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India-Bangladesh Relations: Need for New Approach

By Punam Pandey

Synopsis

The visit of the Indian prime minister to Bangladesh this week offers opportunity to address emerging challenges in the bilateral relationship arising from climate change. There is a need for fresh approaches by the two neighbours to enhance their fluctuating ties.

Commentary

THE MUCH-awaited visit to Bangladesh by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh this week -- after a 12-year break -- is an opportune moment to enhance the relationship between the two neighbours. The last visit by an Indian prime minister was in 1999 when Atal Behari Vajpayee inaugurated the Kolkatta-Dhaka direct bus route. This positive atmosphere has been built up since the January 2010 visit to India by the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which set in a new phase in relations.

Ties between India and Bangladesh have been fluctuating according to the tempo of domestic politics, with Sheikh Hasina's Awami League tending to be friendlier towards India. PM Singh's visit also comes amid a growing tussle for influence vis-a-vis Bangladesh between India and China -- two Asian economic giants hungry for resources. While Bangladesh has addressed most of India's security concerns by cracking down heavily on anti-India militants, India has offered US\$1 billion in credit to Bangladesh for infrastructure development -- the highest for any South Asian country. In PM Singh's visit on 6-7 September 2011, both countries are expected to sign important agreements on land boundary, water resources and market access apart from discussing new challenges.

Challenges ahead

The challenges that confront the two countries in the coming decade will, however, be different in nature from those of the late 20th century. The biggest one is climate change whose global impact has become marked in different parts of world, including in India and Bangladesh. There is the increased frequency and erratic seasonal patterns of cyclones and typhoons. The frequency of floods, drought and river erosion will also be higher in future. Such issues cannot be tackled by states without regional cooperation given their trans-boundary nature. They also require unconventional approaches from the political leadership of both India and Bangladesh.

Global warming is causing sea level rise, and consequently the threat of submergence of low lying areas. The Fourth Assessment Report of the Working Group III on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

published in 2007 suggests that past emissions are expected to cause unavoidable warming even if atmospheric greenhouse gases remain at 2000 levels.

Bangladesh is disadvantaged by its geography: it is constituted by the delta of three great rivers which makes the country vulnerable to coastal and riverine flooding, besides cyclones and storms. As half its total landmass is less than two metres above sea level, millions of people face displacement. Scientists predict that Bangladesh can lose 20 percent of its land to sea level rise over the next 90 years, displacing 20 to 25 million people. The capital, Dhaka, already home to a staggering 27,500 people per square kilometre, is attracting ever-growing numbers of people displaced by erosion, storm damage to embankments and salination of crop fields.

Climate Refugees

As Bangladesh has very limited high land to which people can move, migration to India becomes the next option. With India facing its own population pressures in low-lying coastal areas, this new scenario throws up challenges for both governments.

The two neighbours need to conduct a joint study on the impact of forced mobility from sea level rise – the number of people who will be displaced and possible solutions. For example, India could identify the areas where climate refugees can be accommodated. India and Bangladesh would have to study the possibility of the climate refugees' onward movement from India to other parts of the world.

These climate refugees should be provided with basic food, clothes and medical services. The present UN treaty on the status of refugees dating from 1951 applies only to those who fear or flee persecution; it does not cover people who cross national borders as a result of climate change. Both countries should jointly appeal to the UN to widen the definition of refugees in the light of the emerging situation.

Environmental Degradation

Another climate change-induced concern is environmental degradation, especially of their Sundarban mangrove forest – one of the largest such forests in the world. Of the 9,600 sq. km of Sundarbans, 40 % lie in India and the rest in Bangladesh. The Sundarbans are critical for the protection of low-lying areas because they provide ground stability in the face of high tides, holding the trees and also absorbing salt. As India and Bangladesh are already sharing data on flood forecasting, new stations can be set up to expedite the transfer of data on environmental degradation.

As climate change will intensify the process of river erosion, this has become an urgent issue for India and Bangladesh. Reports in the Bangladeshi media predict that around 2,400 hectares of cultivable land and 400 hectares of settlement on the banks of Jamuna, Ganges and Padma rivers will disappear due to erosion in 2011. Sometimes new land emerges along the rivers and this leads to controversy over their ownership.

Successful Example

Both countries have the success story of the Ganges River Water Treaty which has survived almost 15 years and changes of government in both countries. This augurs well for the resolution of other contentious issues between them. It is expected that during PM Singh's visit, both countries are set to overcome their long-standing differences and sign at least an interim water-sharing agreement on their common rivers Teesta and Feni. There is consensus that they shall leave 20 percent of the river flow untouched to preserve circulation.

This recognition is a significant departure from their previous position that water in the river that is left to flow into the sea unutilised should be considered as 'waste'. Recognition of the right of survival of the river will set a precedent for negotiations on the other 54 rivers that India and Bangladesh share. The emerging understanding is that rivers should not be exploited to an extent that their survival would be at stake.

The climate-change induced issues are fundamental to the relations between Bangladesh and India. They require "out of the box" thinking to look for solutions based on the principle of shared problems and shared sufferings. Only then can both countries achieve "stability, peace and prosperity for all our peoples".

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