

Challenges and Opportunities of Indo- Bangladesh Bilateral Relations in the 21st Century: Historical Imperatives and Future Direction

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Introduction

India and Bangladesh are close and friendly neighbours now and while geographically they share the longest borders in the neighbourhood, therefore the bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh over the four decades have seen several highs and lows. Significantly, historical and cultural linkages, economic interdependence and geo-strategic interests make India and Bangladesh politically vital to each other. It is fact that, the new phase that began since January 2010 has turned the bilateral trajectory on a path of bilateral cooperation. Both Bangladesh and India have had their relations shaped by history, culture, geography, economics and above all, geopolitics. While India is a geopolitical, economic and military giant involved in the affairs of the world, over the years Bangladesh has been struggling to ensure the sustenance and preservation of human security within its borders.

India-Bangladesh Relations: Some Historical Trends

The foreign policy of a country is primarily a projection of its socio-economic and political compulsions in international politics. India's contribution towards Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971 was critical to the latter's birth. However, events that followed the liberation of Bangladesh did not result in the continuance of cordial relations between these two countries as expected. There are few fundamental issues between India and Bangladesh, such as land and maritime boundary demarcations, the sharing of waters from 54 common rivers, informal trade,

transnational crime, and interference in internal affairs that have adversely affected their relationship over the years. On an optimistic note, however, interpersonal relations and civil society movement between the two countries have increased. In order to assess the prevailing challenges between the two countries and the need to overcome them, this paper would thoroughly examine and excavate some recent trends, as well as explore a possible framework for the future direction of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Hypothetically, both nations need to undergo a change in mindset, particularly at the political level. Ironically, there is a need for greater understanding, dialogue, diplomacy, regional cooperation and less-inference in each other's internal affairs. While it may be easy to simply list these issues. Overcoming them would be difficult, mainly due to the overall geopolitical compulsions, the historical legacy, and the mutual mistrust in the region. Undoubtedly, India-Bangladesh relations would improve greatly if both parties recognize the need for greater political will to overcome the geopolitical compulsions, to appreciate the essence of regional-economic cooperation and to realize the benefits of peaceful coexistence.¹

India extended critical support to Bangladesh during its War of Liberation in 1971, and thus paved the way for cordial relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, it is necessary for India, as a formidable power in the region, to take along its neighbours, especially the smaller nations, in order to settle any outstanding issues amicably. A relatively smaller country such as Bangladesh has to depend on, and share resources like water, energy, maritime, trade and technology etc. with its neighbours. However, when there is contention among these states, especially over the sharing of resources, the situation gives rise to misunderstandings which then lead to a state of mistrust.² India has one of the largest and state-of-the-art military forces in the world, while Bangladesh's military is small when compared to India. Over the years, India and Bangladesh spend 2.5percent and 1.5-1.7 percent of their GDP³ on defense respectively. Former American Secretary of State Madeline Albright once commented that no diplomacy can be effective without befitting military prowess (one of the components of national power) backing it. Moreover, India is aspiring to become an Asian power or even assume a global leadership role by going beyond the orbit of South Asia and competing with China. In this context, the paper will explore some of the fundamental critical facets of contemporary India-Bangladesh relations and deal with the broad issues that directly impinge on this relationship. India is the largest democracy in the world with democratic values and ethos emulated by other nations, and similar democratic values and ethos could be the forerunners for better relations between the two countries. Subsequently, India definitely enjoys more political stability than Bangladesh; however, there remains much room for improvement in the area of constitutional liberalism in both countries. There is, therefore, a need to understand the varied dynamics of inter-state relations, particularly in the light of certain recent issues that are straining the relations of the two countries. In addition, there is already an existing history of mistrust between India and Bangladesh, which has been exacerbated by these current issues. The overall scenario thus calls

for a change in the South Asian mindset.⁴ Bangladesh is a small country, in terms of area, resources and gross domestic product (GDP), when compared to most of other South Asian countries. Some even label it as a “soft state”. For human security it has to depend on the two giants, India and China; and turns to the Middle East, America, European Union, Malaysia and Japan, among others, for remittances, development aid, energy, trade, and commerce etc. apart from facing challenges in human security issues, Bangladesh is currently also plagued by problems pertaining to transnational crime, international waters, inter-state land and maritime border demarcations and informal-trade all of which have cross-border ramifications, especially with India and to some extent with Myanmar. While the population in Bangladesh is the third most homogenous in the world after North and South Korea, internal political squabbles resulting from low political culture, natural calamities that continually devastate its land, overpopulation problems and scarce resources make it difficult for this country to attain its developmental goals. However, it has excelled in such areas as achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education, decreasing child mortality rate, in its microfinance policy and in supporting the United Nations’ peace-keeping operations around the world.⁵

Indo-Bangladesh Bilateralism in the post-Cold War Period: Some Historical Context

India’s role in Bangladesh liberation war is rather well documented. The close trust between Indira Gandhi and Mujibur Rahman was evident resulting in the signing of the India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace Treaty in 1971. However, the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975 irreversibly ruptured the special relations that the two states shared. In the post-Mujibur phase, as Bangladesh achieved stability its foreign policy became more prominent and outward looking.⁶ This and the changing internal dynamics within the country with prolonged period of military rule till 1990 meant that for many years Indo-Bangladeshi relations never could renew the earlier warmth. The political turmoil and Bangladesh’s attempts to look beyond India in order to gain more strategic autonomy resulted in limited engagement during the period. Paradoxically, New Delhi’s political proximity with Mujibur Rehman in the early years became a liability for the future of bilateral relations and the bilateral ties between the two neighbouring countries have witnessed many phases but with the ushering of democracy, the bilateral relations became stable if not improved. Soon after a BNP-led government assumed office after the first multiparty elections in 1990 and opted for economic liberalization, its trade and economic relations with India increased manifold. This deepened the economic linkages but the Bangladeshi inability to tap Indian markets effectively created a rapidly growing huge trade deficit in favour of India. There was also a distinct trend that developed during this phase; firstly, of Awami League being associated with India and being targeted by the opposition, especially, the BNP of being pro-India to the extent of hurting Bangladesh’s interests. Nation building process in Bangladesh during that time developed its

own brand of anti-India rhetoric, especially in popular politics.⁷ Since the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Soviet Union, the rise of China and an increasingly inward-looking USA, India was looking to play a role in a multi-polar world that is reflective of the realignment of powers taking place. The idea of the rise of Asia has been a popular narrative finding resonance with India's political outlook. In hindsight, the resurgence in the Indian economy and growing international trade provided wings to Indian lofty ambitions. Therefore, India has been fighting to expand the scope of South Asia that has been limiting for more reasons than one. India's forays into the Southeast Asian region and its deepening engagement with the ASEAN and membership of the East Asian Summit forum have translated some of these new imaginations into reality.⁸ India in the South Asian region is uniquely located sharing geographical proximity with almost all the other South Asian states. Summarily, the interdependence in the so-called region has been growing in recent decades. And indeed the last decade witnessed a transformation in the Indian economy and mindset. South Asia is now a distinct phenomenon. The India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (BBIN) have found common grounds for many issues that overlap including common water resources as well other natural resources.⁹ Similarly, for example, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic cooperation which comprises seven states of South Asian states and South East Asian States. Most importantly, Bangladesh is a member of both the organizations and its geographic location gives India a vital link to connect the two regions. Bangladesh has thus become an increasingly critical factor under the new Indian calculations of increasing its foot-prints outside the South Asian region. In this context of a strategic shift in India's foreign policy and political changes in Bangladesh in changing times, the NDA government has adopted certain policy postures towards Bangladesh. As Bangladesh's location assumed an importance and Bangladesh is increasingly measured by that country's political, economic and physical usefulness in India's great power ambition.¹⁰ The article essentially argues that India in its seeking a larger role for itself in Asia has realized the criticality of its neighbours in this strategy. It also argues, that the past four decades of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relation has allowed the two states to find a meaningful path of development and progress. And to seek to find more common ground in a regional landscape that has much more to offer when there is convergences between nation states than that is possible through a unilateral method. India and Bangladesh hopefully have embarked on a path where political affinity will be minimized. As has been evident in the past the cost of non-cooperation has been higher, there is hope now that Dhaka and Delhi have found convergences on several issues and mutual benefits translated on the ground will ensure the process may not be obstructed in the future path of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral ties.¹¹

India and Bangladesh share bonds of history, language, culture and multitude of other commonalities. The excellent bilateral ties reflect an all-encompassing partnership based on, understanding, sovereignty, equality, and trust etc. Above all, in the present world of interdependency, no country, however large or powerful it might be, can afford to live in

isolation. In the course of interaction, a nation's behavior is constantly changed and influenced by others. Thus, the domestic and international environment determines the foreign policies of that nation. In this paradigm, India, a regional power, occupies center stage in the foreign policy of Bangladesh, which it pursues by virtue of its geographical surroundings, historical and cultural legacies and more importantly, persistence of a number of outstanding bilateral issues, which are vital to its existence. These determinants are very much vital to form and shape the foreign policies of the two empowering nations. Effectively, history is the first and leading determinant of the foreign policy of Bangladesh towards India.

Challenges and Opportunities for India and Bangladesh (1975-2023): A Multi-Faceted Relationship

In recent years, South Asia has received growing attention as a region that is integrating successfully into the ambit of global economy. And to maximize the benefits in terms of faster growth and poverty reduction, the region will need to strengthen regional and bilateral cooperation in several areas. In this context, closer bilateral cooperation and integration between major South Asian countries, such as between India and Bangladesh, will strengthen the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a whole. Meanwhile, cultural, trade, and economic exchanges between the two countries are long standing. India and Bangladesh boast of a total population of more than 1 billion, and their rapid domestic, economic development and good cooperation have demonstrated broad prospects for future cooperation. A remarkable growth in two-way trade between India and Bangladesh has resulted in robust growth of the economies in the particular region. Of late, India has become Bangladesh's largest trading partner in South Asia. Compared with their strength, much potential exists for developing trade and economic relations between the two countries. This paper discusses various opportunities and associated prospects and ensuing problems in strengthening the India-Bangladesh economic cooperation and integration agenda in the context of SAARC. This paper will also examine some recent trends, as well as explore a possible framework for the future direction of India-Bangladesh relations. India and Bangladesh share a common border of 4096km running through five Indian states, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. India's relations with Bangladesh are traditionally, cultural, social and economic etc. There is a much that brings them together-a shared history and common heritage, linguistic and cultural ties, passion for music, literature and the arts etc. India shares not only a common history of struggle for freedom and liberation but also enduring feeling of both fraternal as well as familial ties. This commonality is stupendously reflected in the multi-dimensional relations with Dhaka at several levels of interaction. While India so-far played a critical role in 1971 towards the birth of Bangladesh, this does not however result in close bilateral ties. The paper seeks to provide a framework of recent trends along with some impending issues which rock the two nations. Currently, both nations are enjoying extremely good quality relations.¹² As noted by eminent statesman and former

ambassador to China, K.M Panikkar who reciprocated: “geography constitutes the permanent basis of every nation’s history. It is not too much to say that it is one of the major factors that determine the historical evolution of a people.”¹³ In the same vein he goes on to say that “both the internal policies of a country and its external relations are governed largely by its unalterable geographical conditions and their relationship in space to other countries. Geopolitics can play as the planner of a nation’s security policy on the basis of impending geographic factors.”¹⁴

Bangladesh occupies a key place in India’s Neighbourhood First policy .Thereafter; India’s links with Bangladesh are civilization, cultural, social and economic etc. There is much that unites the two countries-a shared history and also Rabindranath Tagore created the National Anthems of both India and Bangladesh. However, there still remain major issues such as river water disputes (Teesta River water sharing), aiding illegal immigrants and drug trades remain between India and Bangladesh, that must be addressed. The geographical proximity of India to Bangladesh has made it one of its biggest trading partners. Bangladesh is the 6th largest trade partner of India. India has provided duty free quota free access to Bangladesh on all tariff lines except tobacco and alcohol under South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) since 2011. Moreover, India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. The Ganga Waters Treaty signed in 1996 for sharing of waters of river Ganga during lean season (January1-May31). Most recently, the Kushiyara Pact was signed that will benefit people in Southern Assam and the Sylhet region in Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh share 4096.7km.of border, which touches Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and West Bengal. Transit and trade through inland waterways have been governed by a long standing and time tested protocol between Bangladesh and India.¹⁵ Energy sector cooperation between India and Bangladesh has also seen considerable progress in the last few years. Most importantly, the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline Project, signed in 2018, will connect Siliguri in West Bengal in India and Parbatipur in Dinajpur District of Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh have also signed the Framework of Understanding (FOU) on cooperation in the Hydrocarbon Sector. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Bangladesh accounted for the largest share of foreign tourist arrivals in India in 2020, including tens of thousands of people who come to the country for medical treatment. In the International Forums such as SAARC, BIMSTEC and IORA where India and Bangladesh are common members and both the countries act as active members in these regional organizations. Agartala –Akhaura Rail-link will be the first rail route between Northeast India and Bangladesh. There is a large opportunity for India-Bangladesh ties to move to the next level, with the principles of cooperation, coordination and consolidation. The connection has been enhanced in recent years, primarily through engagement in new and high-technology fields. The signing of the “Land Boundary Agreement” in 2015, which resolved the border dispute, cemented the friendship even further. India sent the COVID-19 vaccine and other medical tools to Bangladesh to show reconciliation and progress in bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh.¹⁶ In many respects, Bangladesh is crucial to India from a “geopolitical” standpoint. Taking Bangladesh’s relationship casually would be detrimental to

India's national interests. There is also a sea boarder between the two countries. Bangladesh is currently working on several connection projects. The country has also become an entry point for India's North-Eastern states. These initiatives will aid India's North-Eastern region's socio-economic growth. Bangladesh's geographical location also plays an essential role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Bangladeshi Navy plays a pivotal role in ensuring that sea channels of communication remain free from pirates and other threats to the marine trade. The India and Bangladesh relations are rooted in tradition, culture, language, and mutual values such as secularism, democracy and a plethora of other similarities.

The following are the irritants and challenges between the two nations:

China Factor

Over 25 energy projects, including Bangladesh's second nuclear power plant and the Bangabandhu communication satellite, are being funded by China. Many port development projects are underway. Also, Bangladesh imports Chinese military equipment, including submarines, in the defense sector that is major concern for India's National Security. China's One Belt One Road initiative has also entrapped Bangladesh, and China's proximity to India causes security worries.¹⁷

Rohingya Refugees Problem

Bangladesh is home to around 11 million Rohingya Muslims. The Myanmar catastrophe has spurred their departure. India has cordial connection with Myanmar and Bangladesh and does not want to jeopardize such relationships. Apart from carrying out "Mission Insaniyat", a humanitarian aid operation, India has no direct involvement in resolving the conflict. As a result, there has been a significant divergence in bilateral ties with Bangladesh.¹⁸

Security Issue in the Border Regions

The Boarder Security Force (BSF) has recently targeted and gunned down traffickers and illegal migrants from Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, this has sparked a public outcry and Bangladesh Rifles have shot down Indian service members belonging to the BSF without provocation. Several commentators have linked this current religious indoctrination to the influence of the infamous ISI on the Bangladeshi military.¹⁹

Teesta River Dispute

Teesta is a tributary of the Ganges and begins in Sikkim before making its way through Bengal and Bangladesh. India has 55 percent share of the river's water. Bangladesh wants a more significant proportion than it already receives. Another topic of conflict in the Teesta river

dispute is hydropower. The river is Bangladesh's fourth largest trans-boundary river. On the river, there are at least 26 projects on the river, most of which are in Sikkim. The Teesta river dispute has the potential to wreak havoc on the partnership.²⁰

Drug Smuggling and Trafficking

There have been many incidences of cross border drug smuggling and trafficking. Humans (especially children and women) are trafficked and various animal and bird species are poached through these borders.²¹

Terrorism

The borders are susceptible to terrorist infiltration. A number of outfits are trying to spread their tentacles across India, such as Jamat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). JMB is listed as a terror group by Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and United Kingdom.²²

Connectivity

Both the Governments are undertaking various measures to restore the pre-1965 rail links and other connectivity links that existed between India and Bangladesh. The two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated the newly restored railway link between Chilahati (Bangladesh) and Haldibari (India) on 17 December 2020. To enhance people to people contact between the two countries and both countries also started using side-door container and parcel trains to maintain uninterrupted supply chains during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Visas

In pursuance of the policy of the Government of India to further liberalize Indian visa application process and to strengthen people to people contacts between India and Bangladesh, six new Indian Visa Application Centers (IVACS) were opened in Cumilla, Noakhali, Brahmanbaria, Sathkira, Thakurgaon and Bogura of Bangladesh in 2019 raising the total number of IVACs to 15. In 2019, the number of visas issued to Bangladeshi citizens crossed the mark of 16 lakh.

Dispute over New Moore Island

New Moore is a small island about 5.2 km. The geographical proximity of the island to both sides lends it strategic importance. The India standpoint over ownership of the island is sounder as it is closer to the Indian mainland. Even British and American naval maps show New Moore Island as part of India. The island became a bone of contention between the two nations and in 1981 both sides were on the brink of a naval clash. However, both decided to maintain

status-quo in the matter. Bangladesh is yet to accept Indian authority over the island and the problem persists. But, India controls the island at present. Stability in the region requires the two sides to resolve the border dispute, ownership of New Moore Island, the problem of refugees, infiltration, ISI and insurgency which mar bilateral ties.²³

Migrants as a Security Threat to India

Bangladeshi migrants are a threat to Indian security. In 2001, the Supreme Court of India also expressed the concern that undocumented migrants from Bangladesh might pose a threat both to the economy and the security of the country.

The Indo-Bangladesh Border Fencing Project

The Government of India sanctioned the erection of fencing in two phases. The Indo-Bangladesh Border Works under Phase-1 had been initiated in 1989. This project was budgeted at Rs. 10.5 billion in 1998. Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina resolved the dispute jointly with Indian former Prime Minister Vajpayee. According to the Annual Report 2010-2011 of Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, fencing was necessary in order to prevent illegal infiltration and other anti-national activities from across the border.²⁴

India-Bangladesh Maritime Boundary

The India-Bangladesh maritime boundary has been pending since 1974. Since the water are not delimited in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh cannot explore and exploit certain areas because they are disputed. No foreign company would be willing to explore the area unless it is certain that the area is not disputed. It appears that this issue has become one of the top priorities of the Bangladesh government.

Cooperation to Tackle the Challenge of COVID-19 Pandemic

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina participated in the video conference of Leaders of SAARC countries on 15 March 2020 at the invitation of Prime Minister Modi to share assessments of the current situation relating to this pandemic, consider best practices and identify cooperative measures to minimize and mitigate the spread of the disease during that time. The Government of India has also been conducting various online training modules to train the health professionals of Bangladesh on treatment and care of COVID patients.

Future Direction and Prospects of South Asian Regional Cooperation: A Way Out

The 21st century has been described as “Asian Century” because both economic and strategic weights are shifting towards Asia; and South Asia, under the new strong and imaginative leadership of India, could contribute to translate that into reality and Bangladesh will fully cooperate with India to this end. In the gamut of economic relations, trade transactions have played a special role. This has emerged as a dynamic factor in recent years, particularly after 1982 when Bangladesh embarked upon the path of liberalization. India has been the major beneficiary of the trade relations between the two countries. Bangladesh is one of the most important markets for India’s exports. For the past several decades, it has been the largest export market for India in the SAARC region. During 1985-90, the growth rate of Bangladesh’s trade with India was higher than that with the world and SAARC countries as a whole. During the period 1988-89 to 1992-93, whereas India’s total an export increased by 164 per cent, the increase in exports to Bangladesh was 293 per cent. In 1995, India jumped to the first position among exporters to Bangladesh, with China being a distant second. India maintained the first rank until 2005-067 after which it was overtaken by China. China has remained in that position until now. In 2011-12, India’s total exports to Bangladesh reached the level of 5.84 billion dollars.²⁵ It is noted that in the year 2011 indo-Bangladesh Framework Agreement on Cooperation and Development opened up possibilities in cooperation on bilateral, sub-regional and regional level on areas such as water, energy, food security and environmental safety. Furthermore, the Modi government may take initiative to constitute a sub-regional unit comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the North-Eastern states of India. The economic reforms introduced by Bangladesh in 1982 and by India in 1991 have inevitably brought about changes in the nature and forms of economic interaction between the two countries. The political relationship between India and Bangladesh has passed through cycles of hiccups. The end of the Cold War brought a new momentum to the study of conflict resolution towards the study of India-Bangladesh beyond Confidence Building Measures. India and Bangladesh called for more vigorous efforts to upgrade border infrastructure, including Land Customs Stations and Integrated Check Posts and removal of non-tariff barriers on both sides. An entente between India and Bangladesh on transit will encourage cooperation on trade and transport, energy, environmental protection, development of infrastructure, regional security and strategic issues etc. Sub-regional integration of the economics of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and India will contribute to poverty alleviation, economic development and improvement in transport and communications of the region. This arrangement may be extremely beneficial for landlocked Nepal, Bhutan and the “Seven Sisters” of Indian North-East. Increased trade and investment between the two countries was mutually beneficial and pledged to continue their efforts to promote balanced and broad-based trade, including border trade.²⁶

Energy security ranks high for both the countries. Although, cooperation on energy may yield significant payoffs for both sides, there may be some uneasiness on both sides since neither party is sure of the other’s intentions. Indian companies like Tata and Mittal have shown keen

interest in the high quality bituminous coal reserve in the Northern Bangladesh for their steel industry, but have not been successful in securing access to the resource. Further, cooperation on energy security may be realized with an understanding for joint development of the disputed blocks in the Bay of Bengal. It would ensure a means of renewing the supply of natural gas for the energy-hungry neighbours. Both the countries have the hope that road; rail and waterways are building blocks to an inter-dependent and mutually beneficial relationship among the countries of the region. The establishment of physical infrastructure would promote exchange of goods and traffic and lead to the connectivity of services, information, ideas, culture and people.²⁷ Both the countries reiterated the importance of an effective multilateral system, centered on a strong United Nations, as a key factor in tackling global challenges. In this context, India and Bangladesh recognize the need to pursue the reform of the main UN bodies, including the Security Council. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh reiterated her country's support for India's candidature for permanent membership of an expanded and reformed UN Security Council. Both sides noted with satisfaction contribution of both countries to UN peacekeeping operations. India and Bangladesh introduced border haat, a traditional commodity market, in a bid to revive trade in the areas bordering the two countries. Such trade was halted after the partition of India and Pakistan, resumed after a few years and suspended again after 1971. The concept of such border trade was endorsed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. Another major challenge between India and Bangladesh is the demarcation of maritime boundary which has delayed the marking of territorial waters, the exclusive economic zone and continental shelves, which are essential for the exploitation of maritime resources.²⁸

One major issue of concern is the construction of Tipaimukh Dam proposal which was commissioned by India in 2006. The objective of the project is to generate 1500MW hydel power and to contain floods in the Barak valley in Manipur. The project will also improve infrastructure and economic development in India's North-East region. A vibrant and mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh is critical if India is to better economically integrate its North Eastern states with the mainland and the sub-region, which stretch beyond Bangladesh's borders. Such a relationship could also help India realize its decades-old-Look-East policy towards ASEAN. Both India and Bangladesh should try for the promotion of positive peace which involves the elimination of the root cause of war, violence and injustice. From India's point of view, the key issues are illegal migration from Bangladesh, the presence of IIGs in Bangladesh, the lack of transit facilities through Bangladesh, the involvement of HUJI cadres in terrorist incidents in India. India should walk the extra mile to resolve the outstanding issues with Bangladesh in order to spread stability in the South Asian region at large.

Conclusion: 50 Years of India Bangladesh Relations

Commemorating 50 years of the 1971 India-Pakistan war that led to the liberation of Bangladesh, a 122-member contingent of the Bangladesh Armed Forces has recently participated

in the 72nd Republic Day parade. This year, India and Bangladesh are also celebrating 50 years of the establishment of their ties. Democracy in Bangladesh is in a nascent state and is passing through a consolidation phase. It is yet to mature. And a detailed appraisal of history and other factors impacting Indo-Bangladesh relations indicated the need to avoid jumping to stereotyped assumptions about political realities. Moreover, the assumption in India that the Awami League is pro-India and BNP is anti-India is fallacious. In hindsight, it is an inward-looking approach to International Relations. The fact is that both of them espouse neither pro-Indian nor anti-Indian machinations and their so-called attitude towards India is governed by domestic compulsions and tactics to secure a modicum of regime security.²⁹ In the longer run, with maturing of democracy, secular forces will come to play a greater and well-defined role in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The framework of cooperation and stability which had been built-up in the South-Asian region during the Mujib period has left a vision for both countries. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has recently visited India. Both the countries worked on various aspects and signed agreements like the Kushiyara River Water Agreement, Maitree Power Plant etc. The Prime Minister of India and Bangladesh discussed a wide range of bilateral collaboration, including cooperation on politics and security, defense, border, management, commerce and connectivity, water resource, power and energy, development cooperation and cultural and people-to-people ties. In addition, they decided to work together in new field like the environment, climate change, cyber security, ICT, space technology, green energy and the blue economy. Subsequently, the leaders stressed the importance of increased cooperation in a spirit of friendship and partnership for the region's prosperity and growth. Currently, India and Bangladesh are also engaged in regional cooperation through multilateral forums such as BIMSTEC, SAARC and IORARC etc. Even though there have been unofficial discussion about CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) since 2018, the pandemic has heightened urgency. India was initially sparked by Chinese investments in Bangladesh, but after both economics experienced an economic shock, New Delhi and Dhaka want to pick up the pace.³⁰ A major goal of the CEPA is to close the trade imbalance between the two countries, with a concentration on trade in goods, services and investment. Dhaka is eager to finalize the CEPA in a year as it prepares to transit into a developing country by 2026, after which it may no longer be eligible for trade privileges that it presently enjoys as a least-developed country. This agreement is expected to help in boosting trade and investments between the two neighbours and more importantly it will help in enhancing trade in Eastern and North Eastern region.

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