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International Relations and Security



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Irreversible, Irrevocable Successes in India-Bangladesh Relations

Modi's visit to Dhaka could not have been better timed. The relations between India and Bangladesh are on an unprecedented upswing.

1 Comment By [Syed Muntasir Mamun](#) Jun 05, 2015

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"Irreversible! Irrevocable!" – If times could speak – probably these would have been their exact words on the eve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. The ancient scriptures suggest that it is the initial intent, which defines the ultimate outcome. After years of fine tuning, we now have a window of opportunity to both witness and participate in the ground-breaking processes that Bangladesh and India have initiated and nurtured particularly since 2009. One would not be erring – given how things have turned out – if one says that the current Bangladesh government sees India more as a "Strategic Complement" rather than only as a "Strategic Partner". In

my opinion, it would not be an overstatement to term Bangladesh as India's most prominent foreign policy priority.

In a matter of a thousand years, the Indian sub-continent, and essentially the geographic contiguity termed as the South Asian landscape, has seen spectacular changes in the realm of power and authority over the last millennium. Communal and feudal systems gave way to colonial occupation. From the Palas to the Cholas and from the Afghans to the Mughals and from Nawabs to the British. All very different forms and genres of governance ultimately leading to the division of the sub-continent in a containment of the modern day republics. While advances in nutrition, health, literacy, technology, and various emancipatory forms of empowerment have morphed the social psyche of the peoples, slowly replacing oriental despotism with a somewhat skeletal form of mondiale administrative pluralism, the core tenets of life, living and probably everything in between has remained much the same. Still today, for at least one third of the population in the sub-continent, uncertainties related to basic amenities of life, i.e., food, water, shelter, and health dominate the daily prayer list. This highly negative and contagiously pessimistic state-of-affairs for such a large proportion of humanity, funnelled through the tunnels of myopic coteries and energized by the political rent-seeking behaviour of vested interest groups, transcribe into a visible component of mistrust – or rather distrust – that characterize the inter-state relationship between and amongst the countries of South Asia.

It is said that one can't drive ahead with eyes fixated on the rear view mirror. But knowing one's past and consequently one's present is essential to understanding where one's future is heading. South Asia is a unique place to be! It is marked with (i) a shared culture – concentric to the Indic civilization, (ii) a widely varied topography, (iii) a strong lineage of family and religious bonds (and its flipside / consequent harmony and/or discord), (iv) Cross-breeding societies, yet bound existence, (v) a huge mélange of geographic and climatic conditions, (vi) invasions, assimilations and colonial past, (vii) continuous interplay of strategic powers and power players, (viii) well-defined and strong administrative structures, (ix) growing economies and communities trapped in low-level equilibriums, and (x) Involvement and pre-eminence of security concerns (and consequently, security agencies).

In such a configuration, Bangladesh and India share an extra-ordinary relationship. Sketched, as post-Westphalian republics, out of a stretch of land and waters, which sheltered a multitude of nations, peoples and belief-systems for centuries across, Bangladesh and India are not exclusive neighbours. Rather, Bangladesh-India relations are multifaceted and deeply inter-entrenched in a shared history, geographical contiguity, cultural commonality, and economic complementarity. The psychological bonds, which stem from the association of the two countries during the 'War of Liberation - 1971' remain a dominant factor in how peoples of the two countries see each other. While many inside India would not know, Bangladesh has always been supremely aware of the pivotal role that the Government and people of India, and especially the Indian Armed Forces, played in our War of Liberation. The shared struggle of 1971 has set the benchmark for bilateral cooperation in maintaining peace and stability and upholding the superior human values in our neighbourhood landscape. Needless to say, the War of Liberation has set in motion a permanent détente that defines the entire range of Confidence Building Measures [or CBM] between the two countries.

The intense and dynamic interlinks between the two countries in terms of trade and commerce is complemented by the fact that at least three major sweet-water river systems of the world – complete with their tributaries and branches, alluvial deltas and marshes, a full-fledged sea with a sizeable and resource-rich continental shelf, are shared by the two countries. One cannot but write with heartfelt passion when one writes about anything, which even remotely relates to the relationship between the two countries.

Of the menaces which troubled the relationship between the two countries, Land Boundary Agreement was a strange case to deal with. Complications had originally started with the Radcliffe award when during a certain midnight in 1947 a caricatured border was produced by an Englishman who had never even visited the areas that he was entrusted to divide. Further complication had arisen with the differentiated implementation of the 1974 Treaty signed by the founder of the Independent Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It is hard to believe but remains nonetheless true that of the 4,096 kilometres of border

between Bangladesh and India, only 6.5 kilometres remained un-demarcated and it remained so in three separate pieces none of which is longer than 3 kilometres at a stretch and one involves nothing other than a river which has shifted course many years before! The question of exchange of enclaves (111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh with an area of 17,158.13 acres; 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in Indian territory with an area of 7,110.02 acres) and territories in adverse possession (there was 3,506.01 acres of Bangladesh territory under the adverse possession of India and 3,024.16 acres Indian territory under adverse possession of Bangladesh) also plagued the relationship between the two countries till now due only to procedural delays.

Even when technical committees headed by Envoys Plenipotentiary had signed and exchanged close to twelve hundred strip-maps, and the cabinets had approved in effect the Mujib-Indira Treaty of 1974, the issue remained pending for a lack of consensus in the Parliament. De facto was constrained by de jure. The sub-human levels of existence that inhabitants of the enclaves and adversely possessed lands lived in was not only a problem, rather it was a shame for the two countries. Bangladesh had ratified this supremely important treaty in the early seventies. The ratification by the Indian Legislature effectively removes one of the last vestiges of a foreign Raj and its vicious measures to divide the Indian Subcontinent. Enclaves, Adversely Possessed Lands and Undemarcated Boundaries had literally been humanitarian and law-enforcement issues of epic proportion. The lack of a de jure agreement represented a serious impediment to the people-to-people connect of both the countries, and led to an Achilles' heel which undermined the security apparatus and processes of both Bangladesh and India. Although each successive Government in India worked hard to get the Constitutional Amendment Bill passed, it is Prime Minister Modi who should be credited the most for bringing all parties together into a path-breaking consensus.

An area which created headlines in each other's countries for well over three decades was the concern for security and especially the rise of sub-state actors. In last seven years, considerable momentum has been whipped up in both countries to drive out sub-state actors infringing on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other. Most notable amongst these are Bangladesh Government's steps to mobilize actions against the Northeast insurgents like ULFA et al. Actions taken in spite of the limited force capabilities of the law enforcement agencies of the country are symptomatic of the commitment of the government to bolster Confidence Building Measures (CBM) taken on its part to dispel the distrust in each other.

Since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power six years before, her Government has been trying to piece together a coordinated strategy to put the relationship between the two countries on the right track, and essentially, on an incrementally upward growth trajectory. Very much within the scope of this collaboration, be it at the bilateral or at the sub-regional or at the regional level, the intention was to make collective endeavours for ensuring ecologically sustainable economic progress for the region as a whole.

It is very well understood that no matter which country or society we may represent – our lives and destinies are interlinked. Recognizing the centrality of Article XXV of the Bangladesh Constitution and the Vision 2021 agenda of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh foreign policy priorities include:

- a. Economy, i.e., stabilizing the economy
- b. Ecology, i.e., renewing efforts for environmental protection and prevention of environmental degradation
- c. Security, i.e., building and consolidating on a regional network of security institutions.

It is also understood and hence premised that for countries to exist in peace with themselves, with their constituent peoples and with their neighbours across borders, it is imperative that we ensure for each: (a) an equitable market access commensurate to the merit of comparative economic advantage (negating the infant industry argument) in the other, (b) a rapid expansion of the environmentally sustainable regional export basket in both goods and services – contributing to the reconstruction of the ancient value-chains (essentially supplementing its gamut with free movement of cargo and seasonal workforces), (c) quick transfer and assimilation of critical technologies, (d) broader employment of both professionals and workers in regional economies based purely on the principle of 'dead-weight burden' reduction, (e) commencement of regional power, energy and communication grids, and (f) embedding the youth, the media, the civil society (Track II?), and the social media, in the discourses related to policy formulation.

The various factors enabling, calling for and dictating cooperation between the two countries are – geographic proximity, common language, similar demographics and consumption pattern, common development needs and experience, and common inherited industrial infrastructure to name a few. In terms of economics, these are very high positive simulators in the Gravity Model – which would bring any two countries and their economies extremely close together – as if they were almost one yet each maintained its sovereign priorities.

The geopolitical or rather geostrategic interests, that are a natural result of the location of Bangladesh and India in South Asia, cannot be undermined. If we trace our recorded history back to the 7th century, when Hiuen Tsang travelled through India, we would notice that the erstwhile Bengal and particularly East Bengal—which is now Bangladesh—had always been one of the most critical gateways to the vast economic and even political inner core of the Indian sub continent. Sketchier glimpses from Mahabharata or for that matter Indica might only complement this fact from an even more ancient past.

At the level of pure physical and tactical security of the societies, it is quite obvious that both India and Bangladesh share a vision of a peaceful immediate neighbourhood, and that decision-makers on both sides understand the important role to be jointly played by the two countries. National security, regime stability, and territorial integrity define the baseline understanding of both Bangladesh and Indian policy-makers. From a purely operational viewpoint, Bangladesh understands the depth and breadth of security that India's friendly postures ensure and at the same time, India appreciates the value of the unprecedented security measures taken by the Government of Sheikh Hasina at a very high personal cost and commitment to free the Bangladesh landmass from anti-India elements. This has only added to the unmatched breakthroughs in the development of the Northeast and stability across the entire Eastern theatre. Bangladesh has allowed the transport of heavy equipment for power generation and other industrial usage in the Northeast ending decades of disconnect between the Indian mainland and the northeast. Work is now going on to facilitate greater connectivity between and across points in India and Bangladesh.

As the world's attention zooms in on Asia and her Oceans, the two countries have successfully resolved the maritime boundary delimitation issue. Successful arbitration between India and Bangladesh for the resolution of the maritime boundary delimitation has become an issue for discussion, deliberation and introspection in far away countries.

Prime Minister Modi's visit comes at such a time when inhibitions are either totally removed or heavily subdued on both sides of the border. Clear sail and full steam ahead appear to be the Captain's choice from both sides!

To begin with, theoretical infrastructures are ready.

Over the last couple of years, Bangladesh and India have put in place several 'Capstone Documents' and set in motion 'Key Processes' which will define the Government-to-Government relationship in the years to come. Starting with the visionary Joint Communiqué of 2010, the Framework Agreement of 2011, and the institution of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) at the level of Foreign Ministers have ensured that our two countries embark on an irretrievably irrevocable process of shared and mutual prosperity and unparalleled confidence in each other. The Ministries of Home and Foreign Affairs now meet regularly. The Border Security Instruments are now in real-time sync with each other starting with the Directors-General down to Company Commanders. The District Commissioners at the bordering districts now meet to resolve the issues, which create tensions and hindrances in our bilateral cooperation at the state level. All these measures attest to only one thing, that leadership at the helm believe in looking ahead, that they believe in looking beyond the rear-view mirror, that they believe in creating the charts and the maps ahead, and that they don't want to go back in a time warp.

It is said that visions grow out of facts of the past, appreciation of the present, and ideas for the future. We have vividly seen the past and are experiencing the present. While Prime Minister Modi is going to Dhaka with the Land

Boundary Agreement in hand, visionary thinkers from both sides are speaking of a few new areas to begin work on. These include, amongst others:

1. Managing Peaceful and prosperous International Borders and Security,
2. Water Security and joint management of river basins,
3. Energy Security and cross-border generation and trade in power,
4. Connectivity and Integrated Multimodal Communication - with special emphasis on utilizing inland waterways,
5. Sub-Regional and Regional development and utilization of mega-architectures such as Regional and Continental Highways, Rail Networks, Sea Ports and Coastal Shipping,
6. Investment, production, manufacturing and service sector complementarity,
7. Education and Health Sector Development and elimination of diseases, malnutrition, illiteracy and ignorance,
8. Designing sustainable and forward looking mechanisms in joint finance and marketing of both innovative and high-end value-added products and services, and
9. Development of leadership across South Asia to institute measurable social and economic changes.

It is not expected that a thirty-six hours' visit would solve all outstanding issues or for that matter would deliver on all the desires of more than one hundred and sixty million people on the other side of the border. But one cannot but be supremely hopeful when both countries are governed by strong leaders who have proved their positive goodwill towards each other and carry the mandate of their peoples to lead them to their rightful places in the Comity of Nations. Prime Minister Modi has generated new hopes for peoples across South Asia and it can be assured that Bangladesh, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, would like to partake in his journey ahead – as a partner and as a comrade.

It is imperative that we do not only make the policies and rules for our two countries, but that we effectively implement all those to boost both South Asian trade and trade with the Southeast Asian nations. Better connectivity in the value-networks and instilling a component of trust amongst the nations is crucial in this regard. The leadership of the region must demonstrate determined and forward-looking 'political will' to bring peace and prosperity to the region which, in spite of its glorious past, remains least integrated in the world today. May be, just maybe, people on both sides of the border would like to hear their Prime Minister speak these words of hope that the two countries would march ahead together – hand in hand – irreversibly and irrevocably.

There was a saying of the "Ibu People" of Nigeria, which went like this, "You are, therefore, I am; and since I am, therefore, you are". The best network is not a cartel of petrochemicals and weapons, rather, the best network, is the network of the intelligent minds. Irreversible, irrevocable!

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