



INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: ANALYZING THE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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Abstract: *The Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship is rooted in common civilizational heritage. The bilateral relationship encompasses political, economic, cultural and strategic dimensions. Despite the proximity in their cultural tradition, such that popular verses of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam are revered by people on both sides of the border even today, a number of issues have clouded the Indo-Bangladesh relationship for years. However, the assumption of office by the new leadership in both India and Bangladesh has led the two Asian neighbors into a new phase of bonhomie. The present ties maybe defined as mature, pragmatic and practical. It is founded on the values of friendship, equality, sovereignty, trust and understanding. Consequently several issues which are a manifestation of sovereign reality, such as the disputed boundary between the two countries, have seen the light of settlement in the recent past. Skeptics suggest that India can remain apathetic to its relationship with its eastern neighbor and Bangladesh is too vulnerable to adopt such a stance. However, reality champions such oversimplification. With China making deep inroads into India's backyard, it is imperative for India to renew its strategic ties with Bangladesh. In this context, can the recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Bangladesh, be viewed as a 'game changer'?*

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The Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship is one of those areas in South Asia which has not comprehensively caught the attention of scholars, academics or foreign policy analysts. Interestingly the school of skeptics suggests that India can remain apathetic to its relationship with Bangladesh, whereas, Bangladesh is too vulnerable to adopt such a stance. However reality champions such oversimplification.¹ With the chronic instability in India's northeast and the presence of neighboring countries trying to forge relation of goodwill with Bangladesh (the commercial gateway to India's northeastern region), it is at present critical to India's national interest to renew its relationship with its eastern neighbor.

The significance of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's maiden visit to Bangladesh, on June 6-7, 2015 looms large, in this backdrop. Clearly the official tour has opened new vistas in the bilateral relationship. It had displayed India's steadfast approach of converting its Look East Policy into an Act East Policy. Further, the sojourn was a game changer in terms of perceptual shift between the two South Asian neighbors and India's rising skepticism and its tactics to curb China's mounting footprint in Bangladesh in the recent years.

THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

Prior to the foundation of the modern nation-state of Bangladesh in 1971, it was a part of the non-contiguous Pakistan. India's role towards the birth of this new state signified that it would enjoy a favorable relationship with the country, at least for some time in the future. India's endeavor to withdraw its troops from Bangladesh after the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 denoted India's acknowledgement of the latter's sovereignty. Not unexpectedly, India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh. The two countries signed the 'Treaty of Friendship and Peace' in 1972, for a period of 25 years, agreeing to adhere to the principles of sovereignty, mutual independence and territorial sovereignty.²

However the healthy Indo-Bangladesh rapport witnessed a steady decline post 1975. With the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the rise to power of General Zia-ur-Rahman there was a reconfiguration of relations between the two countries. At this juncture Islam evolved as the new symbol of Bangladeshi national identity. It marked the commencement of Bangladesh's feeling of apprehension towards India's rising regional power profile. Giving air to anti-Indian sentiments became an effective instrument in the hands of political parties, with an exception of the Awami League, to wax nationalist credential in Bangladesh.³



Despite this mood of ambivalence, in 1992 India granted Bangladesh the Tin Bigha Corridor on perpetual lease. Hereafter, the assumption of office by the “Hindu nationalist” BJP and the “secular” Congress in turns, could not mend ties between the two countries. Ideological issues apart, Bangladesh has always been wary of living next to a big neighbor. Being historically and geographically close to India, the “India factor” has loomed large in its foreign policy agenda, since the very beginning.

However, alike the tall leaders of the Bangladesh government such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Lt. General Zia-ur-Rahman, Indians too, have time and again emphasized on the necessity of maintaining friendly bilateral relations.⁴

A number of issues that had clouded the Indo-Bangladesh relationship for years, have seen the light of settlement in the recent past. Although few unresolved matters continue to linger on. The deft diplomacy of the new leadership on both sides of the border, have commenced a new era of bonhomie between the Asian neighbors.

THE SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION OF THE LAND BOUNDARY AGREEMENT

India shares its largest contiguous and “porous” border of 4000 km with Bangladesh. An important question in the Indo-Bangladesh security discourse is the peaceful resolution of the boundary dispute. Prime Minister Modi’s recent sojourn to Bangladesh led to the settlement of the long drawn boundary dispute, ensuring the elements of national security and territorial sovereignty to both India and Bangladesh.

The sealing of this historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) has enabled as many as 50,000 people living in border enclaves under stateless limbo, to finally secure their nationality.⁵

The two countries have agreed to exchange territories according to the new boundary arrangement with 51 and 111 enclaves being transferred to India and Bangladesh respectively. Indian PM Shri Narendra Modi had symbolically identified the signing of the historic agreement with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall.⁶ However, apart from being significant in terms of resolving a historical disagreement and offering national identity to the stateless people, the LBA holds prime importance in terms of addressing an important security question.

Absence of territorial sovereignty, had led to the neighboring areas surrounding the disputed border, to grow into a hub of illegal activities such as human trafficking, cattle smuggling, illegal migration, breeding ground of terrorist outfits and circulation of fake



currency. With the recent terror attacks in Assam by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and West Bengal by Jamaat-e-Islami, the assertion of Bangladesh being a breeding ground for terrorists, had emerged more blatantly.

To this end, the demarcation of the border and the resolution of the boundary dispute had been identified as the first step to curb such activities. Both PM Modi and PM Sheikh Hasina had re-affirmed and reiterated their unequivocal position against terrorism and extremism and expressed commitment to share information about individuals and groups, indulging in such activities.⁷ Thus, the LBA successfully closed a dreadful chapter and a constant irritant in the Indo-Bangladesh relations.

THE TEESTA WATER DISPUTE: AN UNRESOLVED POLITICAL ISSUE

Despite congeniality in the relationship, a key factor that casts its long shadow over their multifaceted engagement strategy is the unresolved water sharing dispute of the Teesta River.

The Teesta, which enters the country near Tin Bigha of Lalmonirhat district, is an important river for north-east Bangladesh. The issue of debate between the two neighbors has been the construction of a barrage at Gajoldoba by India, whereby 85% of the Teesta River water is diverted towards it, without Bangladeshi consent.⁸

This has resulted into Bangladesh suffering from a paucity of water during the dry summer season and an overflow of water during monsoon, causing floods and widespread devastation. The scarcity of water has been detrimental to Bangladeshi farmers who have to irrigate an area of 632,000 hectares. Since the population ratio on either side of the border stands at 70 for Bangladesh and 30 for India, therefore the equation of the Teesta water dispute being a key political agenda for successive governments in Bangladesh, stands understood.

Although there was much expectation in the Bangladeshi foreign policy circle regarding a fruitful outcome on the Teesta issue, during PM Modi's official tour to Bangladesh, yet to their dismay no such agreement could be concluded. However the presence of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee in Dhaka during the two- day summit suggested a potential future outcome of a peaceful resolution of the dispute.

Shri Narendra Modi had stated, "I am of the view that birds, air and water-these three do not have to have visas at all".⁹ His vision towards the resolution of the Teesta water issue is



to adopt a humanitarian posture, rather than politicizing the water crisis. However, when viewed from Bangladesh's lens the settlement of the dispute seems to be of critical socio-economic and political importance. For long, the succeeding governments in Bangladesh had suffered great disappointment towards the attitude of indifference and high handedness of the Indian ruling elite to peacefully settle the trans-boundary water sharing dispute. This had in a way, culminated into Bangladesh's apprehension and suspicion towards India, leading to an estrangement between them and Bangladesh looking beyond India to seek new allies in the region.

Water sharing continues to remain a sensitive subject for countries on both sides of the border. Consequently an endeavor must be made the respective governments to bring about a cooperative agreement based on the principles of fair play and equity to either party.¹⁰

CAN THE RECENT VISIT BE VIEWED AS A 'GAME CHANGER'?

In spite of a rich historical legacy, the essence of the Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship must be viewed from the security prism. While a formal statement identifying India as an adversary has never been issued by Bangladesh yet its security policy has projected a shift in stance. For several decades, it had shared a sense of anxiety of living next to a bigger neighbor. Thus, geographical proximity, asymmetric economies, feeling of insecurity of Bangladesh and complacency on behalf of Indian leaders- have been the defining factors in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

In this vacuum of trust, China had silently made deep inroads into Bangladesh and with time it has sought to expand its footprint in the region. Bangladesh on its part, had identified China as a security guarantor, to counter the influence of India, the perceived hegemon. Such circumstances have finally led the Indian government to realize the strategic importance of Bangladesh. Consequently, in the recent years Bangladesh has emerged as a key strategic ally of India and an important lynchpin determining the geopolitics of South Asia. It is in this context that PM Modi's visit can be seen as a 'game changer'.

Although on former occasions, several high level visits have taken place between India and Bangladesh, yet Modi's sojourn has brought a new dimension to the relationship.¹¹ For the first time in several years, Bangladesh has perceived a decisive moderation in India's posture towards it: the fresh element of respect. This has given way to a shift in the perception of



the local Bangladeshi population and the government towards India, from one of skepticism to that of goodwill.

PM Modi's competence has outdone the communal dimension that could have loomed large in the relationship. A Muslim dominated Bangladesh had warmly welcomed an Indian delegation led by saffron Modi, as he met his words with deeds. Apart from the paradigm shift in perceptions, the issues of connectivity and new strategic developments have given a fresh direction to the Indo-Bangladesh rapport.

Initiatives forging greater connectivity had been a formidable part of the tour. As one observes, China's famed string of pearls strategy gradually waning, with South Asian nations- Sri Lanka, Bhutan and now Bangladesh - tilting towards India, PM Modi's sojourn had brought with it a surprise package of fresh tactics to sustain India's pre-eminence in the region and curb China's rising influence in India's backyard.

A case in point is the agreement on inland water transit and trade and the commencement of the Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati and Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus services respectively.¹² Such projects would deliver the task of enhancing interstate connectivity as well as have a larger implication in terms of bolstering regional connectivity.

Of critical importance is Bangladesh's recent approval to Indian cargo vessels to use the Mongla and Chittagong ports. Prior to this, Indian cargo vessels travelled to Singapore to offload cargo, which was later brought back to Bangladesh. India's access to the Chittagong port may be identified as a milestone for its international trade.¹³

This connectivity agreement would not only facilitate in conserving time but also have larger strategic implications. Further the fact that both the countries would, for the first time, use the common sea, is likely to have larger security repercussions in the region in the years ahead. The Chittagong port forms an important "pearl" in China's "String of Pearls". It is apprehended that at a later stage China could use this commercial port for strategic purpose. This is particularly the case because China has been involved in developing a deep sea port off the island of Sonadia at Cox Bazar, a fishing port located 150 km south of Chittagong.¹⁴

Thus, a well connected South Asia and a benign image of India will not only benefit India economically but would also strategically enable it to sustain its pre-dominance in the region. As far as India's economic clout in South Asia is concerned, a brazen fact is the



asymmetric economic relationship that it shares with its smaller neighbors, namely Bangladesh. For all these years, the reality of trade deficit between the two countries was viewed by Bangladesh, as not its own inability to expand its exports but as India's overwhelming edge to economically dominate it.

However, the tables have now turned with the signing of an agreement to establish an India specific Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and an extension of \$2 billion credit to Dhaka. This is the first time in history, that a neighboring country would establish an economic zone specifically designed for Indian companies. Such a project would facilitate greater Indian investment and contrive a way to curb the issue of trade deficit. In 2014-15 trade between the two nations stood at \$6.9 billion, of which Indian exports and imports to and from Bangladesh amount to \$6.2 billion and \$0.6 billion respectively. The number is expected to shoot up to the \$10 billion mark by 2018.¹⁵ India seeks to emerge as a strong partner of Bangladesh in its objective of becoming a middle income country by 2021.¹⁶

Further the extension of a fresh line of credit would not only boost the Bangladeshi economy but would also be a source of immense opportunities for India. It is anticipated that this initiative would promote the *Make in India* drive and create 50,000 jobs in India.¹⁷ However a critical element in the line of credit is that a minimum of 75% of the loan amount must be utilized to purchase Indian goods and services. This will clearly have a constructive and positive effect on the steel and cement sectors of the Indian economy.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

The pro-active diplomacy of both PM Modi and Sheikh Hasina has set the tone and momentum of the future trajectory of the previously stalled Indo-Bangladesh relations. With the longstanding boundary dispute being resolved, the predicament of cross-border illegal migration, illegal trafficking is expected to get restricted, at least for the time being. Further India's energy assistance to the energy-scarce nation, together with her financial support to Bangladesh partially rules out the future possibility of China's predominant presence in the country.

An economically strong Bangladesh is seen by India, in favor of its rising power profile in the region. With the recent Bangladeshi approval of Indian operation in Chittagong and Mongla Ports, India would in a way be able to partially neutralize China's escalating interest and



presence in the Indian Ocean region. Clearly the relationship between the two nations would be based on mutual trust and appreciation, in the forthcoming years.

Another dimension of the visit, which is likely to have a bearing in the years ahead, is the strengthening of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal)- a sub-regional architecture. Such a grouping would ensure greater connectivity amongst its member nations, ensure each other infrastructural, economic and political support and prevent the inroad of foreign exploitative powers in the region. Once again this would be a tactics of India's good neighborly relations and its endeavor to sustain its pre-eminence in region.

It is anticipated that apart from the security and strategic dimensions, many groundbreaking endeavors would be pursued in the economic realm as well. The agenda of the two nations would be to find a mutually agreeable solution to the Teesta dispute and cooperation on navigation and patrolling of the Indian Ocean region.

The Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship is at a critical juncture today. In order to develop its restive north-east, India needs to consider the broader regional security paradigm and minimize the risk of military violence.¹⁸ Further, as India seeks to assert its rising regional profile, it continues to take strong consideration of its neighborhood, preventing China from making deep inroads into its backyard. In this context Bangladesh forms an important constituent of its neighborhood diplomacy. Bangladesh on its part, seeks closer alliance with India in order to collaborate on issues of trade, security and in order to mitigate the matter of Teesta water distribution and energy scarcity. The potential of future co-operation between the two countries is immense. Such prospect reflects the scope for greater economic development, security support and cultural exchange for the region at large, in the coming years. However, all agreements kept apart, the most important facet of such a strong alliance would be mutual trust and goodwill.

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