INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: A NEW PHASE OF COOPERATION

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Introduction

Bangladesh and India are part of the South Asian subcontinent and have had a long common cultural, economic and political history. The cultures of the two countries relate with each other, particularly in language. Bangladesh and Indian states like West Bengal and Tripura are all Bengali speaking. However, since the partition in 1947, Bangladesh (formerly East Bengal) became a province of Pakistan. Following the war of 1971, Bangladesh gained its independence and established relations with India.

The political relationship between India and Bangladesh has not always been smooth. The relations typically become favourable for Bangladesh during periods of Awami League (AL) government. Currently, they are having another honeymoon following the AL landslide in the 2008 elections. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed’s state visit to India in January 2010 has opened a new chapter of bilateral cooperation.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the nature of the bilateral relationship; the second discusses the historical evolution of relations.

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with special reference to the AL contribution in this regard. The third part outlines
the conflictive issues between the two countries and highlights the current
developments in relations to address the outstanding issues under the government
of AL.

**The nature of relationship**

Since the end of the Second World War, realism has been a predominant
paradigm for understanding international politics. “National interest” is the core
value on the basis of which states interact with each other. It is national interest
that determines the nature of relationship between states. There can be four kinds
of relationships in the international system.

- Relationships based on politics and diplomacy
- Relationships based on economic interdependence
- Relationships based on security-related concerns, and
- Compulsive relationships

For instance, the United States and Canada, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,
India and Israel, etc have political and diplomatic relations; the European Union
came into existence on the basis of economic interdependence of member states;
China and the United States have economically interdependent relations; Pakistan
and India, Afghanistan and Pakistan, China and India have relations based on
security-related concerns. Relations based on security concerns can be avoided
whenever required. For instance, Pakistan developed relations with the United
States instead of India during the cold war period to ensure its security.
Compulsive relationship emerges when a powerful state applies coercive
diplomacy on a smaller state, hence a relationship is formed in accordance with
the interests of the powerful state. It is not necessarily a core and periphery
relationship, sovereignty of the smaller state is maintained in the compulsive
relationship, but the objectives of the powerful state are gained at the expense of the smaller state. Such kind of relations cannot be avoided. They either emerge because of the political weakness or geographical vulnerability of the smaller state towards any powerful neighbouring state. As far as the condition of political weakness in compulsive relationship is concerned, the relations between the United States and Pakistan, and between the US and Saudi Arabia can be cited as significant examples of such a relationship. The following diagram illustrates all four categories.

Source: Designed by the author.

Bangladesh and India have a two-dimensional relationship; it is based on both security-related concerns as well as compulsions of geographical dependence.

The birth of Bangladesh was marred by a security dilemma. Without going into the details of how Bangladesh won its independence, let us start from the well-established fact that Bangladesh came into existence with the help of India.
India, taking the opportunity of the chaos created in East Pakistan played the midwife in the birth of Bangladesh. This help was not out of sympathy, but based on securing its eastern border from a part of a country (Pakistan) that emerged on the basis of a conflicting ideology from that of India. Thus a natural relationship emerged between India (the facilitator) and Bangladesh. Secondly, Bangladesh is surrounded on three sides by India which is a hundred times larger than itself. Therefore it is a geographical compulsion for Bangladesh to keep workable relations with India. The Awami League being the founding party of Bangladesh is said to be more inclined towards India.

**In retrospect**

The Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman formed the first democratic government in Bangladesh. Mujib was well equipped with the vigour to fight for independence which he won and became *Bangabandhu* (father of the nation) of Bangladesh. But after independence he was unable to lead independently owing to the fears he had of being “unsure” of himself. This fear compelled him, firstly, to rely heavily on India for his support and, secondly, to resort to undemocratic ways to establish his hold on the torn polity of Bangladesh. Thus an enduring bilateral relationship emerged, which had an everlasting impact on Bangladesh. A look at the map of Bangladesh shows it surrounded by India in the east, west and north. In the south it has the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar.
The biggest compulsion Bangladesh faces which leads to its tilt towards India is geographical. Moreover, its water resources completely depend on India. Bangladesh owns only 8 per cent of the Brahmaputra, Meghna and Ganges basins while all the three rivers run mostly through India. Therefore, water withdrawals and diversions by India may result in water shortage for Bangladesh.

Construction of the Farakka withdrawal project was allowed Bangladesh in 1975. It is built on the Bhagirathi River in India’s West Bengal state about 10 kilometres from their common border. The purpose of the barrage was to divert sufficient water from the Ganges into the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river. Bangladesh has always been dissatisfied with the withdrawal of water by India. In 1975, India diverted the Ganges flow which resulted in water shortage in Bangladesh. When General Zia assumed power the dispute over Farakka was in the limelight. In
1977, Gen Zia and prime minister Indira Gandhi reached an agreement over Farakka. But despite signing an agreement, indo-Bangla relations remained tainted with distrust throughout Zia’s tenure. On 9 May 1981, India violated the territorial integrity of Bangladesh and landed its troops on New Moore/South Talpatty Island.

At that time, popular opinion in Bangladesh opposed alignment with India so Bangladesh got closer to the Muslim countries and the Zia government gave ‘Islam’ a higher profile. “Zia endeavoured to make Bangladesh less dependent on its large subcontinental neighbor, and that foreign policy was perpetuated by Abdu Sattar.”(4) It was also reinforced by the Bangladesh army.(5) Abdul Sattar’s government was ousted from power by the martial law imposed by Gen Hussain Muhammad Ershad on 24 March 1982.

“Bangladesh’s relations with India during the Ershad regime were no less intricate or sensitive than those existing while Zia was in power.”(6) In the initial three years (1982-84) of his tenure the relations remained at the lowest ebb.(7) Later, after the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi, there came some improvement. During those times, the initiative for South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC),(8) taken by Ershad’s government, was strongly supported by Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

In 1993, India violated the temporary treaties signed with Bangladesh to regulate the water flow, and reduced the dry-season water flow lower than 10,000 cusecs instead of around 34,500 cusecs under the previous accords. “This decision eventually led to a serious water shortage in Bangladesh. The most serious effect was seen in agriculture. Bangladesh, considered the best-watered region of the world, was able to irrigate only 23 per cent of the total arable land at that time. The shortage of water had stalled the construction of the Ganga Barrage in Bangladesh.”(9) To resolve the conflict over water-sharing, the Ganga Water Treaty was signed in 1996, during the tenure of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Wajed. Her government took some remarkable steps vis-a-vis India. It also paved the way for the repatriation of thousands of Chakma refugees from Tripura.(10) Now her government has once again revived the project for a barrage, on the Ganga in Rajbari district, with work planned to start in December 2012. The project will store the river water during the monsoons and release it during the lean period.(11)

The tenures of Begum Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party (NBP) in 1991-96 and 2001-06, were marred by mutual distrust. In India the BNP is considered to have inclination towards Pakistan. Consequently, when the BNP is in power India turns more cautious in its relationship with Bangladesh. In 2008, the landslide victory of the AL has once again opened new avenues of cooperation between the two countries. But before analyzing the progress in relations it is imperative to have an overview of various points of contention between them.

Issues between India and Bangladesh

Dispute over water sharing

Since the outset the biggest issue straining Indo-Bangla relations has been the dispute over water sharing. The headwaters of the Ganges and of all Bangladesh’s tributaries are in India and Nepal. The surplus water enters Bangladesh from water resources in India.

Farakka barrage

On 29 October 1951 Pakistan — as Bangladesh was then the eastern province of Pakistan — officially called India’s attention to reports of Indian plans to build a barrage at Farakka, about 17 km from the border. It was supposed to divert the surplus Ganga water to Bhagirathi-Hooghly tributary, to provide silt-free flow into the Bay of Calcutta, thus improving navigability for the Calcutta port during dry months and keeping the city’s water supply salt-free.(12) A series
of talks were held between India and Pakistan over the issue and while the talks were in process, the Farakka barrage was built in 1970.

After the emergence of Bangladesh by March 1972, the governments of India and Bangladesh agreed to establish the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission whose purpose was “to develop the waters of the rivers common to the two countries on cooperative basis.”(13) “The two sides agreed to a limited trial operation of the barrage, with discharges varying between 11,000 and 16,000 cusecs in ten-day periods from 21 April to 31 May 1975, with the remainder of the flow guaranteed to reach Bangladesh.”(14) But without renewing or negotiating a new agreement with Bangladesh, India continued to divert the Ganges waters at Farakka after the trial run, throughout the 1975-76 dry seasons, at the full capacity of the diversion — 40,000 cusecs.(15) India kept on diverting the water flow until 1996. Eventually, to resolve the water-sharing dispute over a Ganges water-sharing treaty was signed on 12 December 1996 for the duration of 30 years.(16)

Currently, Bangladesh has raised its point of consideration over the construction of Tipaimukh dam by India.

**Tipaimukh dam**

Experts from Bangladesh have warned that the proposed 1,500MW Tipaimukh hydro-electric project on the Barak River at the junction of three Indian states, Manipur, Assam and Mizoram, could dry up the rivers Surma and Kushiara in northeastern Sylhet, a major city in Bangladesh.(17) Agriculture, irrigation, navigation, drinking water supply, fisheries, wildlife in numerous *haors* (wetlands) and low-lying areas in the entire Sylhet division, some areas of Comilla and Mymensingh districts, and some peripheral areas of Dhaka division, depend on the water obtained through the Barak River to Surma-Kushiara river basins.(18)
The river system also supports local industries like fertilizer, electricity, gas etc. Any artificial alteration of this wetland could affect food security and particularly weather, by turning a wet, cool environment into a hot, “uncomfortable cauldron.”

The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in order to raise its voice has formed an all-parliamentary team to visit the Tipaimukh dam site in Manipur, India. But the delegation returned home without much success. Although the delegation claims that it got some valuable information which substantiates India's position that construction of the dam will not affect Bangladesh in any way, the people are not inclined to believe the delegation's claim of India's positive assurances. Ironically, the delegation could not visit the site and was only provided documents to prove that India will not ignore Bangladesh’s reservations over the construction of the dam.

Analysts are therefore stressing the need for forming an international body to determine whether the dam will have any hazardous effects on Bangladesh’s population or not. However, nothing in this regard has been done so far. In contrast, the Indian high commissioner in Dhaka, Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty ridiculed, Bangladesh’s sensitivity over the construction of Tipaimukh dam. The BNP demanded his removal from the post; eventually he has been replaced by Rajeet Mitter.

The Farakka Barrage was a major breach of trust by India as it had repeatedly claimed before it started the project that the barrage would not cause any damage to Bangladesh. The same assurances are again being given over the Tipaimukh dam. Another issue over water sharing from the Teesta River is in the news these days. Some rounds of talk were held early last year under the auspices of the Joint River Commission to address the issue. A joint press statement issued on 6 January 2010 said talks would continue. It was also agreed to continue talks on the modalities for withdrawal of water from the Feni River.
Another issue that has been lingering on since long as a constant irritant between India and Bangladesh, is the unending insurgency in Northeast India.

**Insurgency in Northeast India**

Northeast India is a boiling cauldron of ethnic conflicts. Insurgency in Assam is the most chronic among all such movements going on in India. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is behind this movement, which demands independence from India. It is largely believed that ULFA is supported by Bangladesh and Pakistan. As Bertin Lintner, a Swede journalist based in Thailand, writes ULFA was born out of a nationalist movement aimed at expelling illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam; but “ironically ULFA ended up being based in Bangladesh, and used by India’s archenemy Pakistan to stir up trouble in India’s northeast.”(27)
The conflicting borders of India and Bangladesh

The writer has also established a link of ULFA with China. He says that in the 1990s “ULFA units trekked through northern Burma to the Sino-Burmese border areas and even managed to open an unofficial “office” in the Chinese frontier town of Ruili.”

On 2-5 August 2005, at the biannual meeting of security forces from the two countries, the IG, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland, S.C. Srivastava, handed over a new list of alleged 195 camps of Indian insurgents located in Bangladesh to Deputy Director General of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Brig Gen Ibrahim Khalil. Earlier a list of 192 camps had been given to the
Bangladesh authorities. Bangladesh denied the presence of Indian militants on its soil. Indian defence minister Pranab Mukerjee had claimed earlier in 2004 that intelligence reports confirmed that the Bangladesh government was sheltering Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) \(^{29}\) and ULFA extremists.\(^{30}\) During the reign of Khaleda Zia the matter of alleged support of insurgency by Bangladesh loitered in talks only and nothing substantial was done, except for detaining 34 suspected ULFA rebels in Dhaka.

However, with the victory of the AL, Bangladesh detained several ULFA leaders and handed them over to the Indian authorities in order to start afresh with India. Among them was ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and deputy commander Raju Baruah, who for years had been based in Bangladesh.

It is also believed that in order to destabilize Bangladesh, India is also supporting insurgency in Bangladesh. The unsettled population of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is believed to be manipulated by India’s secret agencies.

**The chaotic hill tracts — Chittagong**

Owing to this insurgency India and Bangladesh have been at loggerheads since 1976. Bangladesh government blames India for exacerbating the conflict, which could have been resolved with much less difficulty. On the contrary, India sees the issue as if Bangladesh is using its name to justify chaos in the area.\(^{31}\)

The CHT of southeast Bangladesh comprises 13,000 square km (10 per cent of Bangladesh) which forms strategic border area next to India and Myanmar. The CHT region is inhabited by approximately a dozen non-Bengali ethnically diverse Montagnard groups. These people are underprivileged and are vulnerable to external influences. It is believed that before independence the hill people were trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US to check the spread of Communism in the area and later against the Chinese government in Tibet. Muhamud Ali is of the view that the militia in CHT was once trained by
Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to wage war against India. He has also mentioned the involvement of China in supporting the militia, which eventually became known as “Shanti Bahni.”

After independence in 1971 the tribals rose against Mujibur Rahman’s move to promote Bengali nationalism; they sought to stick to their own tribal identity, the Chakmas particularly. In 1986, the ferocious killings of the Chakmas by government forces caused many Chakmas to flee into the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura, which eventually deteriorated India-Bangladesh relations. In the late 1980’s it became evident that the unrest created by the Shanti Bahni in Bangladesh was sponsored by India through its intelligence agency, the RAW.

In 1997, the government of Bangladesh signed a Peace Accord with the Hill people. Under the treaty, “Hill fighters agreed to surrender and de-commission their arms for general amnesty, enactment and amendment of laws concerned with indigenous life, and for the rehabilitation programmes offered by the government.” A ministry headed by a tribal leader was set up by the government. The government also pledged to repatriate the tribal refugees from India.

However, many of the provisions of the treaty are still not implemented which is aggravating dissatisfaction among the indigenous people of the CHT. For maintaining peace, the government of Bangladesh would have to address the grievances of the Hill people; otherwise they will continue to fall a victim to external manipulation.

Another matter that perturbs the Indo-Bangla relations is the issue of enclaves, the pockets in each country where nationals of the other one are residing. These areas are not demarcated by both countries and hence the people living in these undecided or un-demarcated lands face numerous problems.
**Issue of enclaves**

India holds as many as 111 enclaves within Bangladeshi territory totalling to some 17,000 acres of land while Bangladesh holds some 51 enclaves amounting to about 7000 acres in India. After partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the Cooch Bihar district was merged with India and Rangpur went to East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971. In 1974, both countries agreed to exchange the enclaves or, at least, provide easy access to the enclaves. But the issue got entangled in diplomatic negotiations and border security concerns expressed by India’s defence and home ministries and dragged on until 2001.

People in these enclaves are deprived of basic human needs and no development is possible in the areas as neither India nor Bangladesh have yet decided about their fate. There are hardly any roads. There is no electricity, schools and dispensaries. Both countries take little interest in the welfare of these enclaves therefore crime is rampant.

However, despite all the public sufferings no substantial development was seen in the negotiation process until 2010. The current AL administration has again raised this issue. According to some analysts, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was keen on inking an agreement with India over the issue of enclaves as early as possible. Consequently, India has now agreed in principle to cede control over its enclaves. In other words, once the negotiations are complete, the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh’s territory would be absorbed in Bangladesh and vice versa.

Other than the un-demarcated bordering areas, people living on the demarcated bordering areas of Bangladesh and India face atrocities as a consequence of the enmity demonstrated by the border forces of both countries.
Border incidents: ‘Joint patrolling’

Bangladesh is surrounded by India in the east, west and north. It shares 4300 km of border with India. The people in Bangladesh frontier areas always live in panic. A human rights watchdog has observed that at least 439 Bangladeshis have been killed by the BSF and Indian intruders since 2006. Fifty-five Bangladeshi soldiers had been reportedly killed in the first six months of 2009.

To increase cooperation between both frontier forces a proposal for joint patrolling along the border is in the air. Some rounds of talks have been held to discuss the possibility of joint patrolling. However, some analysts see the idea with suspicion. They believe that under the guise of activating joint patrolling at the Indo-Bangladesh borders, the governments of India and Bangladesh have made a radical strategic move to create a regional task force (RTF).

“RTF is an integral part of a strategic vision for the region, which was devised in 2007 by an officially sponsored Delhi-based think tank to checkmate the rise of the Maoists in Nepal and the Indian North-Eastern States on the one hand, and the Islamists in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the other.”

It is believed that in the wake of the ongoing turmoil in Nepal and the ferocious resistance shown recently by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, India decided to settle its agenda with respect to Bangladesh without further delay. However, such a proposition could not materialize as nothing in substance out of various rounds of talk has emerged so far.

BDR mutiny

A total of 74 people, including 57 army officers, were killed during the 25-26 February mutiny in 2009 the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) Headquarters at Pilkhana. Various analysts link the mutiny to the present government’s close affiliation with India. However, some Indian newspapers had alleged that Pakistan
Another story that was in the air claimed that the AL was involved in the mutiny. Those who projected this story said that Sheikh Hasina Wajed wanted to punish the army after their two-year rule (2006-08) during which she was jailed on corruption charges. The most popular reason advanced by various newspapers was that the BDR needed reformation; though it comes under the army yet it is deprived of privileges which the mainstream of army enjoys at large.

The rebellious soldiers at the time of carnage claimed a sense of “deprivation” which prompted them to stage the mutiny. They also demanded that the frontier force should be freed from “military domination.” In a bid to reform the BDR Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently gave her consent for renaming the BDR as Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) with a new combat uniform.

A high-level government committee was set up to investigate the mutiny. It had suggested further probe into possible “external links”, fearing that the carnage was part of a bigger plot to destabilize the country.

Initially, the mutiny, a total of 1,394 BDR men were arrested until May 2009, and of them 580 were interrogated on remand. Besides, another 1,723 BDR soldiers were detained in 29 frontier districts for staging the mutiny and looting weapons. It is also reported that 21 BDR soldiers in custody or under security watch died in March-April 2009. This fact makes the case more fishy and vicious. Nevertheless, cases of the accused are still waiting for judgment in the courts of Bangladesh.

Keeping in view all the conflicting issues between India and Bangladesh, the current developments in relations under the government of AL in Bangladesh will be examined. Prime Minister Hasina’s visit to India from 10 to 13 January 2010 is seen as a significant step towards strengthening of Indo-Bangla relations.
Sheikh Hasina’s India visit

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Prime Minister Hasina Wajed’s arrival in New Delhi, “India seeks to build a new future with Bangladesh. The time has come to chart a new path. We are ready to pursue a bold vision for our relations, based on mutual respect and mutual benefit.”

The visit produced an exhaustive 50-paragraph declaration of intent by the two countries. The meeting resulted in a breakthrough in relations. Following are the key points of the two-hour meeting at Hyderabad House between Sheikh Hasina and Manmohan Singh:

- A $1-billion line of credit for infrastructure development in Bangladesh was announced.
- Three agreements on fight against terrorism and organized crime, and mutual transfer of convicted prisoners were signed.
- Two memorandums of understanding on cooperation in power sector and cultural exchange were also signed.
- In response to concerns over proposed Tipaimukh dam, surety was provided by India that it would not hurt the interests of Bangladesh.
- India agreed to remove 47 items from its negative list to give Bangladeshi products duty-free access to its market.
- The two sides decided to enhance connectivity. In efforts to that end, India will set up a 14-km meter-gauge rail line between Akhaura (Bangladesh) and Agartala (India).
- Besides, India will give Bangladesh transit to Nepal and Bhutan.
- It would export 250 MW of electricity from its central grid to Bangladesh.
• Both countries reaffirmed commitment to solving all issues through discussions and decided to put in place a Comprehensive Framework for Cooperation in Development.

• The two neighbours also signed an MoU on cultural exchange under which they decided to jointly celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore.

• Issues relating to the 6.1-km undemarcated stretch of the 4,096-km border, “enclaves” and “adverse possessions” were also discussed.

• Various conflicting issues between India and Bangladesh, like sharing of water, containing terrorism, and demarcation of boundaries were discussed during the visit.

Understanding on water sharing issues

The prime ministers vowed to work positively to reach an agreement regarding sharing of the Teesta River water. The JRC will meet to expedite resolving the Teesta issue. Actions on dredging of the Ichamati river and protection of Mahananda, Karotoa, Nagar, Kulik, Atrai, Dharala and Feni rivers were also agreed to be worked out.

Assistance in curtailing cross-border crimes

Three agreements were signed to contain cross-border crimes. These are titled as ‘Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, Transfer of Sentenced Persons and Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. The one on transfer of convicted persons would allow those convicted of criminal offences to serve their sentences in their own country if they want. Anyone condemned to death, however, will not get this opportunity. If similar agreement existed with a third country, Bangladesh and India will provide transit facility for extradition of the convicts. The agreement on combating
international terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking relates of bilateral implementation of a protocol under the SAARC. It says if terrorist activities are perpetrated in and against India and Bangladesh, then the two countries can exchange intelligence and general information.\(^{(51)}\)

**Resolution of maritime boundary dispute**

India is alleged to have encroached 19,000 sq km into Bangladesh waters.\(^{(52)}\) Bangladesh’s economy is increasingly dependent on the sea. But due to a conflicting claim by its neighbours (India and Myanmar), it could not materialise its claims over various maritime zones. After independence, Bangladesh designated its maritime zones through the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Act of 1974. Under that law Bangladesh demarcated its waters for its use, and it was provided in the Act that “contravention of the rule (made by Bangladesh’s government for preservation, exploitation of its territorial waters) shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to one year or with fine which may extend to five thousand takas.”\(^{(53)}\)

But with introduction of the Law of the Sea Convention in 1982, Bangladesh got an opportunity to exploit a vast area beyond its coastal waters. The Convention provides a framework, detailed provisions and principles for demarcation of maritime boundaries and international cooperation on exploration of both living and non-living marine resources. There are two principles on the basis of which demarcation of territorial waters of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar could be done; “Equidistance”\(^{(54)}\) and “Equitable.”

India and Myanmar are demanding the equidistance principle for demarcation, while Bangladesh is seeking to resolve the disputes on the basis of the equitable principle. Drawing maritime boundary on the basis of equidistance principle will result in annexation of much of Bangladesh’s sea area India and Myanmar.\(^{(55)}\)
All three countries have ratified the Convention of 1982, therefore the dispute should be resolved, the sooner the better, to allow maximum benefit from the unexploited waters which are reported to have gas reservoirs.

During the visit, both countries agreed to resolve their maritime boundary disputes through mutual discussions. They said initiation of the proceedings for demarcation of boundaries shall take place under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), where demarcation of territorial waters will be done on the principle of “equitable” use of resources.

Resolution of other boundary issues

Issues related to land boundary disputes were also agreed to be resolved keeping in view the spirit of the 1974 Land Boundary agreement. It was agreed to convene the Joint Boundary Working Group to address this issue. India and Bangladesh have issues over the demarcation of boundary of rivers, like the Muhuri River (Belonia) Sector and the Feni River, bordering areas like the Mizoram-Bangladesh Sector, Tripura-Sylhet Sector including the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sibpur-Gaurangala Sector, Beanibazar-Karimganj Sector, Hakar Khal and Baikari Khal, and various enclaves.

During the visit, special emphasis was given on generating economic activity. The following significant steps were taken to move forward on the road of prosperity:

Opening border haats

India and Bangladesh introduced border ‘haat’, a traditional commodity market, in a bid to revive trade in their common border areas. Such trade was halted after partition of the subcontinent in 1947, then resumed after a few years and suspended again after 1971. “The haats will be held once a week. The locations of the markets to be started in the first phase are at the border points
between Kaliachar in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills district and Lawar Ghar in Bangladesh's Sunamganj district and between Balat in West Khasi Hills district and Narayantala in Bangladesh's Sunamganj district.” (59) Commodities to be traded through these haats include fruits, spices, minor forest products excluding timber, fresh and dry fish, dairy, fishery and poultry products, cottage industry items like thin towels, wooden furniture, cane products and utensils.

**Access to Chittagong and Ashuganj port**

The Bangladesh government also agreed in principle to allow the use of the Chittagong seaport and Ashuganj riverport across the border for transshipment of goods to Northeast India. (60) It also allowed Nepal and Bhutan to use Mongla and Chittagong port by rail and road for trading. It was also agreed by the two countries that Rohanpur, Singabadar broad-gauge railway link would be available for Bangladesh for transit to Nepal. It was agreed between India and Bangladesh that trucks from Bhutan and Nepal would be allowed to enter about 200 metres into the zero point at Banglabandha (61) at Banglabandha-Phulbari land customs station. Necessary arrangements will be mutually agreed upon and put in place by both countries through negotiations. (62)

**Trade boost**

The Bangladesh government is also keen to boost trade and commerce with the Northeastern part of India, but seeks reduction or withdrawal of customs duty and reduction in the rate of Value Added Tax (VAT) for exporting bricks and other commodities. (63) The Bangladesh government invited Indian companies to set up their economic operations in special economic zones (SEZs) being planned by the country.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, during her recent interaction with a 51-member Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) delegation in Dhaka, said, “We have already decided to set up SEZs…there are
already some areas…If you want to invest, you can identify and we will facilitate the investment.”

Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh stood at $3175 million in 2007-08. In FY 2008-09, Bangladesh’s imports from India were US$ 2.841 billion and exports to India were US $ 276.58 million. The figures show a huge trade imbalance in favour of India. Ms. Hasina Wajed assured Indian businessmen of all possible assistance and cooperation in their endeavours for investment in Bangladesh. She also called upon Bangladeshi business community to take advantage of the new opportunities on reciprocal basis to increase their business activities in India. She added,

"I will welcome Indian businessmen and investment and we are keen to set up a nice relationship which will help not only India and Bangladesh but the entire South Asia."

In order to enhance people-to-people contacts and creating more opportunities for Bangladeshi students, academic and cultural exchanges have also been ensured. According to United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) statistics (2003-2008), 54 per cent people are literate in Bangladesh.

**Academic and cultural exchanges**

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is already giving 100 scholarships every year to students from Bangladesh for pursuing general courses in arts, sciences, engineering and also specialised courses in culture, drama, music, fine arts and sports, etc. During prime minister Hasina’s January 2010 visit, India again offered to provide 300 more scholarships annually for five years to students from Bangladesh for studying and training in universities and training institutions in India. Both countries also decided to jointly celebrate the birthday of Rabindranath Tagore. The Indian prime minister observed that the countries were fortunate to have produced some of the finest writers, scholars and
artists. He said, “The works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam have inspired generations of people. This is a unique asset which binds our people, and which we must preserve.”

In Bangladesh people are hopeful that both countries would move forward by supporting each other for prosperity and welfare of their people. Haffezul Alam, a former civil servant of Bangladesh, expressed his jubilation in these words: “We would like India to be our friend as it was during our liberation war. On the question of national interest, we should settle our minor internal political differences and display united and enlightened disposition, internally as well as externally.”

Cooperation in power sector

Considering the overwhelming hopes of Bangladeshi people, India has also agreed to assist Bangladesh in the power sector. According to Paul J. Heytens, Country Director, Bangladesh Resident Mission appointed by Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh suffers from 1500 MW shortage of power.

Therefore, an MoU was signed for import and export of electricity to the tune of over 900 million units per annum, depending on availability, need and price. Under this MoU the Power Development Board of Bangladesh will buy electricity from India at a price to be agreed upon by the two parties. Besides, India will also supply 250 MW from its central grid to Bangladesh.

Despite, the progress made in bilateral relations many people in Bangladesh are sceptical over getting closer to India. The unavoidable hurdle of trust deficit hinders smooth sailing between the two neighbours.

Opposition’s response over the visit

The Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami launched scathing criticism of what they described as the ‘surrender of
national interests to India” by Prime Minister Hasina Wajed in signing five deals on various vital issues. The Opposition vehemently claimed that by allowing India access to Chittagong and Ashuganj ports, the government had made Bangladesh insecure and sacrificed national sovereignty.\(^{(71)}\) Khaleda also demanded cancellation of all agreements with India.\(^{(72)}\)

However, many analysts praised the effort made by the AL government. They regard it as a way forward. A senior analyst, Kazi Anwar ul Masud is of the view that “the segment of society that has praised the joint communiqué is happy at the realism displayed by the present government. Yet the detractors, not few in number, consider the Bangladesh Prime Minister’s visit as a sell-out to India and consider that Sheikh Hasina has delivered concrete “concessions” to India but has returned with vague promises from Delhi.”\(^{(73)}\)

Eviction of Begum Khaleda Zia on 13 November 2010 from her home of nearly 30 years in Dhaka’s cantonment area is also said to have links with AL’s close linkages with the Indian government. “The end to Mrs Zia’s political dynasty has become almost tenet of national security for India, which sees her family meddling in India’s domestic affairs.”\(^{(74)}\)

Therefore, there are two variant opinions circulating in articulate circles of Bangladesh. One sticks to the lessons learned from the past and shows least confidence in India as far as the progress of Bangladesh is concerned, whereas the other ponders over the growing prestige of India in the world and wants to gain benefit and support from such an emerging global power. The course taken by the Awami League favours the later. Now the question arises what can Bangladesh do in the current scenario.

**What can Bangladesh do?**

As discussed in the beginning Bangladesh has a compulsive relationship with India, provided its geographical location and the foundation of its very
existence. India is emerging as a significant power, which has a global role to play. The recent much-touted visit of US President Obama to India has further glorified its role in the world. Therefore, to avoid or restrain one’s relations with an emerging power like India would not be suggestible for Bangladesh.

The AL government is mindful of that. Haroon Habib, a senior analyst in India, says that “an economically strong, secular and democratic Bangladesh is crucial for New Delhi and the rest of the region. A democratic and secular India, and Bangladesh, that has started its renewed march towards a stable democratic polity despite the muscle flexing by some extremists, should work together for a stable South Asia.” These words best describe India’s intention to attract every South Asian state towards itself.

Bangladesh has a tremendous potential. It was one of six countries in Asia and Africa distinguished for its progress towards achieving its Millennium Development Goals, a set of targets that seek to eradicate extreme poverty and boost health, education and the status of women worldwide by 2015. Its economy has grown at the rate of nearly 6% in 2009. The country exported $12.3 billion worth of garments last year, making it fourth in the world behind China, the European Union (EU) and Turkey. Against heavy odds, Bangladesh has curtailed its population growth. Today the average Bangladeshi woman bears fewer than three children in her lifetime, down from more than six in the 1970s.

Most importantly, the microcredit pioneer, Grameen Bank, has earned a global reputation and this experiment is replicated at various places throughout the world. In July, 2010 the Supreme Court struck down a 31-year-old constitutional amendment and restored Bangladesh to its founding status as a secular republic. This development will further enhance Bangladesh’s links with India. The aid given by India to Bangladesh, which amounts to $1 billion, is the highest financial assistance from India to any country.
Bangladesh is sensibly taking steps forward in maturing its relations with an emerging world power, putting aside all the episodes of distrust in the past. But it is also evident that history repeats itself. History has not repeated itself in Europe because their interests have become coherent and interdependent but it may repeat itself in South Asia as the interests of all South Asian states are not intertwined. Lawrence Ziring wrote in the 1980s that “India will not further risk its tenuous unity in order to improve Bangladesh’s chances with statehood”….“India will do very little to help Bangladesh reorganize its political life or improve its economic performance.”(77)

If Bangladesh becomes a stable country, the population in the West Bengal state of India will become destabilized. The unsatisfied Bengali population will prefer to go to stable Bangladesh. Eventually, the security of unified India will be threatened if such a development takes place.

The Grameen experiment is the real salvation for Bangladesh. Economy can be a key to success, which could also unlock various opportunities for the country. It would help Bangladesh to develop itself without the support of any country. It can only be done if unity and peace is achieved at indigenous level and collective effort is directed for the betterment of the country. Though India is willing to help Bangladesh in its development, yet there is no instance in the world that any country has helped another country without some hidden interests. Since there is no mutuality of interests between Bangladesh and India which could result in a win-win situation, Bangladesh should be more cautious in dealing with India.

Conclusion

Bangladesh and India have a lot of commonality vis-à-vis culture and language. But so far their commonalities have failed to construct any mutual interest between the two neighbours. The existence of Bangladesh owing to its
geographical location depends on its peaceful relations with India. Hence their relations translate more in “compulsion” rather than the “will” to cooperate with each other.

The ruling Awami League is, however, more inclined towards India. Therefore, after assuming power the AL government has eagerly re-established relations with India. The visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed to India in early 2010 is considered a significant step towards the development of Bangladesh. The $1 billion financial assistance rendered to Bangladesh is the biggest assistance given to any country by India. This shows the tremendous interest India has in Bangladesh. It certainly indicates that India, which has US$229.9 billion external debt as of 2009, has some objectives in Bangladesh that it decided to give such a huge amount to Bangladesh for infrastructural development.

Bangladesh too has given India access to its strategically important ports of Chittagong and Mongola. Indian access to this port was earlier restricted owing to security reasons. But opening up of this port would allow more trade between both countries. India being the bigger market would obviously get the maximum benefit. The Bangladesh industry would have to compete with that of India, and the competition could be healthy as well as disastrous, as Bangladesh’s industrial capacity is much meagre compared to India.

However, if the industrial sector of Bangladesh becomes more diligent, innovative and competent then they can even supersede India in the market, as Japan was making it hard for various strong economies to sustain themselves in the world market.

The chances for Bangladesh are bright as well as bleak. All depends on the inner strength and sincerity to preserve national interest. A country cannot live in isolation; it is always advisable to develop workable relations with all countries and especially the neighbours. However, the sovereignty of a country to decide
freely may not be compromised. Hence, it is suggested that Bangladesh should not forget the lessons learnt from history.

Notes and references

4. Abdus Sattar was Bangladesh’s President after the assassination of General Zia.
7. Ibid.
8. South Asian Regional Corporation (SARC )eventually became South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid.

27. Bertil Lintner, “Bangladesh was a conduit for anti-India insurgency,” *Yale Global*, 17 February 2010.

28. Ibid.

29. The objective of the KLO is to carve out a separate Kamtapur state comprising six districts: Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur and Malda of West Bengal and four contiguous districts of Assam: Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri and Goalpara. The KLO maintains close linkages with the ULFA. For more information see introduction to KLO, available at: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/klo.htm>.


36. India, Bangladesh to resolve complex border issues *The Tribune*, 6 September 2010.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. “BDR mutiny trial in Bangladesh begins” The Hindu, 23 February 2010.
47. Ibid.
48. “BDR mutiny might have had ‘external links,’ The Indian Express, New Delhi, 22 May 2009.
49. Ibid.


56. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which came into force on 16 November 1994, is an international treaty that provides a regulatory framework for the use of the world’s seas and oceans, *inter alia*, to ensure the conservation and equitable usage of resources and the marine environment and to ensure the protection and preservation of the living resources of the sea. UNCLOS also addresses such other matters as sovereignty, rights of usage in maritime zones, and navigational rights. As of 1 February 2008, 155 States have ratified, acceded to, or succeeded to, UNCLOS. The full text and status of UNCLOS can be accessed through the United Nations Division for Oceans Affairs and the Law of the Sea. Since the 1982 Convention came into force in 1994, five cases have been arbitrated under Annex VII of UNCLOS. The PCA is acting, or has acted, as registry in four of those cases. The cases arbitrated under the auspices of the PCA are the following: (i) Ireland v. United Kingdom (“MOX Plant Case”), which was
instituted in November 2001 and is still pending; (ii) Malaysia v. Singapore, which was instituted in July 2003 and terminated by an award on agreed terms rendered on September 1, 2005; (iii) Barbados v. Trinidad and Tobago, which was instituted in February 2004 and decided by a final award rendered on 11 April, 2006; and (iv) Guyana v. Surinam, which was instituted in February 2004 and decided by a final award rendered on 17 September 2007. Having administered most of the UNCLOS Annex VII arbitrations to date, the PCA has gained unique experience in dealing with, among other things, diverse organizational, procedural, and substantive issues that may arise in such arbitrations. More information available at “Ad Hoc Arbitration Under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” Permanent Court of Arbitration, accessed from <http://www.pca-cpa.org/showpage.asp?pag_id=1288>.

57. Gupta and Saleque, op.cit., (ref. 50).
60. “Dhaka allows India to use Chittagong, Ashuganj for transhipment,” the Telegraph, Kolkata, 6 July 2009.
61. Banglabandha land port is located on about 10 acres of acquired land at the north-western tip of Bangladesh.
62. Gupta and Saleque, op.cit., (ref. 50).
63. Ibid.


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