

INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Like the other country of the world, India also formulates its foreign policy based on its national interest. From the date of Independence, India has been prepared its foreign policy towards the international order in general and its neighbouring countries in particular. From an Indian perspective, the relationship between India and Bangladesh here can be mentioned. India's relation with Bangladesh is quite friendly. India extends her support to the freedom movement of Bangladesh, and even after Independence, India helped Bangladesh with its nation-building process. Despite contradiction in many issues related to socio-economic, immigration, water disputes, border dispute, etc., the relation between India and Bangladesh is still good. In this paper, a discussion will be made on Indo-Bangladesh from the historical perspective and the problems faced by the two countries in different national and international issues.

Keywords: *Neighbourhood, 'Banga Bhang' Andolan, Balance of Trade, SAFTA, PIWTT, Border Fencing, Farakka, Teesta Barrages*

Introduction

Any Country of the world formulates its foreign policy based on national interest only. India is not the exception to it. From the date of Independence under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Nehru to Modi's era, significant changes are found in its foreign policy towards the international order in general and its neighboring countries. Bangladesh, as a neighbouring country, is closely related to India through its shared culture and ethnicity. Though, a slightly varied dialect of Bengali, the language acts as a bridge between East India, Northeast India, and Bangladesh. India shares an almost 4,024 kilometres long boundary with Bangladesh, which is the most extended boundary shared by India with any country in its neighbourhood. In this regard, one of the primary goals of India's foreign policy is to maintain a good relation with Bangladesh. The emergence of Bangladesh was a significant turning point in the political history of India, which was a massive blow to Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory on which he claimed

Pakistan. India's relations with Bangladesh have always been full of ups and downs since Bangladesh was born in 1971. After the creation of Bangladesh, the relationship was quite friendly. During the war also India was Bangladesh's most vital and closest ally. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first head of government, acknowledged India's role in the liberation of Bangladesh and regarded India as a friend. India helped the new country in South Asia with the state-building process, which appeared to mark its successful relationship. India sheltered about 10 million refugees from Bangladesh and even hosted the government in exile, eventually participating in the war in 1971.

India's Neighbourhood Foreign Policy

Ever since Independence, the broad strategy of India's foreign policy towards her neighbours has been to maintain peaceful and friendly relations with all and Nehru is reported to have said in 1949 that the neighbouring countries have the first place in our mind. However, during the Nehruvian era, India's concept of neighbourhood covered the whole of Asia. The tragedy of 1962 and 1965 led PM Lal Bahadur Shastri to initiate an active phase of intense concern for our immediate neighbours. Though Indira Gandhi shared the Nehruvian vision and aspirations, she also believed that it should be related to its evolving security, political and economic interests. India needed to emerge strong and reliant. Most scholars see this period as one of India's high assertiveness. The Janata Government was highly critical of India's muscular foreign policy. It aimed to give top priority to good neighbourliness and mutual benefits but was criticized by the next Congress Government for bartering away its national interests. Though the initial years of the Rajiv era saw an improvement in the relations, later, he accused the neighbours of seeking extra advantage. The V.P Singh Government was also criticized for its mishandling of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka, thereby damaging India's image as a regional power. The Congress was returned to power in 1991, and India took economic liberalisation at the end of the Cold War. The wide-scale economic reforms of this period attracted the neighbours barring Pakistan to seek deeper economic engagement with India. The emergence of the United Front Government in 1996 with I.K. Gujral minister and later as PM is seen by many as marking a new phase in India's approach towards her neighbours based on the Gujral Doctrine of magnanimity and non-reciprocity, unilateral initiatives and peaceful solution of disputes. Though the BJP led NDA Government continued the Gujral trend, the nuclear explosions of May 1998 added a nuclear dimension to Indo-Pak. Relations. The Congress's return in 2004 and 2009 with its UPA coalition partners marks another period in Indian approach to its neighbours and is known as the "Manmohan Singh doctrine." The main idea was to promote a peaceful periphery in the South block after the Gujral doctrine.

The UPA Government has come out with a foreign policy that is purposeful, result-oriented and proactive by giving high priority to relations with all its neighbours. The primary objective of PM Manmohan Singh's Government has been to improve the global and regional environment for sustaining India's growth process and overall development. Hence, the major shift evident in India's relations with her neighbours was maximizing her gains and minimizing her losses, integrating her Look East Policy with her better ties in South Asia.

Hence, in September 2012, addressing the three-day Conference of Indian High Commissioners from nearly 120 Countries, PM Dr. Manmohan Singh focused on the idea of more excellent connectivity in South Asia. India's growth provided the engine of progress for its neighbours. Nowadays, it is expected that India will resolve all the bilateral contentions between India and Bangladesh. The Narendra Modi government has focused on Neighbourhood First Policy to Strengthen relations with the countries of its neighborhood. Moreover, through Act East Policy, India is trying to build a strong relationship with its neighbours in South Asia to extend its relations up to Southeast Asian nations.

Historical Background

On which land, where Bangladesh exists, has undergone three partitions. It started in 1905, when the British, as per their 'divide and rule policy, divided the Bengal Presidency based on religion i.e. Hindu and Muslim. The majority of Muslims were landed in the area, which was to become East Pakistan later. But after massive mobilization and political protests, known as 'Banga Bhanga Andolan', the territory was reunited in 1911. However, the Muslim League, established in 1906 in Dhaka, demanded the area to be under East Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947. After the partition in 1947, it led to the creation of East Pakistan. Again in 1971, this territory saw a split to become Bangladesh. Various factors like inadequate representation, imposition of Urdu language in administrative works, access to limited resources led to the division of this part. In the election in 1970, the Awami League of East Pakistan won the election but the regime in West Pakistan refused to recognize the election mandate and did not allow Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to take power. Eventually, it led to the confrontation between the government and masses and violence occurred in East Pakistan. However, the planning of the pre-emptive attack on India by Pakistan forced India to retaliate militarily and support the formation of independent Bangladesh as a new nation. This confrontation finally led to the emergence of independent Bangladesh in December 1971. In 1972(on 19th March), India and Bangladesh signed a treaty of friendship and peace which became the foundation of modern India- Bangladesh relations. From 1971 to 1975, the government was

under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But, after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975 by an anti-Indian segment of the Bangladeshi army, Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed formed a new government in 1975. After Mujibur Rahman's death, the relation between India Bangladesh went through a tough phase. In this period, Bangladesh was governed by two military rules, one by Ziaur Rahman and the other was under H. M. Ershad. Only during the 1990s, civilian rule returned to Bangladesh, but the relations with India were not always good. At present in Bangladesh, there are two key political parties. Awami League, headed by Sheikh Hasina, is a party that has stood up for secular ideals and is favourable towards India. In contrast, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, is a party that favours Bengali Nationalism and is not that inclined towards India.

Economic Relations

Historically, economic relations between the two neighbours have not always been hassle-free. There are issues of tariff and non-tariff barriers from the Indian side, which Bangladesh has always been vocal about. The primary concern is the unfavourable balance of trade. With growing exports between these two, there is a trade gap that continues to exist. India's lot of non-tariff barriers for Bangladeshi exports, trade deficit with Bangladesh is also increasing. Bangladesh showed its concern over these trade issues. During his visit to Bangladesh in September 2011, the prime minister of India assured the Bangladeshis that India would look into the matters to improve bilateral relations.

Intending to strengthen their economic relations, India and Bangladesh have agreed to address the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and port restrictions and facilitate the movement of cargo by rail and water. India had permitted duty-free entry of Bangladeshi products into Indian markets under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) provisions in January 2008. As a result, the negative list was reduced from over 700 products to about 400. Bangladesh has a strong demand for goods, and India has emerged as an important trade partner.

India and Bangladesh have signed several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) to improve their economic relations. Some of them are: Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (IWTT), Bilateral Agreement on the establishment of Joint Economic Commission (JEC), India Bangladesh Convention for the Avoidance of Double Taxation, India Bangladesh Agreement for the Regulation of motor vehicle passenger traffic, Rules for Interchange of traffic between India and Bangladesh, MoU for cooperation in the field of agriculture, Protocols for the operation of passenger bus service between Dhaka and Kolkata, and Dhaka and Agartala, Agreement on Bulk Power Transmission between Power Grid Corporation of

India Ltd and Bangladesh Power Development Board etc. In addition, the establishment of land ports, land customs stations and immigration points to facilitate trade and movement of people is another initiative to improve its bilateral relations. Moreover, border markets have also opened to provide the locals with a platform to sell indigenously produced goods and crops.

Under the Bilateral Inland Water Transit and Transit Protocol, Bangladesh has allowed India to use Mongla and Chittagong seaports to transport goods to and from India through road and railway networks. For independent and mutually beneficial economic relationships, road, railway, and waterways are essential, eventually leading to the connectivity of services, information, ideas, and people. India provided 1 Billion USD in credit to Bangladesh and a further 200 million USD for the development of infrastructure in 2016.

Connectivity

India-Bangladesh is a good example of connectivity through all modes of transport. The road movement is operationalized through 36 functional land Customs Stations (LCSs) and 2 Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) along the border. It includes the Petrapole- Benapole ICP through which more than 50% of the bilateral trade occurs on account of which it has been decided to operate these land ports on 24 hours basis since 1 August 2017. The Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT) has been operational since 1972. It permits the movement of goods over barges/vessels from India through the river systems of Bangladesh on eight specific routes. Coastal Shipping Agreement signed during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in June 2015 has also enabled direct sea movement of containerized/bulk/dry cargo between the two countries. In February 2017, container ship services started between Kolkata and Pangaon (around 20 km from Dhaka) under this framework. Out of the former six rail links that existed, four Broad Gauge inter-country rail links between the two countries are operational now. The Radhikapur-Birol rail link was the latest to be put back in operation during PM Sheikh Hasina's visit in April 2017.

Apart from these, work on the remaining two new rail links is ongoing. The 7th new rail link between Agartala and Akhaura is being financed under grant assistance from India. The 'Maitree Express' between Kolkata and Dhaka now operates 4 days a week and has been converted into a fully AC train service. The trial run of the 2nd Maitree Express between Khulna-Kolkata was conducted during PM Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in April 2017 and will be operational soon. In addition, there are regular

bus services between Kolkata-Dhaka, Shillong-Dhaka, and Agartala- Kolkata via Dhaka. A new bus service (Dhaka-Khulna-Kolkata) was also launched during PM Sheikh Hasina's visit in April 2017.

The trial run of the Cargo Movement on Trucks from Kolkata to Agartala via Dhaka and Dhaka to New Delhi via Kolkata and Lucknow was conducted in August 2016. There are presently around 100 flights operating weekly between India and Bangladesh connecting various Indian cities like New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai to Dhaka and Chittagong. From Bangladesh, US-Bangla Airlines, NOVOAIR, Regent Airways and Biman Bangladesh; and from India, Jet Airways, Spice Jet and Air India are operating flights between India and Bangladesh.

Power and Energy sector Cooperation

Cooperation in the power sector has become one of the hallmarks of India Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is currently importing about 660 Mega Watts of power from India. In March 2016, the two Prime Ministers inaugurated the export of power from Tripura to Bangladesh as well as the export of Internet bandwidth to Tripura from Bangladesh. Supply of another 500 MW is expected to begin in 2018. In addition, the 1320 MW coal-fired Maitree thermal power plant, a 50:50 Joint Venture between National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) of India and Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), is being developed at Rampal. The power generation agreements (over 3,600 megawatts of electricity) between India (public and private companies) and Bangladesh also were signed during the Bangladesh prime minister visit in April 2017. Energy sector cooperation between India and Bangladesh has also seen considerable progress in recent years. Many Indian public sector units such as Indian Oil Corporation, Numaligarh Refinery Limited, and Petro net LNG Ltd are working with their Bangladeshi counterparts in Bangladesh's oil and gas sector.

Security Relations

India and Bangladesh share more than 4000 km. of the border, which is the longest land boundary that India shares with any of its neighbours. The India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) came into force following the exchange of instruments of ratification in June 2015. The Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves were interchanged, and strip maps were signed on 31 July 2015 in each other's countries. These enclaves, who opted to retain their Indian citizenship, made a final movement to India by 30 November 2015. The settlement of the maritime boundary arbitration between India and Bangladesh, as per UNCLOS award of July 7,

2014, has paved the way for the economic development of this part of the Bay of Bengal. It gave them access to Bangladesh to open sea due to exclusive economic zone. Several agreements related to security cooperation have been signed between both countries. This includes a Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) signed in 2011 to combine the efforts of both Border Guarding Forces for more effective control over cross-border illegal migration, organized crimes, illicit drug trafficking, terrorism, and the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the India-Bangladesh border.

Major conflict Issues between India and Bangladesh:

Shelter to Indian Insurgents

Bangladesh inherits a legacy from Pakistan, which had provided training camps, logistic support, and transit facilities to insurgents of Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram. As a result, India was confident that Bangladesh would not allow any anti-India activity to take place from her territory after her birth. But there is still the presence of anti-India activities, which affects the relationship between both countries.

Illegal Immigrants

Illegal Immigrants from Bangladesh are one of the essential facets of border management. It is a challenge that India is facing since 1971. Besides Assam and West Bengal also sneak into Tripura, while Mizoram is used as transit routes for smuggling narcotics, arms, and drugs.

Border Fencing

In mid-1998, India started 'project fencing' around Bangladesh on West Bengal and Assam boundaries to check infiltration. However, some concrete pillars were constructed and objected to by Bangladesh, resulting in firing across the international border issue. Fencing has been stopped, but tension still exists due to persistent demand by people in Assam to speed up the project.

Land Border issues

The border between India and Bangladesh is unique in that it cuts across cultivated fields and barren lands, hills, tropical and rain forests, marshy patches, rivers, canals, and ponds. India and Bangladesh share almost 4,096 km of the land border, of which 6.5 km of land along the Comilla-Tripura border is officially considered disputed. An agreement was signed by the two countries' presidents in 1972, which was not ratified by India and hence could not be put into effect. Thus, there is an acute problem of managing it, with ethnic affinity amongst people cutting across the border.

Teen Bigha Corridor

Bangladesh faced the links of its Dahagram-Angorpotha enclave as only Indian territories could approach this. India agreed to give a land corridor measuring 178m x 85m to Bangladesh's perpetual lease. Thus, in June 1992, under an agreement, India allowed Bangladesh to use the Teen Bigha corridor, with certain restrictions. The locals were allowed normal movement between sunrise and sunset. But it was resolved in 2011 during Hasina's visit to India.

Water Concerns

Bangladesh is heavily dependent on India for the flow of the 54 rivers the two countries share. Bangladesh has complained that its share of river waters, compared with India's, remains unfair. The construction by India of the Farraka Barrage—a low dam in West Bengal province designed to increase water supply in the Hoogli river—was a significant bone of contention between the two countries. India has built a feeder canal at Farakka where the Ganga is divided into two branches; this has allowed India to control the flow of Ganga water by re-channeling it on the Indian side of the river. This dispute was resolved in 1996 with the mutual signing of a 30-year water-sharing agreement for the Ganges. This happened after the earlier short-term agreement lapsed. Teesta river issue is another issue between India and Bangladesh. The problem arose when an agreement was reached to establish a joint hydroelectric observatory. India was to get 42.5% of Teesta water, and Bangladesh to get 37.5% of water during the dry season. But due to the opposition of the chief minister of West Bengal, the agreement could not be adopted, and it remains unresolved. The two countries use water for irrigation through dams, resulting in severe water shortages in dry months.

Though experts have been suggesting solutions to this issue, it still remains. Apart from these, various issues have been acting as hinders between India and Bangladesh relations. However, few problems have been solved, although few still need to be resolved for the boom in its relationships.

Challenges and Opportunities for Bangladesh and India

Both countries have specific difficulties and opportunities to solve the remaining major problems to maintain friendly relations. Bangladesh has challenges like balancing trade deficit and resolving water-sharing discords of Farakka and Teesta Barrages, while India has challenges like transit to the North Eastern Region (NER) through Bangladesh from the Indian mainland, establishing security at those regions, and controlling China's close ties with Bangladesh and other regional countries. Access to Bangladesh seaports is of great economic and strategic advantages to India. Transporting goods to its

northeast states through Bangladesh, India will significantly reduce time and cost. This will also benefit the Indian Armed Forces in solving security issues in those regions.

On the other hand, the Modi government will face a more significant strategic challenge as Chinese influence has rapidly increased in Bangladesh. A mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh is critical if India integrates its north-eastern states with the mainland better economically. Such a relationship could also help India realizing its decades-old 'Look East' policy towards Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On the other hand, Bangladesh can attract Indian people and export more items to India.

Moreover, resolving the water issues will allow Bangladesh to avoid floods during monsoon seasons and droughts during dry seasons. The future Bangladesh-India relations will depend on India's friendly and cordial attitude to resolve the significant unsettled issues. Whatever the political position may be, their attitude must be. Political leaders of the two countries have to exploit the available opportunities through the positive momentum for resolving the critical outstanding issues.

Conclusion

For each other during the period of Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister, the importance of India and Bangladesh was an opportunity to take India-Bangladesh relations to a higher trajectory and move towards a strategic partnership. This significance of strong India- Bangladesh ties goes beyond the bilateral context. Good relations between India and Bangladesh will have a positive influence on the region. While the new extradition and visa agreement and more robust economic ties are an unmistakable mark of progress, some unfinished issues exist between the two countries. For one, India has not yet signed the Teesta Water Treaty, which will give Bangladesh access to the Teesta River that flows from India.

Meanwhile, India is waiting for Bangladesh to grant transit access to its landlocked north eastern states bordered by Bangladesh. According to analysts, as the biggest country in South Asia, India is taken to engage its neighbour in a bid to neutralize China's growing influence there. To do so, India must give more economic leverage to Bangladesh and allow Bangladesh to have a bigger share of India's growing economic success. The arrangement suits India's new foreign policy vision based on greater economic engagement with its neighbours. India's slowly growing ties with Bangladesh have given its Act East Policy a boost and could be the start of renewed progress.

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