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India and Bangladesh: A Multi Faceted Relationship

Alok Deb

Abstract

The physical map of the Indian subcontinent depicts an integrated landmass, bounded by the Pamirs/ Hindukush to the North West and the Himalayas to the North, with the Patkai Range, Naga and Chin Hills forming a natural border between India's North-Eastern states and Myanmar. The ends of the Indian Peninsula are bounded by the seas in three directions. This article attempts to review important aspects of the continuously evolving India-Bangladesh relationship—as Bangladesh, today with the second largest GDP in South Asia,¹ journeys through its fifty-first year as an independent nation.

Introduction

As noted by eminent statesman and former ambassador to China, KM Panikkar ‘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’.² 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

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conditions and their relationships in space to other countries'.³ Within the subcontinent, the importance of undivided Bengal, the richest province in the 18th Century before the depredations of the British East India Company⁴ is recorded in history. The benefits bestowed upon this region in terms of trade and connectivity, being the shortest route from the Bay of Bengal to the Himalayas, further linking up to the Silk Route are equally well documented.⁵ 1947 saw the creation of Pakistan. Less than 25 years after this event, a mass movement in its Eastern wing was driven by misdeeds of a myopic and prejudiced central government that denied people their due and culminated in an armed struggle aided by India. A free nation, Bangladesh, was born. It is a paradox of history that it was the former citizenry of this newly freed nation that in the early 20th Century, was attracted to the idea of Pakistan primarily for socio-economic reasons, overlaid with the politico-religious.⁶

Brief Geopolitical Outline

A researcher has defined Geopolitics as 'the planning of a nation's security policy on the basis of geographic factors'.⁷ Of the 15,106.7 km of land borders that India shares with seven countries, a peculiar geography results in its having the longest border with Bangladesh (4096.7 km).⁸ Bangladesh borders five Indian states—Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal, and is surrounded by India on three sides. Inevitably, this has led to a feeling in that country of being 'India locked'. Conversely, India's entire North East, reliant on connectivity with the rest of India through the narrow, Siliguri Corridor (a short distance from Tibet's Chumbi Valley via the Jampheri Ridge of Bhutan), finds itself 'Bangladesh locked', with that country implanted as a 'strategic wedge' between the Indian mainland and the 'Seven Sisters' of North East India with the corridor itself vulnerable to ingress from North and South. Even without external stimuli, such observations have coloured security perceptions of many in both countries. For some Bangladeshis,

it breeds a sense of insecurity, should this huge neighbour with the largest economy in South Asia and fourth-largest military in the world, become a regional hegemon. Correspondingly, in India, it generates an impatience & strategic issues—more so considering the assistance rendered to the nation for achieving freedom. Certain quarters also voice concerns about powers unfriendly to India securing a foothold in Bangladesh to threaten India's security. Combined with grievances on trade, economy, water sharing, border management and other issues between neighbours, 'India bashing' remains a convenient tool for interested parties in Bangladesh (and governments other than the current dispensation) to whip up passions in domestic politics or gain favour with forces inimical to Indian interests. Similarly, long-running issues like illegal immigration continue to form part of the security discourse in India. To summarise, the India Bangladesh relationship has traditionally been and shall continue to remain, complex, sensitive and multidimensional.

Some in Bangladesh have decried what they perceive as an unequal relationship with India. For many years, commencing from the time of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's assassination onto the period of multiple coups and military rule, a barely concealed animosity became characteristic of this relationship, overshadowing all else. Though Sheikh Hasina's government from 2001 to 2006 was relatively balanced in its approach towards India vis a vis her rivals, *it was her return to power in the 2009 general elections and stated decision to strengthen ties with India that transformed the relationship, making it transparent and mutually beneficial*. She has held fast to this resolve despite opposition and taken positive steps on all fronts, including acceding to the long-pending demand to release Indian insurgents hiding in that country. India has responded equally proactively in other spheres. Major long-standing disputes over land and maritime boundaries have been successfully resolved either mutually or through international arbitration.

With a 271 km long border with Myanmar, Bangladesh provides an additional land bridge to that country and onto South East Asia. Through its inclusion in regional South Asian groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, whose secretariat is located in Dhaka), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and the proposed BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India Myanmar corridor from Kolkata to Kunming which has seen little progress for many reasons), India sees Bangladesh as indispensable for the success of its 'Act East' policy. With a stable government in Dhaka now in its third consecutive term, *the India Bangladesh bilateral relationship is without doubt the most successful and amongst the most important in the Indian subcontinent today. The outcome of this success is a greatly enhanced strategic relationship.*

Major Non-Military Aspects of the Relationship

Improved Connectivity. The deepening strategic relationship between the two countries and their increasing connectivity act as drivers for each other. With Bangladesh having three of the 12 major ports on the Bay of Bengal coastline⁹ and well-developed inland waterways, India's landlocked North East is more accessible than ever before from the mainland through a much shorter combination of land/river/sea routes, all passing through Bangladesh. At the time of writing, there are four rail interchanges between the two countries from the Southern portion of West Bengal Northwards to the Chicken's Neck (Haldibari in the Siliguri corridor). The fifth interchange on the Tripura border from Agartala to Akhaura is due for completion.¹⁰ A sixth from Mahishashan in Karimganj in the Barak Valley to Sylhet is planned.¹¹ These provide seamless rail connectivity across Bangladesh from many points to and from West Bengal and the North East. The scale of commerce can be gauged from the assessment in August 2021 that 20 freight trains per month would be using the Haldibari link alone.¹² For travellers, the number of passenger

trains has increased to three, on the Kolkata-Dhaka, Kolkata-Khulna and Dhaka-New Jalpaiguri routes respectively.

Operationalisation of the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (originally signed in 1972 and renewed in 2015)¹³ has resulted in movement of goods using a combination of sea, inland waterways and roads from 2016 onwards.¹⁴ The second addendum to this protocol signed in May 2020 included two new Protocol routes, five new ports of call and two extended ports of call.¹⁵ In February 2022, the Protocol was utilised to transport foodgrains as well with 200 Metric Tonnes of rice leaving Patna by ship via National Waterway No 1 for Pandu (near Guwahati), travelling 2,350 km to reach its destination after one month.¹⁶ As regards roadways, Tripura and other Northeastern states have benefitted enormously with opening of the bridge over the Feni river, connecting its Land Custom Station at Sabroom (just 80 km from Chittagong Port) with Ramgarh in Bangladesh (the Prime Minister's Office has forecast that Tripura is poised to become 'the gateway to the Northeast'¹⁷). Bus services on the Dhaka-Siliguri-Gangtok-Dhaka and Dhaka-Siliguri-Darjeeling-Dhaka routes (in addition to the original Dhaka Kolkata) have commenced. Discussions on operationalising the Motor Vehicle Agreement between India, Bangladesh and Nepal are ongoing.¹⁸ For travel by air, around 100 flights operate weekly between New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai to Dhaka and Chittagong.¹⁹ During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in March 2021, Sheikh Hasina '*offered the use of Chottogram and Sylhet International Airport, by the people of North East India, especially of Tripura*'.²⁰

Improved Economic Ties. Enhanced connectivity has been matched by great economic activity, whose scale and scope are difficult to summarise adequately. Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia and India is the second biggest trade partner of Bangladesh.²¹ It is also India's fifth-largest export destination.²² Trade between the two countries has grown steadily. Exports of Bangladesh to India have tripled

over the last decade, crossing \$1 billion in 2018-19. In FY 2019-20, India's exports to Bangladesh were \$8.2 billion and imports were \$1.26 billion.²³ As a comparison, in 2019, total bilateral trade between India and Russia from January-September 2019 stood at \$7.55 billion (all data from the same source). Bangladesh is the biggest development partner of *India Today*.²⁴ India has extended three Lines of Credits to Bangladesh in the last 8 years amounting to US\$ 8 billion for development of infrastructure in various sectors including roads, railways, shipping and ports, while providing assistance through grants for other infrastructure projects. *This is the largest concessional credit given by India to any single country. Additionally, India is also developing two Indian Economic Zones at Mirsarai and Mongla in Bangladesh.*²⁵ As the example of private firms from Bangladesh supplying LPG to Tripura shows, interdependency is increasing by the day.²⁶ India and Bangladesh have also agreed in March 2022, to conduct a joint study on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).²⁷

Infrastructure Development and Capacity Building. The scale of cooperation in other spheres is equally wide and touches every aspect—be it digital infrastructure, disaster management, education of students and other aspects of human resource development or capacity building. Till March 2021 India had funded 68 High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in Bangladesh such as construction of student hostels, academic buildings, skill development and training institutes, cultural centres, and orphanages. Training of professionals and bureaucrats carries on at a regular pace, with 1800 Bangladesh Civil Service officials training at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), Mussoorie from 2019 onwards and 1500 Bangladeshi judicial officials training at the National Judicial Academy Bhopal from 2017 at National Judicial Academy, Bhopal. 800 Bangladeshis avail of the ITEC training courses. In addition, 200 scholarships are awarded by ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) every year to students from

Bangladesh for pursuing under-graduation, post-graduation and M.Phil/PhD courses in educational institutes in India including NITs and IITs.²⁸ 1,000 ‘Shuborno Jayanti’ Scholarships in India for Bangladeshi students were also announced in March 2021. Exchange programs for NCC cadets are keenly awaited events. The Nutan Muktijoddha Santan Scholarship Scheme for children of Bangladeshi freedom fighters continues to be popular.

Security Aspects

Strategic dialogues at the apex level have been regular. NSAs of both countries have met frequently at various fora (the most recent being the interaction at the Colombo Security Conclave in March 2022 where Bangladesh and Seychelles attended as observers²⁹). At the strategic level, there appears to be a good understanding of each other’s sensitivities, providing scope to extend some leeway over matters which are difficult to immediately resolve. Cooperation on intelligence sharing, combating terrorism, maritime cooperation (including the Blue Economy) and other strategic issues continue to grow. Today, prominent Bangladeshis in important positions openly acknowledge India as ‘... our most important partner...’.³⁰

Defence Cooperation. Considering that the Indian Army and Mukti Bahini fought shoulder to shoulder in 1971, mutual defence ties even predate Bangladesh’s independence. Immediately after independence, the 25 years ‘India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty’ was signed by Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Despite being a comprehensive document covering all aspects of security *including people to people exchanges*, this treaty was viewed essentially as a security pact in Bangladesh. Given short shrift by its military rulers and unpopular with a suspicious public, it lapsed in 1997.³¹

Today the Bangladesh military is the third-largest in South Asia and an important arbiter in that nation’s destiny. Improvement in defence

relations and a shift from the Pakistan coloured perspective commenced after Bangladeshi military officers who were commissioned after 1971 gradually came into senior positions. An alumnus of the first course at the Bangladesh Military Academy, Gen Moeen Ahmed became COAS in 2008 and also headed a caretaker government. The first step in structured military to military cooperation however was taken only in 2017 with the signing of three MoUs on defence supplies and technology transfer and cooperation in defence and security studies between respective Staff Colleges and National Defence Colleges.³²

Today, military exercises between all three services take place annually—SAMPRITI for the Army, BONGO SAGOR for the Navy and a multilateral involving the Air Forces, SAMVEDNA.³³ Since 2018, the navies and coast guards have been carrying out coordinated patrolling exercises (CORPAT) in the Bay of Bengal. Over the years a large number of Bangladeshi officers and men have attended training courses in India, including a recently retired Chief of Army Staff who attended the Long Gunnery Staff Course at the School of Artillery, Devlali. The scope of joint exercises encompasses Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), anti-terrorism coordination and others. Multilateral UN peacekeeping exercises such as SHANTIR OGROSENA in April 2021 are also held.³⁴ Examples of joint adventure and sports activities are cross border cycling expeditions, parachuting and free fall exercises, and white water rafting events. For the first time on Republic Day 2021, a 122 member tri-service Bangladesh military contingent marched on Rajpath as part of the Parade. Similarly, an Indian contingent participated in Bangladesh's Victory Day Parade on 16 December 2021.

While much has certainly happened in some spheres of military cooperation, one fundamental issue remains to be tackled—the requirement to remove any suspicions about India's intentions towards that country in the minds of the Bangladesh military, especially at the middle level. The transparent effort is required to bring about this attitudinal change, so that

perceptions about each other are realistic, forward-looking and not based on incorrect premises—more so given the disproportionate influence that the military wields in that country and its force structuring which focusses on defending the nation against an aggressor. It is therefore important to institutionalise as many of such interactions as possible including bilateral exercises, courses of instruction and visits, to strengthen goodwill, remove misperceptions and maintain fraternal relations between the two militaries. Further, it must be appreciated that most Bangladeshi officers are exposed to UN peacekeeping operations, and a sizeable number have done courses in Islamic countries like Turkey and Pakistan. Thus, to foster confidence closer home, enhancing the scale and scope of interaction is a must. An extremely positive initiative in this regard is the venture of Sheikh Hasina's of hosting Indian veterans of the 1971 war on a yearly basis every December, including widows and dependents of soldiers to honour their sacrifice. India reciprocates by hosting annual delegations of Muktiyoddhas at the same time. For their Indian comrades too, a long view of India Bangladesh relations and unbiased accounts of the 1971 war should be made part of academic syllabi in training academies and courses of instruction. Also, the invariably positive feedback from serving Bangladeshi officers who have visited India with their families on long courses should be utilised to enhance all-round military to military cooperation.

India remains sensitive to Bangladeshi concerns of not wishing to be 'allied' to India. This is one reason for the scale of exercises remaining at the tactical level wherein despite the mostly Chinese origin weapons and platforms held by the Bangladesh military (though dissatisfaction with some of these systems is increasingly available³⁵), interoperability is manageable. Some forward movement toward increasing the acceptability of Indian weaponry and other defence-related items in Bangladesh can be discerned; the \$500 million Indian lines of credit for import of defence equipment, extended in December 2019, is likely to

be operationalised soon.³⁶ There is potential for further cooperation in this field in days to come.

Contentious Issues Impinging on Security

Border Management. ‘The India Bangladesh border ... has a mix of hills, forests, and flat plains with no physical barriers. This diverse mix of topographical features makes the border extremely porous through which illegal migrants, smugglers, criminals, insurgents and terrorists freely circulate’.³⁷ In more turbulent times, border management has led to deaths of civilians and paramilitaries on both sides, resulting in nose diving of bilateral relations. It was therefore the first security-related issue to have an institutionalised mechanism in place, with a Coordinated Border Management Plan signed between heads of the Border Security Force and Border Guards Bangladesh in July 2011.³⁸ Even so, despite pledges of ‘zero killings’ incidents on the border continue to occur. A Bangladesh human rights body claims that 48 Bangladeshis were killed along the border in 2020 alone.³⁹ *What goes unreported is the far higher casualties sustained by the BSF when small patrols armed with only one lethal weapon are attacked by large armed gangs, and the inability to distinguish at night between ethnically identical communities. Most importantly, such attacks take place along the border fencing, which is inside Indian territory.* Much work remains to be done to reconcile differing narratives realistically.

Effect of Internal Socio-Political Dynamics. Domestic politics is known at times to hold a nation’s foreign policy hostage. Whether the issue pertains to treatment of minorities, passing of the Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) or approval of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), both countries have to deal with the fallout of such sensitive matters on their bilateral relationship. Currently, mature leadership on both sides has avoided taking extreme positions on these issues and managed to contain adverse reactions. However, these highly sensitive matters need just a

spark from fundamentalists to create widespread communal disharmony and negatively impact the public.

The Rohingya and Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis is close to six years old. Bangladesh has taken in over one million refugees and made commendable efforts towards their rehabilitation pending repatriation to Myanmar. India has provided economic assistance to redress the situation in Bangladesh refugee camps, simultaneously providing assistance for economic development in Rakhine state. It has also taken up the issue of Rohingya repatriation with the Government of Myanmar.⁴⁰ While Bangladesh has accepted India's stance on the matter considering the extremely sensitive nature of current India Myanmar relations, it would welcome greater Indian participation in resolving this crisis which has only adverse implications for the region in the long and short terms- both directly and indirectly.

The Teesta Waters. Despite being just one of the 54 rivers that India and Bangladesh share, the Teesta issue is a highly emotive topic in Bangladesh, showcased by detractors as a symbol of Indian intransigence and useful for stoking anti-India sentiment. Many pessimists overlook the fact that provisions of the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 are being honoured by India and that a 2019 MoU on sharing of waters of the Feni river for Tripura's benefit is under implementation. Possible solutions to the Teesta issue such as establishing reservoirs in North Bengal to accommodate excess monsoon flow to cater for the lean season, or looking at alternate crop patterns in the river basin continue to be debated, even as the West Bengal government continues to oppose a settlement on the matter.⁴¹ While India stands committed to resolving the Teesta issue, overall sharing of common waters is another option that has made headway, with six rivers identified for water sharing purposes between both countries.⁴² Nevertheless, arriving at a *modus vivendi* on Teesta sooner than later will remove an unnecessary irritant in the relationship.

The China Factor

China has multiple interests in Bangladesh—it is the ‘intersection between India and ASEAN,’⁴³ a littoral providing access to the Bay of Bengal, a rising ‘Asian Tiger’ and strategically located vis-à-vis India. Today it is Bangladesh’s largest trading partner, and in FY 2019 provided Foreign Direct Investment to the tune of \$1.159 billion⁴⁴ and duty-free access to 98 per cent of Bangladeshi goods. China has skilfully invested in developmental aspects and infrastructure building across sectors—roads, ports, bridges (including the signature Padma River railway bridge), high-speed railways, airports, power plants and power infrastructure, green energy, digital connectivity, data centres, IT projects and a Special Economic Zone (SEZ)—in a manner similar to India’s though on a much larger scale. With Bangladesh included in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it ‘... is considered to be the second-largest recipient of Chinese loans under the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) after Pakistan ... is set to receive an investment worth \$40 billion from China under a bilateral partnership ...’.⁴⁵ However, till 2019, loans from China comprised just 6% of Bangladesh’s total debt.⁴⁶

Bangladesh’s military dispensation was decidedly pro-China. Defence cooperation between the two nations was cemented as early as 2002 with a Defence Cooperation Agreement. China is Bangladesh’s largest arms supplier, accounting for 74 per cent of Bangladesh’s arms imports between 2010-2019. It supplies tanks, fighter jets, submarines, frigates, anti-ship missiles and the majority of small arms.⁴⁷ However, awareness of Indian sensitivities at the strategic level and a consensus on the perils of over dependence on China have restrained Bangladesh from proceeding further; one example is the cancellation of the planned development of the Sonadia Island Deep Sea Port by China and coopting of Japan instead to develop the Matarbari port. It’s independent foreign policy was very visible when the Chinese ambassador to Dhaka was soundly rebuked for his comments on Bangladesh joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

(QUAD).⁴⁸ *Overall, Bangladesh strives to derive maximum benefit from its relations with India and China, while striking a balance between the two.* As India plays to its strengths in Bangladesh, it must keep in mind the strategic implications of the China Bangladesh relationship, which will continue to expand.

The American Role

There is renewed American interest in Bangladesh as the US operationalises its Indo-Pacific Strategy. While sanctioning certain Bangladeshi entities in 2021 over human rights issues, the USA has signed a draft defence cooperation agreement with that country in March 2022, and provided over 61 million doses of Covid vaccine, the highest from any country.⁴⁹ At the conclusion of the Eighth ‘United States-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue’ in March 2022, there was “*renewed, multi-faceted, and deepening*” focus on the entire gamut of bilateral ties: trade, investment, labor, human rights, governance, global threats including climate change, terrorism, maritime security, regional issues including the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” and the Rohingya crisis.⁵⁰ The US Bangladesh relationship is on the upswing; as the QUAD continues to take shape and an augmented American naval presence in the Bay of Bengal becomes visible, how Bangladesh manages to maintain its relations with India, China and the US on an even keel will be a test of statesmanship for Sheikh Hasina’s government, given its professed intention of staying away from big power politics.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has come a long way from its birth in 1971, overcoming humongous challenges. Today it is making purposeful strides towards shaking off the United Nations ‘Least Developed Country’ tag by 2026. With a resilient economy that has withstood the ravages of Covid and a geographical location that provides many benefits, it is being courted by

powers from within and outside the region. As closest neighbours who share ‘ties of blood’ with each other, it behoves India and Bangladesh to optimise the advantages of their strategic geography. *This relationship has immense potential for growth but is prone to equally great pitfalls if not managed proactively with maturity.* Both neighbours must work to ensure that over the next 50 years, the bilateral relationship becomes more resilient, notwithstanding inevitable changes in government. The momentum provided should be such that the gains achieved from such cooperation prove irreversible.

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