

A PERSPECTIVE ON PRIME MINISTER SHEIKH HASINA'S STATE VISIT AND ITS IMPETUS TO INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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Sheikh Hasina, the Bangladesh Prime Minister was on a state visit to India from 7-10 April, 2017. The visit came seven years after her last State visit in Jan 2010, though she had also visited India to attend President P Mukherjee's wife's funeral in Aug 2015 and was also in Goa in October of 2016, as head of State for her nation at the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit. This visit has created a lot of hype and justifiably so, as Bangladesh is one of our neighbours with whom we have struck a positive chord. This bonhomie is important as it helps iron out a lot of minor irritants and issues by dialogues at appropriate levels. Just prior to the visit there was a huge question mark on the deliverables with a pact / treaty on sharing of Teesta River water being the fore runner. In fact, the Awami League leaders had proclaimed that a visit sans Teesta was inconsequential; they even accused Hasina for being unable to force a deal on Teesta in spite of giving New Delhi innumerable concessions. Notwithstanding, it was more or less clear that the visit will not see the Teesta water sharing arrangements being finalized hence it would not be wrong to say that Hasina was already on a weaker ground at home, even before she embarked on her visit. It is in this light that we need to analyse the Indo-Bangladesh relations and pragmatically weigh the takeaways to assess this visit.

Bangladesh has evolved from a fledgling State in the early seventies to a robust one capable of surviving on its own amongst the comity of nations. Bangladesh is a stable democracy with a large pool of productive population, an asset, which it is rearing to harness. Bangladesh has made rapid strides in social and economic spheres and its growth rate rivals that of India. It boasts of a reasonably strong defence force and is one of the largest contributors in the UN peacekeeping missions.

Chinese overtures in engaging Bangladesh economically as well as militarily has added to New Delhi's discomfiture. New Delhi is therefore, eager to engage Bangladesh to secure its strategic interest, integrate the region and tap the vast markets in Bangladesh. It is India's long term interests that Indo-Bangladesh relations are strengthened to ensure Chinese inroads are prevented in the region but also to integrate the seven sister states. Huge untapped trade potential exists in this region which hitherto fore has remained largely untapped.

Bangladesh has its fair share of woes, starting with the geographical encapsulation by India, a giant which it cannot ignore, its regular climatic vagaries which it has to withstand, a large population, poor Human Development Index and above all the growing radicalisation of the society.

Accordingly, India has made it apparent that it attaches special significance to the visit by the Bangladesh premier. Hasina was a state guest and housed at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, a rare honour bestowed on a foreign dignitary. Prime Minister Modi broke protocol and received her at the airport. The visit was immaculately planned with sufficient takeaways for Hasina, considering that the most coveted deal, i.e. the Teesta River water sharing was not likely to materialize. India's domestic political environment made it difficult for the otherwise necessary agreement. Despite the foregone conclusion of the Teesta Agreement not coming to conclusion during this visit, the MEA created tangible gains for both India and Bangladesh to optimise the cooperative engagement as a "win-win" proposal for both.

Significance of Bangladesh in India's Strategic Calculus

A quick view of the map of India reveals the secret; while Bangladesh seems to be surrounded by India from three sides and the Bay of Bengal on the fourth, what often misses the attention is the "chicken's neck" formed by the Siliguri corridor. A narrow strip of land measuring 27 km at its narrowest, from this corridor, passes the umbilical cord of India to the seven sister states, be it railways, road, energy, et all. It is surprising why India did not consider negotiating the boundary with Bangladesh when it gained independence with active Indian support! Further, the significance of the area lies in the fact that this region is the confluence of the International Boundary between Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India, with China not too far away. The Siliguri Corridor therefore remains a geostrategic vulnerability; a wedge which can sever the entire North Eastern states of India from its mainland.

India shares 4,000 km plus of porous International Boundary and shares water of 54 rivers with Bangladesh. The population on either side shares common ethnic, cultural and linguistic connects, with villages being divided as a consequence of the partition. Even to this day, people maintain contact with their relatives across the border with marriages often taking place across the divide. During the British Raj the entire area was unified India and inland waterways was developed for communication, transportation and trade & commerce. To this day, though India and Bangladesh are divided by an International boundary the raw material sourcing base for the industrial belt of Kolkata is primarily from the adjoining area in Bangladesh.

India has amicably settled the land boundary issues as a consequence of the Land Boundary Agreement which led to swapping of enclaves in adverse possession. It has also gracefully agreed to abide by the directions of the International Court of arbitration regarding the maritime

boundaries. The relations have improved ever since the Sheikh Hasina Government came to power; the continuation of which is in India's strategic interests.

Improved relations with Bangladesh makes good geo-economic sense for India. Markets in Tripura, Assam and Mizoram can be easily accessed in a shorter time frame from Bangladesh rather than taking a circuitous route through the Siliguri Corridor. Distance for from Kolkata to Agartala via Guwahati is 1,550 Kms, whereas the same destination can be reduced to 640 Kms when goods are transported through Bangladesh. Besides transportation of goods, especially over dimensional consignments by utilising Inland Water Ways through Bangladesh can further cut down the cost and bolster sub-regional trade and commerce.

India has undertaken the development of Payra Port which can prove to be a game changer in integrating the two countries economically. India is also energy surplus and has been exporting power. A regional energy grid, with the participation of Bhutan could be harbinger to prosperity to all stakeholders in the region.

Bangladesh has also made significant contribution by deny sanctuaries to the insurgents operating across the border. Under the Sheikh Hasina Government a concerted drive was undertaken to arrest and extradite major insurgent leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa, founder and Chairman of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Anup Chetia, ULFA General Secretary. The relative peace and tranquillity that prevails in the North East can be attributed as a result of the efforts of the Hasina Government. India and Bangladesh also share a common platform in the regional cooperation such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA and the Commonwealth. Bangladesh has also strongly supported India's candidature for permanent membership of an expanded and reformed UN Security Council.

Though relations are in the upswing there are minor irritants which sour the relations between the neighbours. Firstly, Bangladesh carries the burden of a legacy of suspicion against India which is deep rooted in the politics of the Nation. Soon after independence, successive military dictators and Begum Khalida Zia's government alienated themselves from India and aligned with Pakistan and China. The idea of India as a threat to Bangladesh was perpetuated to usurp power for political gains. The successive military dictators who ruled Bangladesh. Secondly, illegal migration from Bangladesh remains a bug bear, though India cannot deny it has reaped the fruits of cheap labour by the immigrants, nonetheless it strains the administration and economy for the benefits which were due to the Indian citizens. Cross border firing by BSF is an issue which is regularly racked up by Bangladesh, approximately 60 – 70 deaths occur each year due to BSF firing which strains the relations. The plight of the minority community especially, the Hindus, in Bangladesh is deplorable with their population steadily falling from a healthy 14% in 1974 to less than 9% in 2012. The recent spate of intolerance and motivated killings and persecution of the

minority community by alleged radical elements owing allegiance to ISIS and AQIS has brought the Govt under lot of criticism.

India Engages Bangladesh

While one may argue that the Govt led by Mr. Modi has catalysed the Indo-Bangladesh relations, the actual credit goes to Dr. Manmohan Singh who engineered a plan to engaged Bangladesh in a pragmatic manner during his visit to Bangladesh in Sep 2011. Though the visit was marred by the obstinate refusal of West Bengal Chief Minister Ms. Mamata Banerjee to facilitate the Teesta River Water sharing deal, the importance of the visit which marked the beginning of a new Indo-Bangladesh relation paradigm cannot be undermined. Mr. Modi has carried the legacy forward and the Land Boundary Agreement which was signed during the visit of Mr Modi in Jun 2015 and the draft Teesta Water Sharing Treaty were all formulated during the era of Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Land Boundary Agreement. Ironically BJP which was in the opposition in 2011, refused to the proposed the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). However, the equation changed when Mr. Modi came to power with a massive mandate, he had the political clout to push the Land Boundary Agreement to fruition. It may be argued that in numerical terms India lost out on real estate as a consequence to the agreement. However, if one studies the imbroglio carefully it will appear as an oddity where inspite of being citizens of either India or Bangladesh the inhabitants of the “Chitts” actually had a raw deal, wherein they were encircled by a foreign nation and lacked basic amenities as they were nobodies baby. The LBA enabled this impoverished lot to be amalgamated with the mainstream and further, gave them an option to opt for citizenship of either of the country. India also settled its maritime boundary with Bangladesh after it conceded to the ruling of the International Court of Arbitration, thus effectively resolving the most contentious maritime boundary issues with its neighbour.

Teesta River Water Sharing. India is the upper riparian state for 54 rivers which flow into the Bay of Bengal, through Bangladesh. Ironically, there is only one treaty between India and Bangladesh on the sharing of water from River Ganges. India was also accused of forcing a treaty on unfavourable terms for Bangladesh, none the less the treaty has survived and has been able to bring about some method in the madness.

Water is a resource which is diminishing fast and something that either Nations do not want to let go. India as an upper riparian state utilizes the water primarily for agricultural purposes and laments that it is barely sufficient to meet its own requirement, while Bangladesh argues that besides the agricultural requirement the water in these rivers sustains its fishery and inland water transport system. The basic minimum discharge to preserve the eco system to keep the river alive has also been an issue of discussion. Primarily, the lack of cogent data on the river flow has

hampered the negotiations, with each state refuting the data provide by the other. The Teesta River Issue has become larger than life and is viewed as a political agenda and a milestone to be achieved/denied. Ms. Mamata Banerjee has already scuttled the proceedings twice and refused to budge for the third time, this time. On the other hand, the opposition had already warned Hasina that she has already made innumerable concessions for India and if a Teesta Treaty was not there for Bangladesh this friendliness does not pay. Hence the Teesta waters have become symbolic in terms of political mileage that can be drawn/lost on the issue.

Defence Agreement. The issue of having a Defence pact/treaty/agreement with Bangladesh got into prominence in the media after Bangladesh purchased two submarines from China. It raised hackles in India, the question was being asked in the corridors of powers as whether Bangladesh required those submarines and the technical support teams of Chinese which accompanied them. Bangladesh however allayed all fears stating that it had vast coastal boundaries and maritime interest to guard in the Bay of Bengal. It was a rude awakening for India and flurry of visits to include the Army Chief and the Defence Minister were undertaken to engage Bangladesh. India is looking forward to meeting the training, servicing of equipment and supply of small / medium weapon systems.

Bangladesh uses Chinese military hardware which accounts for 90% of its defence needs. Begum Khaleda Zia had signed a defence cooperation agreement with China in December 2002, much of which remained secret with the specific clauses never being made public and hence Defence cooperation with India has been made into an issue by the opposition. Bangladesh had a defence treaty with India, popularly referred to as the Indira – Mujib Treaty of 1975, which was touted to be unfairly biased towards India. Successive Governments did not comply and soon the treaty became dysfunctional. Bangladesh has now sourced its procurement of military hardware from China which obviously has better technology at cheaper rates and more significantly deeper pockets. Mr. Modi's LoC for an amount of \$ 2 billion paled against the \$ 24 billion which was offered by Xi Jinping when he visited Bangladesh in Oct 2016. A tilt towards India means Bangladesh risks losing this friend (China). Besides, the hawks in the opposition question whether Bangladesh would be happy with a "Made in India" gun to defend itself (against none other than India)? Another notable fact that remains to be answered is that what is in store for Bangladesh in such an agreement which it doesn't already get today? India has arguably done well to allay such fears and engage Bangladesh as an equal partner to further the regional security in the sub-continent.

Illegal Migration and BSF Firing. Unfortunately there is no common ground between India and Bangladesh with regard to stream of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, with Bangladesh simply dismissing the issue. Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, told at a press

conference in Dhaka in 2003, “there is not a single Bangladeshi migrant in India.” Bangladesh even accused India of evicting Bengali-speaking Muslims by branding them as Bangladeshis. As a consequence there is no consensus between the neighbours and illegal immigrants, even if they are apprehended, cannot be repatriated. Illegal immigration has caused demographic inversion, political implications by swaying the polls results, competition with locals for jobs, social issues, law and order problems and receding footprint of welfare measures. The porous boundary interspersed with forests, marshy and riverine terrain makes the act of border crossing a very simple affair. Many locals indulge in smuggling and dacoity to source their income. Corruption is rampant amongst the Border Guards Bangladesh and the migrants/smugglers manage to collude with the authorities to secure a crossing for as measly an amount as 100 taka. That is not to say that the BSF is not corrupt but occasionally when detected the migrants and smugglers are fired upon by BSF, causing death. It is estimated that approximately 60-70 persons are killed each year due to BSF firing. This is a serious concern and recently greater interaction with Border Guards has been institutionalised. On humanitarian grounds Border Guards have also been extended medical facility and road access at inaccessible post.

Radicalisation of the Society and Persecution of Hindus. The Nation was conceived as a secular state but immediately after independence and in the post Sheikh Mujibur Rahman era the Bangladesh society gradually drifted towards Islamisation. Secularism is one of the four fundamental principles according to the original 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh. The principle of secularism was removed from the constitution in 1977 by Ziaur Rahman and Islam was declared the state religion in 1988. However, in 2010, the Bangladesh Supreme Court restored secularism as one of the basic tenets of the constitution but Islam remains the state religion. Intolerance and persecution of the minority community and specifically the Hindus resulted in erosion of their population base, while at independence the population comprised 14% Hindu the systematic persecution of Hindus have resulted in the decline of their population to less than 9% as of date. While the Sheikh Hasina Govt has proactively convicted the miscreants, she now faces a challenge of reining in the radical elements. In the present narrative the players are now prosecuting jihad under the flag of the ISIS and Al Qaeda Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) however the targets still remain the minority community, bloggers, LGBT sections and those who are perceived to speak against the Islamic beliefs. The government has staunchly refuted the presence of ISIS and AQIS in Bangladesh and professes that these are locals who are perpetrating the criminal acts. Notwithstanding, the Hasina Govt has a massive task at hand to rein in these elements and preserve the secular fabric of the state.

Excerpts of India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India

The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the excellent implementation of decisions jointly taken during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015. They held wide-ranging discussions during which they undertook a comprehensive review of all aspects of the bilateral relationship. They also pledged to pursue new opportunities to further deepen and broaden bilateral relations for the mutual benefit of the people of both countries.

India and Bangladesh –A Fraternal Relationship

Prime Minister Modi appreciated the impressive socio-economic development in Bangladesh and commended Prime Minister Hasina for her consistent efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism in Bangladesh.

Prime Minister Modi thanked Prime Minister Hasina for her Government's gesture of recognizing the sacrifices made by 1,661 Indian armed forces personnel who laid down their lives in the Great Liberation War of Bangladesh of 1971. Prime Minister Hasina personally handed over a citation and a crest to the next of kin of 7 Indian officers and soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Modi announced a special medical scheme under which 100 Muktiyoddhas of Bangladesh will be provided medical treatment in Indian hospitals every year. He also extended the Muktiyoddha Scholarship Scheme for 10,000 heirs of Muktiyoddhas for another 5 years.

Sustaining the partnership through high level visits

The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the continued exchange of high-level visits that have helped achieve a better understanding on many issues. They also appreciated the regular holding of meetings of sector specific institutional mechanisms in the areas of security and defence, trade and commerce, health, power and energy, transport and connectivity, etc. for effective follow-up of decisions taken by them in June 2015 in Dhaka.

The two Prime Ministers agreed that the Joint Consultative Commission led by the two Ministers of Foreign/External Affairs would continue to coordinate, oversee and follow-up implementation

of initiatives as well as explore new avenues for cooperation. They also agreed to hold the next session of the Joint Consultative Commission in 2017 in Dhaka.

Working together to create a secure environment

Recognising that terrorism remains one of the most significant threats to peace and stability in the region, the two Prime Ministers reiterated their strong commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and stressed that there can be no justification whatsoever for any act of terror. The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction at the extent of cooperation between the two countries on security related issues. They expressed their conviction that the fight against terrorism should not only seek to disrupt and eliminate terrorists, terror organizations and networks, but should also identify, hold accountable and take strong measures against States and entities which encourage, support and finance terrorism, provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups, and falsely extol their virtues. They shared the view that there should be no glorification of terrorists as martyrs. They called on the international community to end selective or partial approaches to combating terrorism and, in this regard, jointly called for the early finalization and adoption of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism by the UNGA. The two Prime Ministers recognised the need for urgent measures to counter and prevent the spread of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization in the region and beyond and expressed their determination to take concrete measures to further step up cooperation and coordination among law enforcement, intelligence and security organizations of both countries. They reiterated their commitment to ensure that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activities inimical to the other.

The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction at the robust bilateral security cooperation that exists between the two countries. They underscored the need for effective operationalisation of the bilateral Extradition Treaty and, in this regard, welcomed the addendum signed during the visit of Home Minister of Bangladesh to India in July 2016. They also lauded the exemplary cooperation on checking the smuggling and circulation of fake currency notes and narcotics. They lauded the signing of Standard Operating Procedures for operationalisation of the MoU on Cooperation between the Coast Guards.

The two Prime Ministers shared the view that effective implementation of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) would enable better border management to jointly manage the identified vulnerable areas, irregular movement, incidents of violence and tragic loss of lives and

ensure a border free of criminal activities. Both Prime Ministers reiterated that the number of deaths at the border must be brought down to zero and directed the concerned authorities to work towards that end. Both leaders welcomed the SOPs signed between the Indian Border Security Force and the Border Guard Bangladesh to allow use of Indian border roads for construction and maintenance of Border Posts of Border Guard Bangladesh as well as use of medical facilities in remote border stretches. They also appreciated the fact that meetings of the DCs/DMs of bordering districts on both sides have been held in cluster format since 2014.

Development partnership with Bangladesh

Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's abiding commitment to supporting Bangladesh in its efforts to build infrastructure and develop human resources capacity in Bangladesh. In this context, he conveyed India's readiness to meet future needs of Bangladesh in all spheres including education, health, skill development, energy, infrastructure, S & T, information technology, e-governance, emerging high technology areas, etc.

The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction over ongoing capacity building programmes for Bangladeshi civil servants, judicial officers, military personnel, paramilitary personnel, police, specialized departments like fire service, customs & narcotics control, scientists including nuclear scientists, teachers and others through training and fellowships in India.

The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the excellent progress made in the utilization of the first line of credit of US\$ 862 million, as well as identification of specific projects for the second LoC of US\$ 2 billion extended by India to Bangladesh. Many of the projects under the first LoC have already been implemented and have helped enhance capacities in transport and build infrastructure in vital areas such as roads, railways, bridges, inland waterways, etc. The two Prime Ministers welcomed the identification of a number of projects in the areas of port construction, railways, roads, airports, power & energy, telecommunications, shipping etc in Bangladesh to be implemented under the 3rd LoC of US\$ 4.5 billion being given by Government of India.

Prime Minister Hasina thanked Prime Minister Modi for supporting various public interest projects in Bangladesh as fully funded grant-in-aid projects. These include city improvement projects in Rajshahi, Sylhet and Khulna; and setting up of 36 community clinics in identified districts.

Both sides agreed that given the common legacy of jurisprudence, there is an opportunity for greater exchange of visits, training and capacity building activities between the judicial services of the two countries. The two sides welcomed the signing of a MoU on Judicial Sector Cooperation and the decision to organize training and capacity building of Bangladeshi judicial officers in India.

Energising the partnership in Power Sector

The two Prime Ministers underlined the need for bringing about greater integration of power and energy supply networks as well as cooperation in the field of energy efficiency between the two countries. They lauded the positive momentum in cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the power sector and the achievements so far in line with Bangladesh's goal of ensuring power for sustainable development of all by 2021. They appreciated that 600 MW of power is currently flowing through the two

existing interconnections between India and Bangladesh at Bheramara-Bahrampur and Tripura-South Comilla. The two Prime Ministers also expressed satisfaction at the continued engagement on all power sector related proposals, including additional 500 MW of power through the existing Bheramara-Bahrampur inter-connection. They also welcomed the consensus on the proposed additional interconnection between Bornagar (Assam, India), Parbatipur (Bangladesh), Katihar (Bihar, India) for power evacuation facilities from which Bangladesh can draw 1000 MW of power from Assam-Bihar transmission through Bangladesh with suitable tapping points at Parbatipur (Bangladesh). Prime Minister Hasina expressed satisfaction at the regular supply of 100 MW of power from Tripura to Comilla since March 2016 and on the inauguration of the supply of additional 60 MW from Tripura. She also welcomed further discussions that have been initiated regarding the supply of 340 MW from various NTPC stations.

The two Prime Ministers emphasized the advantages of sub-regional cooperation in the areas of power, water resources, trade, transit and connectivity for mutual benefit. They welcomed the fact that a Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India for Cooperation in the field of Hydroelectric Power had been worked out. Prime Minister Hasina requested Prime Minister Modi for facilitation of cross-border power sector cooperation with Nepal. Prime Minister Modi appreciated the progress made in respect of Indian private sector investments in the power sector of Bangladesh and hoped that more Indian investments would follow, including possibilities of joint ventures between Indian and Bangladeshi companies.

The two Prime Ministers also expressed their appreciation for the growing bilateral cooperation in the field of civil nuclear energy, especially in training and capacity building. The leaders welcomed the signing of the inter-Governmental Agreement for cooperation in the field of Civil Nuclear Energy and other agreements related to nuclear cooperation.

The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction at the holding of two rounds of the India-Bangladesh Energy Dialogue based on the decision taken by the two Prime Ministers in June 2015. The Dialogue has taken forward energy cooperation in the fields of supply of, inter alia, High Speed Diesel (HSD), natural gas, LNG, LPG, trans-boundary pipelines etc. The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the steady progress made between Numaligarh Refinery Ltd (NRL) and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) towards construction of the Indo-Bangla Friendship Pipeline from Siliguri to Parbatipur for supply of HSD to Bangladesh and both sides have agreed to sign a Sales and Purchase Agreement in this regard.

Both Prime Ministers also welcomed the signing of an MOU between Petrobangla and Petronet for the setting up of a Joint Venture Re-gasification LNG Terminal at Kutubdia Island. The signing of an MOU between the Geological Survey of India and the Geological Survey of Bangladesh in the field of earth sciences was seen as a positive step in cooperation in this field.

Trade and investment promotion for shared prosperity

The two Prime Ministers noted the current level of bilateral trade between the two countries and agreed that it has potential for growth. In this regard, they emphasized the need to remove all trade barriers including removal of port restrictions to facilitate trade between the two countries. Prime Minister Hasina also drew attention of Prime Minister Modi to recent imposition of anti-dumping duties by Indian authorities on export of Jute from Bangladesh and requested him to review this decision. Bangladesh also assured India to consider India's request for doing away with the discriminatory regime of 'Minimum Import Price' in respect of import of certain products from India to Bangladesh.

Both sides expressed satisfaction over the growth of trade and investment in the recent years. They appreciated that during the visit Indian private sector signed agreements that will result in investment of over USD 9 billion in Bangladesh.

Both Prime Ministers directed their respective officials to set up Indian Special Economic Zones (SEZ) quickly on the identified locations. Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation to Prime

Minister Hasina for assigning an area of 1005 acres at Mirsarai for setting up an Indian SEZ. The two Prime Ministers expressed optimism that these SEZs will encourage Indian businessmen to bring in more investment to Bangladesh.

In line with their common resolve to upgrade the infrastructure of the Land Customs Stations (LCSs)/Land Ports/Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) in a coordinated manner to further facilitate the flow of goods and people across the borders, both leaders welcomed the inauguration of the Petrapole ICP, Phulbari-Banglabandha Immigration Check-post and Srimantapur LCS. PM Hasina appreciated India's initiative to develop seven more ICPs on the India-Bangladesh border in a phased manner. Both leaders directed their respective agencies to ensure that developmental work including construction of ICPs/Land Ports will be allowed within 150 yards of the zero line, on the basis of prior intimation and approval from the other side.

The two Prime Ministers welcomed the revision of the MoU on Border Haats between the two countries, which will ease up the existing conditions for operation of Border Haats and enable opening up of more Border Haats, based on the positive experience of the four operational Border Haats. They underlined the need to establish more Border Haats at mutually agreed locations. The two Prime Ministers stressed the need to improve market access and remove barriers to trade, including port restrictions on products, to ensure smooth movement of goods across the borders.

Building Connectivity – on land, on the waters, in the skies

Prime Minister Hasina requested Prime Minister Modi for conclusion of the Interim Agreement on Sharing of the Water of Teesta as agreed upon by both governments in January 2011. Prime Minister Modi reiterated that his Government is working with all stakeholders in India for an early conclusion of the Agreement. The two Prime Ministers also directed concerned officials to conclude meanwhile discussions on various aspects relating to sharing of waters of the Feni, Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar rivers.

The two Prime Ministers appreciated the positive steps taken in respect of Bangladesh's proposal for jointly developing the Ganges Barrage on the river Padma in Bangladesh. They welcomed the visit of an Indian technical team to Bangladesh, establishment of a 'Joint Technical Sub Group on

Ganges Barrage Project' and study of the riverine border in the upstream area of project. Both leaders hoped that the matter would be further taken forward through continued engagement of both sides.

The two Prime Ministers welcomed the operationalization of the Coastal Shipping Agreement signed in June 2015 and noted that it had resulted in the desired objective of improving connectivity and enhancing bilateral trade. They also appreciated the commencement of transshipment of goods through the Ashuganj River Port under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT). Both sides stressed the need to expedite the construction of the Ashuganj Inland Container Port (ICP) and suggested inclusion of more ports of call under the PIWTT framework. The two Prime Ministers welcomed the signing of an MoU on passenger and cruise vessels on coastal and protocol routes.

Both leaders shared the view that enhanced air connectivity between the two countries will boost people to people contacts as well as promote greater tourism, trade and investment flows.

The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the continued progress towards restoration of the erstwhile railway linkages. They jointly inaugurated the newly restored railway link between Radhikapur (India) and Birol (Bangladesh) which will facilitate cargo movement between the two countries. They also witnessed the trial run of passenger train between Khulna and Kolkata and welcomed the fact that the full-fledged service in this sector will be operational by July 2017. They welcomed the decision taken 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 by August 2017. The two Prime Ministers appreciated the progress made with respect to the new railway link between Akhaura and Agartala, including land acquisition, so as complete the link by the end of 2018. They also welcomed the signing of an MoU between Container

Corporation of India and Container Company of Bangladesh Limited, which is expected to lead to greater cooperation in freight operations.

The two Prime Ministers also hailed the launch of the new bus service between Kolkata -Khulna-Dhaka noting that this would facilitate people-to-people contacts. They also welcomed the cargo trial runs between Dhaka and Delhi in October 2016.

Crafting a stronger defence Cooperation

The two leaders agreed to foster mutually beneficial and deeper defence cooperation, taking into account the illustrious history of the cooperation, which began with the joint operation of both forces during Bangladesh's Great Liberation War in December 1971. They noted that the first ever visit by the Defence Minister of India to Bangladesh in November 2016 was a significant step towards a new level of cooperation based on current goodwill and friendly bilateral relations between the two countries. The two Prime Ministers emphasized the need to further strengthen and consolidate defence cooperation through greater military-to-military training and exchanges. They also complimented the Armed Forces for their professional conduct during Joint Search and Rescue Operations in the Bay of Bengal leading to the rescue of a large number of fishermen from both sides and the recent initiatives to enhance cooperation in the field of HADR activities. The two leaders welcomed the conclusion of MOUs on Defence Cooperation, Defence Line of Credit, as well as cooperation between various defence training institutes.

Building bridges to optimize people-to-people contacts

The two Prime Ministers welcomed the growing people-to-people contacts and agreed to further increase exchanges between the two peoples. In this regard, the two Prime Ministers decided to mark the year 2018 as the Year of India in Bangladesh, and 2019 as the Year of Bangladesh in India. They also decided to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 2021 and 75th anniversary of India's independence from British rule in 2022.

The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction with the ongoing cultural exchanges and the implementation of the Cultural Exchange Programme (2015-17) between the two countries. They expressed satisfaction at the signing of an MOU on Cooperation in the Field of Mass Media and Agreement on Audio-Visual Co-production between the two countries.

Both Prime Ministers agreed to strengthen their diplomatic and consular presence in each other's country to further boost people-to-people contacts. They welcomed the upgradation of the Bangladesh Visa Office in Agartala to an Assistant High Commission and establishment of an Assistant High Commission of Bangladesh in Guwahati and the decision to set up Assistant High Commissions of India in Khulna and Sylhet in 2017. Prime Minister Hasina welcomed the opening of more Indian Visa Application Centres (IVACs) in Bangladesh as well as various initiatives taken by India

to streamline its visa procedures and infrastructure so as to render them more user-friendly for Bangladesh nationals. They welcomed the opening of the Phulbari- Banglabandha Immigration

Check Post in February 2016 as a significant step towards increasing people-to-people contacts and facilitating movement of goods not only between the two countries but the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) sub-region. In recognition of special connection between Bangladesh Muktiyoddhas and India, Indian side announced 5 year multiple entry visa facility to all. Indian side responded to a humanitarian need expressed by Bangladesh by allowing medical visa facilities for diagnosis in India.

Friends at Home; Partners in the region and the world

The two Prime Ministers emphasized the advantages of sub-regional cooperation in the areas of power, water resources, trade, transit and connectivity for mutual benefit. In this context, they noted the progress made by the Joint Working Groups on Sub-Regional Cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) on Water Resources Management and Power/Hydropower and on Trade, Transit and Connectivity. They welcomed decision reached between India, Bangladesh and Bhutan for cooperation in the field of hydroelectric power and hailed this development as a new paradigm for sub-regional cooperation.

Both Prime Ministers reaffirmed their shared commitment to deepen regional cooperation to maximize the mutuality of interests and to ensure equitable share of mutual benefits in all areas, including trade, transport and energy. They recognized the importance of various regional/sub-regional cooperative/collaborative initiatives to improve the lives and livelihoods of all the people across the two countries.

Prime Minister Modi thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for participating in the South Asia Satellite Project and offered support and cooperation for the satellite programme of Bangladesh. They also agreed to pursue cooperation in peaceful uses of outer space jointly, for which an MoU was signed by Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Prime Minister Modi thanked Prime Minister Hasina for supply of broadband internet connectivity from Cox's Bazar to Tripura and Northeastern region of India.

The two Prime Ministers reiterated their commitment to work closely in furthering relevant regional/sub-regional cooperation processes. Prime Minister Hasina congratulated Prime Minister Modi for successfully hosting the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit and the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat in Goa in October 2016. Referring to the agenda for action determined at the BIMSTEC Leaders Retreat, they expressed their shared commitment to promoting regional

cooperation, particularly in the areas of trade, transportation, connectivity, energy and counter-terrorism within the BIMSTEC Framework.

They emphasized on further strengthening of cooperation and coordination among the BCIM-EC Study Group and directed their respective teams to finalize at an early date the BCIM-EC Study Group reports, which could facilitate projects envisaged under this framework.

The two Prime Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to work closely in the UN and other multi-lateral organizations. They underscored the importance of coordinating each other's position on multi-lateral issues of common interest including UN Peacekeeping Operations. Both Prime Ministers reiterated the importance of strong United Nations and emphasized the need for an early reform of the Security Council. Prime Minister Hasina reiterated her country's support for India's candidature for permanent membership of an expanded and reformed UN Security Council. The two Prime Ministers also affirmed their commitment to work together particularly in the international arena to strengthen the means of implementation as enshrined in the SDGs 2030.

Both Prime Ministers underscored the need for strengthening and reform of multilateral financial institutions and enhancing the voice and participation of developing countries in international economic decision-making.

The two Prime Ministers welcomed the entry into force of the Paris Agreement and reaffirmed their commitment 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). Both sides reiterated the need for fulfilment of pre-2020 pledges by developed countries under the Kyoto Protocol. Prime Minister Modi thanked Prime Minister Hasina for joining the Framework agreement for the Establishment of International Solar Alliance and expressed hope that it will be ratified early.

34 bilateral documents, including business documents, are being signed, exchanged, adopted and handed over during the visit.

The two Prime Ministers expressed firm commitment to set an example of good neighbourliness in the region. Both leaders agreed to promote shared interests of the two peoples so as to live together harmoniously and in a mutually beneficial inter-dependent environment.

Prime Minister Hasina extended an invitation to Prime Minister Modi to visit Bangladesh. The invitation was accepted and it was agreed that the visit would take place at a mutually convenient date.

Conclusion

At the end there remains only one question to be answered. Has the visit been successful? The answer is an emphatic “yes”. India has done well to create strategic space to engage Bangladesh. Cooperation with Bangladesh will ensure a symbiotic relation, development and progress for the people across the border. A friendly Bangladesh also ensures that the North Eastern states are better integrated with the mainland and India is on a firm ground in case of a China-Pakistan collusive threat. Any void and policy lethargy with respect to Bangladesh will be an invitation to the Chinese to step up their efforts to woo Bangladesh into their folds. With Sri Lanka already in the firm grips of China, overtures in Nepal and current events in Maldives, India can ill afford to let go of Bangladesh from its sphere of influence. The Indo-Bangladesh relations are progressing well on the charted course and it is time that we delivered in our promises and reinvigorate our relations with Bangladesh as an equal partner.