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India-Bangladesh Ties: Enduring Partnership?

By Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

SYNOPSIS

A four-day official visit on 3-6 October 2019 by Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India offered an opportunity for the two countries to review their bilateral relationship and exchange notes on regional matters. What are the key takeaways from their robust engagement efforts?

COMMENTARY

IT IS almost like a ritual to recall New Delhi's critical role in Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan, culminating in the creation of a new country in 1971. The joint communiqué from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent visit to India emphasised the shared bonds and commonalities that characterise their partnership. It noted the "excellent state of bilateral relations" and underlined assurances of both the leaders for advancing this friendship.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has invested a great deal of political capital in trying to transform the sensitive relationship with India. Her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi has also shown his willingness and commitment to making this relationship enduring. In fact, both the leaders are looking at reinforcing the gains in bilateral ties over the last couple of years, and to make the progress "irreversible". Modi and Hasina reiterated their commitment to work together in regional, sub-regional and multilateral fora.

Building a Shared Future

The idea of a 'win-win' partnership between India and Bangladesh is driving the relationship. The two fast-growing economies are prepared to pursue this through a series of measures including simplifying the movement of people and goods between

both the countries; greater use of one another's seaports; exploring the possibility of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, and the early operationalisation of a Motor Vehicles Agreement, among others.

Bangladesh's exports to India have crossed the one-billion-dollar mark in 2019 for the first time at a notable rate of 52% year-on-year growth. Regular exchanges of business delegations have resulted in several joint venture agreements in packaging, animal foods, auto components, denim and household utensils.

Cooperation in the power sector, including grid connectivity, cross-border and intra-regional electricity and energy trade, has already taken off. India's willingness was also echoed in the joint declaration to extend duty-free and quota-free access for Bangladeshi exports to the Indian market, as well as mutual recognition of certifications, operationalisation of the inland water and coastal shipping trade.

On Bangladesh's part, its gesture of allowing India to operate from Chattogram and Mongla ports will accelerate trade and commerce in North East India. All these measures will work as building blocks for a stronger shared future for India and Bangladesh.

Challenges and Way Forward

Some Bangladeshis are, however, apprehensive about the potential for Indian domination. India too has its own concerns about border management, water sharing, transit-related issues and illegal migration. Both countries are taking steps to address those challenges through greater collaboration. However, some matters are very complicated, requiring India to be more sensitive and creative to addressing those barriers.

The migration of Bangladeshis to India has been a politically salient and sensitive issue for New Delhi. India is working on the National Register of Citizens (NRC), an exercise mandated and monitored by the Supreme Court of India carried out to identify genuine Indian citizens living in the state of Assam and removing illegal immigrants.

A large number of people have been declared non-citizens under this process, which has created considerable concern in Bangladesh. Though Modi assured Hasina that the NRC process will not affect Bangladesh, apprehension in Dhaka remains, putting a strain on bilateral ties. Bangladesh is closely monitoring the situation because there are anxieties in Dhaka that Bangladesh could be asked to take in these people.

The Rohingya issue is another major humanitarian challenge. India has appreciated Bangladeshi efforts in dealing with the challenges and has extended its support. However, Modi and Hasina agreed and underlined "the need to expedite safe, speedy and sustainable repatriation of the displaced persons" to Myanmar. Certainly, this requires greater determination and collaboration among various actors to improve security and socio-economic conditions to create a favourable environment to enable their return.

Another key issue between India and Bangladesh has been the long-standing impasse over the Teesta river water sharing scheme. India needs to act on its promises on

water sharing agreements and make concrete progress towards meeting Bangladesh's concerns regarding shared rivers. Otherwise, many in Bangladesh will perceive that "India gets what it wants while Bangladesh keeps on pleading" on water sharing agreements.

India an Insensitive Regional Power?

India is perceived by some in Bangladesh as an insensitive regional power. At a time when India is envisioning a 'win-win' proposition, the government in Delhi needs to demonstrate sensitivity to the neighbouring country's public opinion. Swift action on some unilateral measures announced by India benefiting Bangladesh will give a fresh impetus to the relationship, notably on market access for Bangladeshi exports to and through India.

A study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry suggests that Bangladesh is internationally (and relative to India) highly competitive in batteries, jute twine, cordage and ropes, and cement and bricks. Investment by India in these sectors in Bangladesh, combined with the option to re-export to India, will help diversify Bangladesh's trade and reduce the trade gap between the two countries.

Bangladesh and India have agreed to streamline their activities for an effective regional and sub-regional cooperation. The comeback of the Bay of Bengal as a new strategic space in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has given a new lease to life to the developmental efforts in the region.

BIMSTEC is developing as an important mechanism which could serve as a bridge between two major high-growth centres of Asia – South and Southeast Asia. More importantly, Bangladesh can play a big part to help reintegrate the eastern subcontinent and reconnect South Asia to Southeast Asia and East Asia. However, to accelerate the process of regional integration, the growing role of China cannot be overlooked.

While China has been a significant defence partner for Bangladesh, Dhaka's economic cooperation with Beijing is also intensifying under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is not surprising that the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) did not get into the joint declaration. Perhaps, Delhi needs to accept China's role in the region and engage Beijing creatively.

To reinforce bilateral ties that will also strengthen growth and development in the sub-continent, the commitment to cooperate must be sustained. Dhaka will remain a natural partner for Delhi only if India shows greater understanding towards Bangladesh's concerns and remains focussed on the timely completion of its promises and agreements.

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy is a Visiting Fellow in the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg