatives, including the signing of the second addendum to the Protocol, the trial run of the trans-shipment of Indian goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong, and the operationalisation of the Sonamura-Daudkandi Protocol route. Both leaders agreed to expeditiously operationalised the trans-shipment of Indian goods through the Chittagong and Mongla Ports. In the Summit meeting, India reiterated its request to the Government of Bangladesh of having at least one Land Port with a minimal negative list between each neighbouring states of India and Bangladesh, beginning with Agartala-Akhaura. On the other hand, Bangladesh proposed that Bangladeshi trucks avail of the Feni Bridge once completed, for the transportation of goods from the Chittagong port to India's Northeast.

Nonetheless, most of these initiatives are planned keeping the supply side in consideration. There is a need to make a more comprehensive analysis of the demand side which will capture the adequacy or inadequacy of ongoing and planned infrastructural development. In this context, an in-depth analysis of Origin-Destination may help identify possible products and sectors that might be shifted from the road to the inland waterways transportation system. It is also important to learn from international experiences on vessel design as well as vessel loading and unloading methods to have more cost effective and functional short sea shipping arrangements between India and Bangladesh.

Notes :

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Celebrating 50 years of India-Bangladesh Relations

Joyeeta Bhattacharjee*

Bangladesh holds an important place in India's neighbourhood policy. India shares its longest border with the country, passing through five states, including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Also, Bangladesh is a key partner in India's Act East Policy, and is pivotal in enhancing connectivity with the landlocked north-eastern region (NER), home of the seven sister states. The NER is linked with the rest of the country via the heavily congested Siliguri corridor, which is just 25 kilometres wide in the eastern state of West Bengal. Connectivity is considered a reason behind the slow pace of development in the region. Given these realities, a friendly relationship between the two countries is important for India.

In the past 50 years, the India-Bangladesh relationship was more or less friendly. In half a century of bilateral ties, there were a few moments when the relationship faced strain, particularly during the military regime and during the rule of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, the two countries did not allow the feeling of antagonism to linger for a long time, and worked on improving the bilateral relationship. Today, India recognises Bangladesh as a close friend in the neighbourhood. The golden jubilee year of the bilateral relationship (2021) is a moment to review the journey of this bilateral relationship, and to introspect its strengths and the challenges faced by it to ascertain a productive road map for the future.

A Brief Overview of the Relationship

Initially, the India and Bangladesh relationship was exceptionally warm and friendly, and was marked with the spirit of friendship and trust. The root of the bonhomie between the two countries was India's unprecedented support of the freedom movement of Bangladesh. In the 1971 War, India gave shelter

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to more than 10 million refugees from Bangladesh who fled their homes to escape inhumane torture by the Pakistani forces across the border. India had provided military assistance to the freedom struggle of Bangladesh, and had its boots on the ground also. Notably, India was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh's independence. Another important determinant for the blossoming of this relationship was the political will of the top leadership of the two countries which was in complete support of boosting the bilateral relationship. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's first Prime Minister and the leader of the liberation struggle, had taken a break in New Delhi on his way to Bangladesh after his release from the Pakistani prison in 1972.¹ This gesture of Mujibur Rahman indicated the importance he gave to his country's relationship with India. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, visited Bangladesh in March 1972 as a mark of solidarity with her counterpart.

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Peace in 1972 was the landmark of this period. The treaty, however, was criticised by the opposition, and abandoned in later years. Also, the period marked the signing of some key agreements that laid the foundation for future cooperation. These include the Joint River Commission between India and Bangladesh that helped resolve issues like the sharing of the waters of common rivers. This is the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's tenure. The water-sharing agreement of the Ganges river of 1996 is a major contribution of JRC. Additionally, the Inland Water Trade and Transit Agreement between India and Bangladesh is also a contribution of Mujibur Rahman's rule. The treaty has been functional since the 1970s and is renewed periodically; it is responsible for facilitating one of the longest surviving modes of connectivity between the two countries.

The bilateral relationship faced a major blow following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. During the military regime that followed, outwardly the relationship was friendly; but there was an inherent feeling of suspicion and mistrust which ruled the bilateral ties. The military regime's initiative to enhance Bangladesh's relationship with China, India's competitor in the region, was believed to be an indicator of the shift in Bangladesh's foreign policy orientation, and resulted in distancing the country's ties with India. The military rule ended following a mass protest that led to the ouster of the military dictator, H. M. Ershad, in 1990.

In 1991, democracy was re-established in Bangladesh. The establishment of democracy did not make much difference to the relationship. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that formed the government after winning the 1991 election, maintained an antagonistic attitude towards India. The victory of the Awami League in 1996 opened new prospects for bilateral relations. In

that year, India and Bangladesh signed the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty that was an important breakthrough in solving disputes over sharing of river waters between the two countries and was a sign of the improved relationship. Another landmark of the era was Bangladesh agreeing to provide transit for the movement of goods from one part of India to its Northeastern region, using the country's territory. Notably, the transit could not be implemented due to opposition inside the country.

India-Bangladesh relations deteriorated after the BNP defeated the Awami League in the 2001 election, and formed the government. The bilateral relationship touched rock bottom during the BNP's term (2001–06). The BNP government's reluctance to address India's security concerns was a major point of contention between the two countries. India repeatedly requested Bangladesh to act against the insurgent groups who were running their subversive activities in India from across the border. India's plea fell on deaf ears, with the BNP declining to recognise the presence of such groups in the country.

India-Bangladesh relations got a major boost after the Awami League won the parliamentary election in 2009. Soon after forming the government, Awami League leader and Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, declared that improving her country's relationship with India was a priority for her government. To mend the relationship, the Awami League acted against the NER insurgent groups who were operating in her country. This gesture by Bangladesh contributed to bolstering confidence between the two countries, and paved the way for cooperation in a plethora of areas. Since then, more than 50 institutional mechanisms have been established to oversee cooperation in different areas, including security, defence, trade, the economy, science and technology, etc. Besides, many long pending issues - like the delimitation of the land boundary between the two countries - have been resolved peacefully.

Despite the warmth and friendship between the two countries, scepticism still persists about the future of the relationship. An analysis of the major strength and challenges will be pertinent to formulate policy to ensure the future stability of this relationship.

Key Strengths

People to People Connectivity

Before the partition of colonial India in 1947, India and Bangladesh were part of one composite political entity. The Partition could not separate linkages

between the two countries that had lasted for centuries. India and Bangladesh have always shared a common history, culture, and language. Besides, there are familial ties amongst the people of the two countries. These commonalities have resulted in the formation of unique linkages between the two countries which are independent of government initiatives. Indeed, India has also taken some steps to strengthen these linkages by taking measures like rolling out scholarships to students of Bangladesh as well as providing training to Bangladesh officers of the Civil Service, the police, and judicial services. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations provides 200 scholarships annually to students from Bangladesh for pursuing under-graduation, post-graduation, and M. Phil/Ph.D courses in various educational institutions in India. Besides, beginning 2019, Bangladesh Civil Service officials are receiving training at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), Mussoorie. Bangladeshi judicial officials are receiving training at the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal as well as in other Judicial Academies in different states across India.

Recognising the close bond that exists between the people of the two countries, India has been working on improving the visa regime to encourage larger interactions among the people across society. These measures have resulted in enhancing the cross border movement of people for purposes like education, medical treatment, leisure, and meeting members of families, etc. India issues more than 15 lakh visas annually in Bangladesh, the highest number of visas issued by any Indian diplomatic mission abroad.² The issuance of a large number of visas only highlights the depth of the linkages.

Trade and Economic Relations

Trade and economic relations between the two countries are important areas in the bilateral relationship. Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade surpassing US\$ 10 billion.³ India is the second-largest source of Bangladeshi imports. The trade has a wider potential for increasing, considering the impressive growth that Bangladesh has registered in the past few years. Bangladesh was once referred to as 'basket case'; it is now one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Bangladesh's growth is likely to open new opportunities for Indian businesses, as the country is likely to emerge not only as a market but also become a major manufacturing base for Indian companies.

Already, Indian companies have started setting up businesses in Bangladesh, and are likely to invest around US\$ 9 billion in that country.⁴ The country has offered to establish a special economic zone for Indian companies. Additionally, initiatives have been taken to improve the facilities at border crossings, and

Integrated Check Posts have been established with state of the art facilities, including testing labs and quarantine facilities.

Given the close linkages between India and Bangladesh, trade issues need special handling because there are many facets of trade that involve border communities who are not conversant with formal processes. This has resulted in the flourishing of informal trade which is estimated to be double the volume of formal trade. Border-haats are being established to encourage trade involving border communities on both sides of the border. Presently, 4 border-haats are functioning as pilot projects, and more are being proposed in the region.⁵ Close economic ties have resulted in the creation of interdependence between the two countries, which needs careful nurturing for deepening the relationship.

Development Cooperation

Development cooperation has been a key element in India's relations with Bangladesh. India's development assistance to Bangladesh started soon after the independence of Bangladesh for the post-war reconstruction of the country. Over the years, Bangladesh has emerged as the largest recipient of India's overseas development assistance. Since 2011, India has extended 3 lines of credit worth US\$ 8 billion for the development of infrastructure in a variety of sectors, including roads, railways, shipping, and ports.⁶ Further, India has been providing grants assistance to various projects, like the maintenance of inland waterways and the construction of energy pipelines, etc. Besides, India has been offering assistance in funding small projects, like the construction of school buildings, skill training centres, and health clinics, all of which have a wider impact on the socio-economic upliftment of the community in Bangladesh. India's assistance has helped in boosting its image as an important development partner in Bangladesh. Besides, this enhances the motto of "shared growth and partnership" which is often highlighted as the principle on which India anchor's relationships with its neighbours.

Major Challenges

The Migration Debate

The non-resolution of illegal migration from Bangladesh is considered a major weakness in the bilateral relationship. It is popularly believed that people from Bangladesh are migrating to India illegally for reasons like employment, religious persecution, education, health, etc. Migration from Bangladesh is perceived to have cause a major demographic shift in the border states, and has been a cause of ethnic and social tension in states like Assam. India is repeatedly

urging Bangladesh to take steps in controlling cross border migration but Bangladesh has consistently declined India's claims of unchecked migration from that country. A major lacuna here has been India's failure to provide authentic data. The non-resolution of this issue has become a major irritant in the bilateral relationship.

Water Sharing of Common Rivers

India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. The sharing of the waters of these common rivers forms a crucial part of the bilateral relationship. Presently, water-sharing agreements for two rivers have been signed. These are the Ganges Water agreement of 1996, and the agreement on the Feni river in 2019. The discussion on the water sharing agreement of the Teesta river has progressed substantially, and the two countries had agreed to a draft agreement that was scheduled to be signed during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011. The signing of the agreement was postponed after the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamta Bannerjee, objected to the formula agreed upon in the draft agreement at the last moment. The Teesta agreement has been pending since then. This delay in the signing of the agreement of Teesta river water sharing has emerged as a major irritant between the two countries. The issue of water is repeatedly exploited by various vested groups to ignite anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh.

Border Killings

The reported deaths of Bangladeshi nationals due to firing by the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) has been a point of discord between India and Bangladesh. Notably, people who are killed at the border are primarily cattle smugglers who are referred to as traders in Bangladesh. The death of Bangladeshis leads to feelings of antagonism in Bangladesh, and the country has been urging India to eliminate incidents of death at the border. India has been sympathetic to Bangladesh's concern, and has introduced non-lethal weapons for use by the BSF on the India-Bangladesh border as a measure to control the of deaths. BSF measures have substantially helped in reducing the number, but Bangladesh wants the number to come to zero - a target difficult to achieve unless cross border crimes are controlled completely.

The border is notorious for cross-border crimes like the smuggling of arms, narcotics, and the trafficking of women and children. BSF has claimed that they have to open fire in self-defence as they are often attacked by criminals. The number of incidents attacking the BSF has increased significantly after the introduction of non-lethal weapons.⁷ Moreover, there have been incidents of some Bangladeshi nationals also opening fire on India citizens. In

December 2020, an Indian citizen was killed in Meghalaya by the Border Guard's Bangladesh.⁸ Such incidents add to tensions among the border communities, and give rise to anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh.

The Growth of Radicalism

The growth of religious radicalism in Bangladesh adds another challenge to the India-Bangladesh relationship. Since the early 2000s, Bangladesh has been witnessing a rise in religious radicalism and militancy in the country. The radicals and militants have been critical of the liberal values of the country, and attacked symbols of secularism in Bangladesh - like the judiciary, poets, festivals, and other celebrations like of the Bengali new year. In August 2005, the banned militant organisation, Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, detonated 500 bombs across the country in a single day. Bangladesh has been successful in containing militancy due to the strict counter-terror measures adopted by the ruling Awami League.

Nevertheless, containing the spread of religious radicalism in the country remains a challenge. The rising influence of the radicals can be ascertained from the rally carried out by the Hafaat-at-e Islami in 2013, who were demanding the death penalty for blasphemy 2013.⁹ Recently, the radical group agitated against the establishment of statues, which they feel is against the rules of Islam. They even defaced the statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation.¹⁰ The radicals have been critical of Bangladesh's relationship with India. In 2020, the radical groups staged a protest across the country ahead of the proposed visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The latter was to visit Bangladesh as a guest in the gala celebrations of the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.¹¹ The visit was postponed following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Internal Politicking

The lack of consensus amongst the political parties in Bangladesh concerning the country's relationship with India is a major shortcoming in the bilateral relationship. It impacts the sustainability of the relationship quite seriously. The play of politics about the bilateral relationship impedes the growth of the bilateral ties. The different political parties in Bangladesh have always remained conscious of the domestic implications of taking any steps on issues related to India, which is not a concern while dealing with other countries. This major problem has favoured the growth of the influence of China, India's competitor in South Asia.

Recognising this shortcoming, India has tried to work on its relationship with the BNP, the opposition of the Awami League. In 2012, BNP chief,

Begum Khaleda Zia, was invited to India. However, such measures have hardly yielded results as she declined to meet Indian President, Pranab Mukharjee, during his visit in 2013. The party also continued with its criticism of the Awami league policy towards India.

The Way out

Being neighbours, India and Bangladesh should maintain a friendly relationship, especially at a time when the two countries are growing economically. A good relationship with neighbours is considered a necessity for the peace and prosperity of a nation. Like with any neighbours across the globe, there will be issues between the two countries. However, the relationship should be nurtured in such a way that differences over these issues do not lead to conflicts and rather help to find ways to deepen cooperation. In this regard, emphasis should be given to resolving all long-standing issues. Moreover, the steps required to widen the discourse on water or resource management should also be undertaken. Border management cooperation needs to be further strengthened. The progress of any relationship requires the active participation of both the countries. This will be defined by the importance shown by the future leaderships of the two countries. Political will can be generated only through the sustained engagement and nurturing of this relationship.

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India-Bangladesh Relations: Some Issues Need Deft Handling

Anand Kumar*

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.



Strengthening Cooperation and Reducing Irritants: India-Bangladesh Relations Today

Ashish Shukla*

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 Shahnour 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.



The Resilience of Secularism in Bangladesh

Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury*

With a spiritual commitment to Islam and a cultural affiliation to being Bengali, Bangladesh is a nation where the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Founded on secular principles, Bangladesh has been heralded by the western world as an example of a model Muslim country, but whose people have taken great pride in its unique syncretic nature. In fact, ethno-nationalism conflicting with Islamic religious nationalism was the very embodiment of the creation of Bangladesh.

Although there have been occasional drifts towards religious extremism, the secular character of Bangladesh has rarely been threatened seriously. Despite many attempts, it has proven to be an unlikely breeding ground for radical Islamist groups. The original Constitution of Bangladesh was secular in content. But, after Bangladesh's leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975, successive governments chipped away at the secular edifice of the Constitution, and made the country more Islamic. Secularism was removed from the Constitution in 1977 by the Fifth Amendment of the constitution by Ziaur Rahman, and Islam was declared as the state religion in 1988 by Muhammad Ershad. However, the concept of secularism was reinstated when, in its 2010 landmark decision, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh scrapped the bulk of the Fifth Amendment, which had allowed religion-based politics to flourish in Bangladesh ever since. By making religion based political activities a punishable offence in 2010, Bangladesh's Supreme Court ensured that secularism remains a cornerstone of the Constitution. The Election Commission of Bangladesh subsequently demanded the religion-based parties in the country to amend their charters as they conflicted with the supreme law of the land.

Sheikh Hasina's regime adopted further steps to strengthen the secular aspects of the constitution and has endeavoured to give non-Muslims a sense of belonging by rephrasing certain provisions of the Constitution. In place of the Article 2A that reads: "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but

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other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic”, the amended Constitution reads: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.” The Awami League regime, during Hasina’s second term (2009–2014), opened a new chapter in her governance by omitting Article 25(2) which had underlined the consolidation, preservation, and strengthening of fraternal relations among the Muslim countries.

While the Islamisation of a certain section of Bangladeshi society has dominated the headlines, secularism as a sustainable common platform has always withstood these challenges. Bangladesh has a highly sophisticated civil society, and a strong religion-cultural tradition grounded in a secular political platform. The world’s third largest Muslim country, Bangladesh marks a crucial departure from the trend amongst some other Muslim countries in South and Southeast Asia where an Islamist agenda has become more apparent or prominent. In the case of Bangladesh, Islamist militancy has failed to take root, and the country’s secular state and civil society has indeed retained its strength and resilience. Muslim nationalism - which was the basis for the establishment of Pakistan - tried to rear its head in Bangladesh during the turbulent years from 2001 to 2006.

During this period, Bangladesh was swept by a wave of radical ideology that triggered considerable media and academic concern that the country would fall prey to Islamist forces. The extremism that it experienced during those years was largely the result of an ideology and tactics brought back into Bangladesh by returnees of the Afghan war in the 1980s. Those returnees believed that the radical Islamist ideology they encountered (and imbibed) in Afghanistan could be transplanted into the Muslim community of Bangladesh. They tried to radicalise contemporary Bangladeshi society and politics, competing against Bengali ethnicity, language, culture, and secularism (‘Bengali nationalism’). This was a serious miscalculation. The relative ease with which the current Bangladesh government’s anti-terrorism campaign crushed this outbreak of Islamist militancy has demonstrated how seriously the militants misunderstood Islam in the Bangladesh context - a context in which Islam is intimately interwoven with deeper traditions of tolerance and secularism in that culture.

Incidents of extremism and terrorism witnessed a sharp increase in Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006. Most of the attacks were directed against religious minorities, secular intellectuals, and journalists as well as against politicians belonging to secular parties and leftist activists. Islamist extremists,

with the backing of Jamaat-e-Islami, sought to impose an Islamic way of life on people in the rural areas, often through the use of force. Women were coerced into veiling themselves, and men were forced to grow beards and wear skull caps. Many who defied these rules were tortured and killed. Cultural groups and cinema were targeted as well. Bangladesh's secular tradition was under severe threat from the rise in fundamentalism until Sheikh Hasina returned to power and upheld the principles of secularism.

After Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, the Mujibur Rehman government banned all political activities of the Jamaat-e-Islami Party. However, Zia-ur-Rehman responded by establishing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In an effort to establish itself as a viable political organisation, the BNP gave amnesty to the Jamaat-e-Islami, and permitted them to revive their political activities. But, in a subsequent upheaval, the BNP itself lost power to a military dictator. The Jamaat, nevertheless, continued to flourish during the nine years of dictatorial rule that followed during the 1980s, giving birth to a generation of radical activists.

Islamist groups in Bangladesh flourished with vast financial donations from abroad. They set up hundreds of madrassas (religious schools) in the country, which they have been using as recruitment centres for fundamentalist ideas. What made the situation alarming in Bangladesh was that the Jamaat and its allies penetrated the higher ranks of the armed forces during the military rule, and later during the BNP rule. During its political-power tenures, the Bangladesh army drew heavily on the support of Islamic fundamentalist parties to win over the masses.

During Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's first stint at the helm in the first half of the 1990s, the Jamaat and other fundamentalist outfits were given almost free rein. Over the years, the Jamaat set up thousands of madrassas in Bangladesh, many of which are known to recruit and train radicals and jihadi fighters. In 2001, Khaleda Zia returned to power for the second time on an essentially anti-India platform. In addition to political compulsions to keep her fundamentalist partners in the coalition government happy, Begum Zia's inadequate response against terrorists was prompted by her intense political rivalry and sense of insecurity. The BNP has always viewed its fundamentalist friends as useful weapons to keep the Awami League in check.

Islamist extremists in Bangladesh during Khaleda Zia government, maintained operational linkages with foreign extremist and terrorist groups. According to reports, extremists from the Jemaah Islamia - which is connected to the Al Qaeda and seeks to set up an Islamic State encompassing Malaysia,

Singapore, Indonesia and southern Philippines - once operated out of camps in Bangladesh. The results of the 2008 elections brought an end to the freedom that these terrorists enjoyed as the Hasina regime cracked down on terror groups, as well as the insurgent groups targeting India and operating out of Bangladesh, and brought to justice the perpetrators who had derailed secular ethos in 1975 through the gruesome killing of Bangabandhu Mujibur Rehman. The fugitives were a blot on the character on the national identity of Bangladesh.

Coinciding with the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East, Bangladesh also witnessed an escalation of deadly attacks on secular activists. Throughout this period, members of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society, including publishers, bloggers, and media personnel, continued to receive death threats. Like in other theatres, violence as a political tactic was used by Islamist parties and groups in Bangladesh to silence dissent. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), encouraged the forces responsible for the radicalisation, and legitimised violence as a political tactic to silences critics and opponents. The new Islamic identity took hold in at least some segments of society - evident in the effectiveness of the Islamists casting Shahbag protesters in 2013 as "atheists", and their agenda as being "anti-Islam," thus conflating successfully three concepts: secularism, atheism, and anti-Islamism.

Islamists try to disperse a discourse in which the rallying call is that "Islam is under attack", or that "secularism equals atheism equals anti-Islamism". And, within this, they try to delegitimise and dehumanise outspoken secularists. This discourse is completely distinct from the traditional understandings of Islam in Bangladesh, and appeals to a very narrow audience. Consequently, the vast majority of Bangladeshis are held hostage by a small number of domestic violent networks, some of whom have links with the global dynamics of transnational Islamist activism.

The current administration has taken some robust measures against Islamist outfits, especially in response to the recent targeting of the blogger community. It has taken laudable measures in countering Islamist forces, and pushed for the War Crimes Tribunal in which the defendants come from the Islamist ranks.

Bangladesh is a paradox that Pakistan failed to understand during the 24 years that the country formed its eastern wing. Bangladeshis from all sections of society fast during Ramzan but also celebrate Pujio; they visit the mosque and sing Rabindra sangeet, seeing no contradiction between the two activities,

and indeed, there need not be any. Addressing a function during her visit to the Durga Puja Mandap at the Ramkrishna Mission, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “Bangladesh is a secular state and we all, irrespective of religion, caste and creed, are moving together along the same road. We all are celebrating festivals including religious ones together which is the best achievement for us.” This embodies the essentially secular spirit of Bangladesh as a nation.

The Bangladesh Awami League government’s slogan, “*Dhormo Jaar Jaar, Utsob Shobar* (Religion as per one’s own, but festivals common to all)”, portrays the nation’s secular face. The sentiment is being implemented on the ground, with people of the Hindu community taking charge of security of Eidgahs during Eid prayers, and Muslim youths guarding the Puja Mandaps during prayers. *Poila Boishakh*, which marks the first day of the new year according to the Bengali calendar, is observed by Bengalis in Bangladesh irrespective of their religion. Celebrated across Bangladesh with splendour and revelry, the festivities on the occasion are an affirmation of Bengali culture that transcends religion, and a fitting reply to radical Islamists and their designs.

Bangladesh has a history of linguistic nationalism triumphing over religious nationalism. This has acted as a deterrent against the rising tide of extremism. There is still a strong Bengali culture that Bangladeshi Muslims and Hindus share. This has acted as a brake against the rising tide of extremism.

Thus, in any political rhetoric and history, it can never be forgotten that the war in 1971 was formally articulated in terms of a struggle for a secular state based on the existence of a unified Bengali cultural identity that superseded religious identity. A competitive democratic system of politics, which accommodates aspects of secularism, language, Muslim identity, and Islamic ethical-moral codes, continues to be retained in political discourse for forming and consolidating the multi-racial, multi-religious national identity of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. 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.



Tenets of India-Bangladesh Relations

Sanjay K. Bhardwaj*

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 transshipment 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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