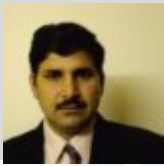




AN AGENDA FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT **POLICY OPTIONS FOR INDIA IN BANGLADESH**



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India and Bangladesh share historical, geographical and cultural bonds. Bangladesh has 'Bengali' a lingual and cultural attachment with West Bengal, a province of India. This linkage has, however, not given Bangladesh an impetus in maintaining enduring warm relations with India. Rather, these linkages have been turned into a fear factor called the 'India factor' that has been playing a pivotal role (as either a positive or a negative connotation) in India-Bangladesh relations.

Bangladesh's policies towards India have not been uniform. The post-independent ruling elites of Bangladesh have shaped the two

distinct nationalistic political discourses within the 'liberal-secular-linguistic' (closer to India) and 'religious nationalistic tendency with 'Islam its core' (distancing India). These two distinct national political leanings have shaped India-Bangladesh relations over the last four decades.

The general trend is as follows: the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) along with the progressive left-wing political parties has usually maintained cordial relations with India, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) along with other religious right-wing political parties has generally maintained an attitude of mistrust towards India and, has constantly adopted an anti-Indian foreign policy stance as a counter-balancing strategy.

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Views expressed are author's own

I INDIA AND BANGLADESH: BILATERAL ISSUES

POLITICAL ISSUES

Bangladesh maintained cordial relations with India in 1972-1975. The bloody military coup of



1975 killed Mujib which totally changed the course of cordial bilateral relations and advanced 'seeds of discord' and, to every extent, mistrust in Bangladesh-India relations. Post-Mujib regimes' bandwagoned with both China and Pakistan with an intention to destabilise India by providing support to insurgents in Northeast India through arms transfers through their 'mutually destabilising policies'.

The relations returned to normalcy when BAL under the stewardship of Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996. India responded positively within the framework of the Gujral Doctrine based on non-reciprocity. One important example was the conclusion of the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996. India also assisted Bangladesh in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord in 1997. The relations were further strengthened when BAL returned to power in 2009 with the mandate to re-instate 'the spirit of 1971'. This time India and Bangladesh reassessed outstanding issues and made a calculated decision despite huge criticism of their leaning towards each others in the domestic domain. Even though Hasina had several options such as bandwagoning with China, maintaining equidistance with India and China, and simultaneously bandwagoning with India and China, she chose to bandwagon with India on the clear understanding that the transnational development approaches between India and Bangladesh would be the best antidote to re-instate the lost socio-economic and security cooperation.

High-level exchange visits have been taking place regularly to strengthen bilateral relations

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and have opened up new areas of cooperation between the two countries since 2009. A paradigm shift of mindsets in all levels of the governments in both the countries regarding regional/sub-regional cooperation, a result of their long-held obsession with bilateralism, was witnessed. Since then, both the governments have been exploring ways to resolve ongoing contentious disputes. They are actively engaged to amicably resolve the issue of water-sharing of all the international rivers (as many as 53) crossing the boundaries of the two countries. The issues of augmentation in the dry season flows of the river Ganges along with the sharing of Teesta, Feni and other common rivers has been recognised.

On an agreement over Teesta river-water sharing, at the last moment, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee disapproved the deal. The federal structure and coalition politics of India had made decision making a complex and arduous enterprise, especially when one take into account the political compulsions of accommodating the demands of the regional stakeholders. The issue appeared to be lost in political wrangling/bickering between New Delhi and Kolkata.

On the other side, Bangladesh has also adopted a 'realist or pragmatic' approach in dealing with India. In the event of not signing the Teesta water-sharing treaty, the government has called off the exchange of transit-related documents. The assertive federalism negatively impacted on the developmental drive for Northeast India.

Other issues that have been a matter of great concern between these two neighbours are the Tippiamukh dam (a proposed dam for hydro-electricity on the Barak River in Manipur), sharing of Feni river-water, and the proposed interlinking rivers project in India. All these issues have also come out from the bilateral discourse without any amicable solution.

In view of the considerably deep security and political implications of land boundary issues, both sides lay great emphasis on suitable solutions to the boundary-related problems. The two countries signed a Protocol on Land Boundary Agreement in 2011 which forms an integral part of the Land Border Agreement of

1974. This additional protocol requires a constitutional amendment for ratification where BJP, the principal opposition party, during the UPA regime, strongly denounced the LBA as it felt, Bangladesh was getting the better side of the bargain. To merely criticize the UPA government for political gains won't be helpful this time for ruling BJP. If it does that then it would be perceived as a second disappointment to the Bangladeshis.

The delimitation of the maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal also needs an amicable solution to the dispute through mutual consultation and understanding. The issue has already been referred to the international tribunal, while keeping the option of negotiations open. On 20 December 2013, the international arbitration tribunal concluded its hearing and has reserved its judgment which is expected to be given within six months. Handling these contentious issues are challenging tasks before the new governments of two countries.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

In the recent past, India and Bangladesh have also agreed to harness advantages of sub-regional cooperation in the fields of energy and food security, trade and commerce as well as transport and connectivity. In bringing about socio-economic development, both countries are mobilising joint investments from domestic as well as international sources. There is scope for investment in the areas of agriculture, fisheries, health, education, telecommunication, human resource development and climate change.

The huge trade gap has been always a rankling matter between India and Bangladesh. Indian formal exports to Bangladesh amounted to about US\$4 billion (with an additional US\$4 billion of 'informal' exports), while Bangladesh's total exports to India was around US\$350 million. However, until and unless the para-tariff and non-tariff barriers are completely removed, the trade cooperation will be way below its potential. The proposed Free Trade Agreement between Bangladesh and India has to be signed

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on a priority basis.

Numerous other measures including opening up of border *haats* and development of Land Customs Stations (LCSs)/Land Ports are being adopted to boost bilateral trade. The seven integrated check posts and eight LCS along the border would also be upgraded. These programmes will help in filling critical gaps in the social and physical infrastructure, particularly in Bangladesh. It is also believed that the diplomatic/consular/trade representation of Bangladesh needs to be increased in order to enhance trade and commerce between two countries. Trade connectivity is inextricably intertwined and linked with increasing people-to-people connectivity. Bangladesh had expressed its interest to open Trade Missions in Guwahati (Assam), Agartala (Tripura), Siliguri (West Bengal) and Aizwal (Mizoram) at the Joint Secretary level Trade Talks between Bangladesh and India. The government of India conveyed its interest in the opening up of a Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh in Mumbai in September 2011.

To minimise the trade gap, power sector cooperation between Bangladesh and India is witnessing a steady progress with some leap-frog movements in the recent times. Bangladesh and India have inked a Power Purchase Agreement for the purchase of 250MW electricity from India to Bangladesh. A Joint Venture Agreement was also signed in January 2012 between the two countries for setting up a 1320MW coal-fired power plant in Bangladesh. India made an announcement in January 2012 welcoming Bangladesh's participation in power projects in India,

particularly hydro-power projects in the Northeastern states of India. Both the countries can also cooperate in exploration of natural gas and oil for energy security.

Apart from thermal and hydro-power cooperation, India and Bangladesh can explore options for cooperation in the nuclear energy sector: (i) India can undertake to construct a nuclear power project in Bangladesh (ii) India can supply nuclear power by dedicating one or two units from its upcoming nuclear power project in the eastern part of the country (iii) India can join Russia with whom there is already had a Memorandum of Understanding to build a nuclear project in Bangladesh (iv) India can assist Bangladesh in capacity building. India and Bangladesh can also collaborate in the renewable energy sector, particularly in wind and solar energy.

SECURITY ISSUES

Issues of terrorism, insurgency, trafficking (human, drugs and arms), piracy and a whole host of non-traditional security threats loom large, raising new questions and demanding innovative answers.

Bangladesh has sought to allay Indian concerns by reiterating its policy that Bangladesh would not allow its territory to be used for activities inimical to any foreign country. During the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in 2010, the two countries signed three security-related pacts, namely Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, Transfer of Sentenced Persons and Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking.

Bangladesh has also helped in the arrests some Indian terrorists operating from Bangladesh. Along with the recently signed Extradition Treaty, these agreements are expected to go a long way in further strengthening security ties between the two countries. The two sides have also decided to institutionalise the regular exchange of visits (at least once in a year) at the Home Minister level.

Bangladesh's 'security dilemma' with regard to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is dominated by nationalist and religious identities, has constructed a misunderstanding in the discourse of foreign policy-making towards India. The alleged reports of the killing of Bangladeshi citizens by the Border Security Force (BSF) of India have put the Bangladesh-India friendly relations at a risk. Assurances have been given by India at the highest level, and a Coordinated Border Management Plan was signed in 2011. Dhaka has consistently maintained that there are no cross-border movement and illegal Bangladeshis in India.

However, the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India is often looked at through the political prism in India and seen to be used as vote-bank politics, especially at the state level. The new government in India may raise the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants with their counterpart. While, the anti-India plank may still maintain by the opposing forces to consolidate their power base. What will be the fate of positive developments that have taken place in the past few years, if political instability prevails or the BNP alliance manages to come to power in near future? The longstanding political instability, growing extremists' intervention in political affairs, and the confrontational politics of Bangladesh have paved a way for the opposition political force to nationalise the 'India factor' for political gains.

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BANGLADESH: LEVERAGES FOR INDIA

Many in Bangladesh perceive that New Delhi is not adequately responding to their positive steps. India has three broader policy objectives in dealing with neighbours in general and

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Bangladesh in particular: security (internal & external); economic development; and political stability. In the pursuance of these objectives, the priorities and approaches in implementation have been driven by the policy of co-existence (Nehruvian) and the doctrine of non-reciprocity (Gujral).

India also emphasises on cooperation with Bangladesh for the integration of the eastern South Asian sub-region. If the country genuinely wants to address the economic and security concerns of the eastern South Asian sub-region, particularly Northeastern states of India, it has to act as soft power or smart power. India can expand the concept of the 'Gujral Doctrine' to resolve bilateral disputes, which will build confidence in small neighbours.

The Northeastern states of India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) have a total population of over 39 million. A graphic way of visualising their connectedness with the rest of India and with the neighbouring countries lies in the fact that 98 per cent of the outer borders of this nearly contiguous region constitute India's international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. West Bengal with its population of over 90 million and relatively developed industrial base is the other key player that dominates and influences the fate of the NE states on one side and India-Bangladesh relations the other (RIS, 2011).

Northeast India could play a significant role in not only further consolidating Bangladesh-India bilateral cooperation but can also offer an opportunity to facilitate sub-regional cooperation in the integrated eastern South Asian region. Apart from huge reservoirs of oil and gas, coal, limestone, forest wealth, fruits and vegetables, the region is a vibrant source of India's largest perennial water system, the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, which can be tapped for energy, irrigation and transportation. Northeast India may serve a gateway for Bangladesh's access to India and may in the long-run act as a 'game changer' in Bangladesh-India trade relations.

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West Bengal is positioned to be a major beneficiary of the new connections that are in the process of being woven throughout this region; it will transform the entire eastern South Asia sub-region (Singh, 2013). Due to poor regional connectivity between Bangladesh and the neighbouring countries of India, Nepal and Bhutan, all the countries and their territories have been losing a great deal on many fronts. For example:

- A container usually takes 20-25 days to move from New Delhi to Dhaka, as the maritime route is via Bombay and Singapore/Colombo to Chittagong Port and then by rail to Dhaka. But the same container could have been moved to Dhaka within 3-4 days if there was direct rail connectivity and operations between New Delhi and Dhaka (Bhattacharyay 2012). The shipment of Assam tea is required to travel 1400 km to reach Kolkata port through the 'Chicken neck', since no agreement exists for India to use the traditional route through Chittagong Port which could have been shorter by more than 50 per cent, in terms of distance (Rahmatullah 2010).

- Indian shipment has to cross thousands of miles to reach eastern coastal states, with industrial and agricultural products lying in the Northeastern region of India, which require a lot of time and communication expenses. Access to Chittagong Sea Port privileges India's goods imported from different countries and her own produced goods along with military

instruments from Madras 'Bishakhapattom' and other ports come directly to the Chittagong port of Bangladesh. The Southern border of Tripura state is only 75 km from Chittagong Port, but goods from Agartala are required to travel 1645 km to reach Kolkata Port through the 'Chicken neck'. If there were transport cooperation between Bangladesh and India, goods would have travelled only around 400 km across Bangladesh to reach Kolkata, and a much shorter distance to reach Chittagong Port (Arnold, 2007).

- India allowed a transit between Nepal and Bangladesh across the 'Chicken neck' for bilateral trade only, and not for the third country trade of Nepal, which now has to pass through the already congested Kolkata Port. If there was transport cooperation, Nepal could have used Mongla Port in Bangladesh, which has spare capacity and is conveniently located with a direct broad gauge rail link from Birgunj (Kharel 2009). The signing of the Standard Operating Procedure for the passage of Bhutanese cargo inside Bangladesh Land Customs Stations has come into force. Bangladesh has also agreed to open up its sea ports, Chittagong and Mongla, for the use of sub-regional countries including India.

India and Myanmar are jointly implementing 'Kaladan project' to link Sittwe port of Myanmar with Mizoram, partly through Kaladan river and partly by road (Rana 2012). This would be quite an expensive alternative for India to have access to Northeast India via Kolkata Port, Sittwe port, Kaladan River and road, as an alternative to the existing route through the chicken neck.

In the process of facilitating trade, Bangladesh has offered the construction of the Akhaura-Agartala rail linkage, and the resuscitation of several other dormant but long atrophied rail links are under discussion (ADB, 2012). Reviving some other historically popular train routes (like Khulna-Kolkata) and opening new ones (between Agartala in Tripura and Ramgarh in Chittagong) is under contemplation (*Times of India* 2013). Bangladesh has proposed new routes for bus services such as Dhaka-Siliguri, Dhaka-Guwahati etc. There are reports of steps forward in the construction of the proposed bridge over the Feni River (for connecting Tripura with Chittagong sea port) and dredging of several common rivers including Ichamati (*The Hindu* 2013).

New ports-of-call have been added to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport and Transit Agreement, and additional ports are under consideration. A coastal shipping agreement is under discussion, linking ports across Bangladesh's long but contiguously shared coastline on the Bay of Bengal. Work is well underway for the putting in place of the infrastructure and supporting hardware needed to concretise that shared vision and transform it into reality (*The Hindu* 2013). India has facilitated US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit (\$200 million of which was converted into outright grant) to Bangladesh. Most of them are being used towards the fulfilment of this grand design (*The Hindu* 2013).

The two sides agreed to set up a Joint working Group on Trade and Connectivity to look into all aspects of trade and related connectivity issues

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with a view to address them jointly (IDSA Task Force Report 2011). India and Bangladesh are also working together in the road transport sector, as seen in the July 2012 renewal of the 'Transit and Trans-shipment Right to India by Bangladesh, which has enabled the continuation of transshipment of bulk cargo. During the visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister to Dhaka in February 2013, the formation of this JWG was announced (Karim 2013).

Tripura Transport Department Secretary Kishore Ambuly said that the state-owned Rail India Technical and Economic Services (RITES) recently conducted a survey for the new waterways between India's Tripura state and Bangladesh (IANS, February 11, 2014). He further said "RITES has conducted the feasibility study to make new waterways between Tripura's Gomti and Howrah rivers and Bangladesh's Meghna and Titas rivers". RITES, a mini-Ratna company under the Railway Ministry, has suggested a fund of Rs. 47 crore for developing three waterways including navigation on the Gomti and Howrah rivers (IANS, February 11, 2014). Currently, Indian and Bangladeshi waterways connect West Bengal and Assam states and the IWAI and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) are operating vessels on these routes (Karim 2013).

Both the governments have laid enormous emphasis in enhancing road, rail and river connectivity between these two countries. Bangladesh has offered itself as a bridge as well as telecommunication hub, linking the Northeast with mainland India, linking South Asia with Southeast Asia and beyond, and opening up the vast potentials of trade and economic interlocation that still remain untapped (Prabir, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The intensity of the developments became evident with the landslide victory of BJP led NDA, which in more ways than one, broke the stranglehold of the coalition politics in India. Now, it provides us with a much requisite space and framework to think and analyze on the implications that the present dispensation of

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India might accrue on the regional politics of South Asia in general and Bangladesh in particular.

Considering India's vital interest in developing the Northeastern states, it should give as many concessions to its neighbours as possible. India should take the lead in settling all existing irritants and disputes (Rizvi, 2011). Given the current state of mutual trust and the levels of confidence and comfort between Bangladesh and India, there is enough space to work on to tap the full potential of the two countries. India must persuade Bangladesh to develop a consensus policy approach.

India and Bangladesh believe in common ideals and principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. The present ruling AL alliance wants to re-instate secular democratic values, which help the positive relationship between the two countries. Bangladesh is also enlisted as one of 11 emerging economies in Asia that would substantially contribute to the global growth in the days to come. Therefore, it is in the interest of both countries that there should be close cooperation and interaction between Bangladesh and India for regional stability and prosperity. India's 'Look East' policy will also acquire more substance as and when it will witness Northeast India growing and expanding in terms of socio-economic development.

How far India's handling of some of relevant issues can be called a "success", remains to be seen in the policy priorities of the new government. Though, the invitation to the Head of the government of SAARC states in the oath taking ceremony of the PM Narendra Modi, may

be observed as a visionary step towards the more friendly, peaceful, economically integrated South Asia where Extra-regional powers will have less influence.

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