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INDIA- BANGLADESH RELATIONS A WAY AHEAD



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1. India and Bangladesh share a common history, heritage, literature, language and culture. The two nations vivisected from a single are bonded with ties of blood and culture. With Bangladesh, India shares not only a common history of struggle for freedom and liberation but also enduring feelings of both fraternal as well as familial ties. Both countries were one before partition of 1947 separated the two. Several years later after the horrors of partition, in 1971, India played a major part in the birth of Bangladesh, getting it liberated from the clutches

of Pakistan. However, the relationship between the two countries have been hot and cold primarily due to the trust deficit that is connected with the kind of political party in power in Bangladesh. As the two nations have a shared border and are placed in the similar geopolitical environment, it would not do if the two works in isolation with each other. India and Bangladesh have several common interests and are dependent on each other which is why even though working together is a challenge, it is still surmountable.



2. Prior to the partition, the connectivity in the Indian North East (NE) States was primarily through present day Bangladesh. This continued post-independence even when West Pakistan was formed. However, after the Indo-Pak war of 1965 the connectivity between India and East Pakistan was cut off by the West Pakistan govt. The war of 1965 paved the way for 1971 war and ultimately the creation of Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh realized that in 1965 they were completely abandoned by West Pakistan. India on the other hand was kind for not interfering and respecting the borders. Even after 1971 war, India did not harbour any expansionist attitude and its forces moved out on completion of the assigned duties. However, it is the irony that 50 years later, India has not been able to undo the environment of not trusting and cooperating with each other on issues of common interest and advantage due to mindset created on both sides. Particularly in Bangladesh new political regime which came into being after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which actually turn out to be a bane for the relationship between the two countries. The Bangladeshi government of Sheikh Hasina in power since the last ten years holds a pro-India stance but it hasn't yet been able to replace the required mindset still prevalent in some form though things have definitely improved. Bangladesh is anxious of being surrounded on three

sides by India with whom it shares 40970 kms of border. To counter that, Bangladesh wants to be ultimate arbiter of what is going to happen in NE India by checking connectivity. Therefore, to unlock the potential of NE India have to take Bangladesh on board. To do so, three aspects are to be addressed i.e. Connectivity, (includes infra development), Economic Integration and Security Issues. In this article an attempt will be made to address some of these issues and look at the way ahead for both the countries in their relationship.

Security Issues

3. India's positive and proactive engagement with Bangladesh is of Paramount importance to ensure a safe neighbourhood and overall regional security. The security of India, especially of the eastern and North Eastern states, is impacted by what Bangladesh does or does not do. If Dhaka does not cooperate with New Delhi, it is hard to see how India can control various insurgent groups that might find refuge in Bangladesh. The important security issues are Border Management aspects, Indian Insurgent Groups (IIG), the problem of illegal immigrants, smuggling and fake currency. In order to deal with security issues India undertook the construction of a fence all along the India-Bangladesh border. This was an expensive exercise which addressed Indian concerns to some extent but

created mistrust/unhappiness in Bangladesh and also amongst the Indian population living along the border.

4. The territory of Bangladesh is embedded in one of most sensitive region of India. The deltaic and riverine border makes it permeable, with or without fences. Any hostile regime in Bangladesh ideologically motivated or otherwise, can be a threat to India's internal security in the border regions and beyond. However in last couple of years Dhaka has demonstrated an understanding of India's security concerns and has taken measures to curb, if not eliminate, the activities of insurgent groups using Bangladesh as a sanctuary. The two nation states in the bilateral meetings have been reiterating their commitment to ensure that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activities inimical to the other. India and Bangladesh share the view that there should be no glorification of terrorists as martyrs. In this regard the two states are willing to cooperate for the effective adoption of CCIT (Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism) by the UNGA.

5. The advent of an Islamist fundamentalist regime in Bangladesh is indeed a matter of concern for India. Fortunately, given the ethos of the people, this is unlikely to happen. Events in recent years have shown that the people of Bangladesh are alive to

the danger and also comprehensively reject fundamentalist views. This is not to discount a small minority which can make a nuisance of it from time to time. It is necessary to create mutual confidence in bona-fides. There must be a mechanism for exchange of real-time information with regard to activities of terrorists/insurgents. Both the nations need to effectively implement Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) which would enable better border management. There is a need to jointly manage and identify vulnerable areas so as to work together in order to control the irregular movements. This would aid in reducing incidents of violence and tragic loss of lives and also do well to ensure a border free of criminal activities.

6. Both nations need to further strengthen and consolidate defence cooperation through greater military-to-military training and exchanges. The right step towards this was recent conclusion of MOUs on Defence Cooperation, Defence Line of Credit, as well as cooperation between various defence training institutes. In fact, close coordination among the Armed Forces in conduct of Joint Search and Rescue Operations in the Bay of Bengal led to the rescue of a large number of fishermen from both sides.

7. Another matter of concern is the advent of external influences like those



from US and China in India's eastern neighbour. Presence of China and US in Bangladesh is a threat to India's security and trade relations. The US, in the past couple of years has tried leasing Chittagong port with extra-territorial rights for 99 years. However cordial Indo-US relations may be currently (or in the future), the entry of a global power in the Bay of Bengal cannot but be a matter of concern for India. India should also reflect carefully what its reactions may be if Bangladesh were to offer Gwadar-like facilities to the Chinese.

8. One of the recent security crises has arisen due to Rohingya refugees. Large exoduses of Rohingyas have taken place since August of 2017 due to operations by Myanmar Army in Rakhine state of Myanmar. More than eight million people are now residing in Bangladesh which actually is a huge human crisis. The living conditions of these people is very challenging. These people are an easy prey for ISIS recruitment or being hired by Pakistan ISI to destabilize the fragile security situation in Indian subcontinent. India needs to play more proactive role to resolve this issue to its security advantage. Also, India needs to hold Bangladesh's hand in international forum to create conducive condition for their early repatriation and rehabilitation.

Connectivity

9. Bangladesh can offer a very vital link between the mainland India and the North Eastern states which are presently connected through a narrow stretch of Silliguri corridor. The connectivity that Bangladesh could offer to the Northeast would ensure a free flow of goods to and from the North-East, releasing the region from physical isolation. To act on this there are three issues of investment, trade and transport which are interconnected and should be addressed together. The trade connectivity through Chittagong port can help the Northeastern region to bridge the infrastructural bottle neck that is in existence. Land connectivity to the eastern states through Bangladesh can boost trade and good will between neighbors. Some of the issues which need attention are:-

(a) Many of the projects under the first line of credit of US\$ 862 million, second line of credit of US\$ two billion which were provided by India have been implemented and have helped enhance capacities in transport and build infrastructure in vital areas such as roads, railways, bridges, inland waterways, etc this activity needs to be further strengthened to achieve optimum results.

(b) Inland water transport, now under-utilized, has enormous potential. This needs

to be developed. Financing the construction of the 10 kms Akhaura-Agartala rail link. Upgrading of Bangladesh's internal waterways through dredging of the choked river channels.

(c) Construction of a bridge on river Feni at Ramgarh in Khagrachhari district and Sabroom in South Tripura district, connecting it to Chittagong Port.

(d) Container movement from north-west India to Kolkata-Chittagong-Dhaka (instead of present Mumbai-Singapore-Chittagong-Dhaka) needs to be promoted.

(e) There is a need to expedite the construction of the Ashuganj Inland Container Port (ICP).

(f) Enhanced air connectivity between the two countries will boost people to people contacts as well as promote greater tourism, trade and investment flows.

(g) There is a need to improve passenger facilities on the Kolkata-Dhaka Maitree Express. These include increase in frequency of the service, introduction of fully air-conditioned service on this sector and end-to-end customs and immigration clearances once the International Railway Terminus is established at Chitpur, Kolkata.

Sharing of Water

10. India and Bangladesh share over 54 rivers, and these rivers are vital for the livelihood of hundreds of millions of people in both countries. Bangladesh being the lower riparian state is in a weaker position on the use of these rivers. If Bangladesh does not get enough water or if it gets too much when the rivers are full, it will face hardships. This could result in environmental instability leading to problems of lower agricultural productions, droughts or floods further resulting into demographic flow into India. Inevitably, severe dislocations in Bangladesh mean migration and refugee problems in India. If we fail to be sensible and fair over river-water sharing with Bangladesh, we could well find ourselves in an equally hopeless down river position someday, especially with China. To address this issue there is a need to have a regional approach to development of water resources. Bangladesh is also working towards a joint water resources management in a sub-regional context involving Bhutan, Nepal, India and itself. Some of the other issues which need consideration are as follows:-

(a) There is a need to strengthen the cooperation and coordination among the BCIM.

(b) Aspects relating to sharing of waters of the Feni, Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar rivers must be worked out.



(c) The 'Joint Technical Sub Group on Ganges Barrage Project' must continue to engage.

Climate Change

11. India and Bangladesh are amongst the 12 countries that will be most severely affected by climate change. Bangladesh could lose up to 20-25% of its land as sea levels rise due to climate change. The ensuing turmoil in Bangladesh will inevitably be felt in India. The two countries must therefore think about how to cooperate on conservation, alternative energy, and many other related aspects of environmental defense. Environment issues can be similarly tackled through joint and regional initiatives. India and Bangladesh have to work in sync to protect and preserve the most important delta region of the world the Sunderbans. Sunderbans have a very fragile ecosystem and if further interfered by man activities it will affect the complete system. Need to work towards developing equitable rules for the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement based on principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR).

12. Some of the other issues of common interest for the both nations are various public interest projects in Bangladesh which are fully funded grant-in-aid projects have been initiated by India such as the city improvement projects in Rajshahi, Sylhet and Khulna; and setting up of 36 community clinics in

identified districts. There is a need to augment such projects by India in a timely and a phased manner.

Economic integration

13. One of India's security concerns is large-scale immigration from Bangladesh. The land-man ratio and the possible consequences of global warming on Bangladesh may create intolerable push factors. There are no simple answers to this, but it would remain in India's interest to see an economically prosperous Bangladesh. India does not determine the economic policies of Dhaka, but fullest economic cooperation and assistance for the economic well-being and development of Bangladesh is required. Despite diverse issues, both countries can only profit from a better relationship between them. Bangladesh can profit immensely from better trade relations with India and it can only result in the improvement of the quality of life of its people. Bangladesh is also crucial for India because it represents economic opportunities and is one of our biggest trading partners. Given that it has been growing at over 5% per annum for the past decade and looks set to continue to grow which is an economic asset and a major opportunity. To further this cause of mutual interest trade in energy on commercial basis needs to be promoted.

14. The Bay of Bengal contains huge natural gas resources and this could change the energy scenario for

both the energy starved nations, but exploration cannot start until the borders are settled to mutual satisfaction recent initiative to settle this has now given new opportunities for both countries to explore these resources. Transmission of gas from Myanmar/Tripura across Bangladesh needs to be further worked out. Bangladesh could use Indian coal-based energy and could sell India natural gas. Electricity from north-east India could be supplied to Bangladesh in exchange for gas.

15. The issue of investment has to be focused upon in the proposed bilateral free trade agreement (FTA). Early conclusion of FTA is required, keeping in mind that China is already investing heavily in the country. A major objective of BFTA would be stimulating intra-regional investment. The main objective of trade facilitation must be improved conditions for investment. Under the BFTA India needs to open its markets at greater speed. Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) are an irritation and reduce mutual confidence. Real and perceived NTBs need to be identified and dealt with. Adequate infrastructure at the border to facilitate trade needs to be developed. There must be steps taken to conclude a Motor Vehicles Agreement. Both nations also need to improve market access and remove barriers to trade, including port restrictions on products, to ensure smooth movement of goods across the borders. There is a need to establish more Border Haats at mutually agreed locations.

16. The SEZs if set up in Bangladesh will encourage Indian businessmen to bring in more investment to Bangladesh. Recently, the Indian private sector signed agreements that will result in investment of over \$ 9 billion in Bangladesh. There is a need to further augment and promote such private investments in the neighbour. Recently Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation to Prime Minister Hasina for assigning an area of 1005 acres at Mirsarai for setting up an Indian SEZ is a welcome step. There is a dire need for strengthening and reform of multilateral financial institutions and enhancing the voice and participation of developing countries in international economic decision-making.

Other Common issues

17. The use of Internet could be promoted to cover areas of society, culture, economics and migration. Use available technologies could be harnessed for mutual understanding and empowerment. A fibre-optic network and microwave link between the two countries needs to be established. A power grid could be established for the region, including Nepal and Bhutan.

18. An Indo-Bangladesh Cultural Foundation should be set up to promote cultural ties. India being a large country with many languages, its composite nature needs to be factored in any communication programmes that are thought of by Bangladesh.



Interaction and exchanges between the universities of Bangladesh and India should be encouraged. Short-term fellowships and travel grants and exchange of faculties between various universities should be instituted. Theatre artists and directors from Bangladesh could come and work with India's National School of Drama to produce Bangladeshi plays in Hindi and other Indian languages. Professors and eminent people from both countries should visit each other on a regular annual basis, for creating better understanding of each other and dispelling misconceptions. India and Bangladesh must strive to market each other as both a tourist destination and a source of major programmes in the electronic media.

Conclusion

19. Today New Delhi and Dhaka are responding to each other's concerns without the baggage of the past and a new chapter in relation between the two nations is on a positive swing. The political leadership in both the countries are looking forward for better cooperation in almost all issues of bilateral importance. The road of growth and prosperity of not only India and Bangladesh but of Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar will stand to benefit in this ongoing bonhomie and it must continue. The present progress on engagement between the two nations is based on long lasting relationship and is irreversible.

Disclaimer : Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

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