

## India-Bangladesh Relationship: A 'Constructive' Phase

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In March 2016, India is going to host two of Bangladesh's senior most cabinet ministers: Foreign Minister Abul Hasan Mahmood Ali was on a two-day visit to New Delhi from March 1 to 3 and; Finance Minister, Abul Maal Abdul Muhith will follow his Foreign Minister in the middle of the month. The Foreign Minister was invited to attend the first 'Raisina Dialogue' held by the Observer Research Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Earlier, India's Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha, Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) was in Bangladesh from 21 Feb to 25 February 2016. The main focus of his visit was to improve bilateral relations, promote defence ties, and outline further areas of defence co-operation between the two countries. The COSC also gifted airframe of *Alloute* aircraft, used in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, to Bangladesh's Liberation War Museum in Dhaka.

The trips by the two Bangladeshi ministers coincide with a landmark deal struck by Indian public sector firm Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) to build a 1,320-megawatt coal power plant in Rampal close to the Sundarbans at the cost of USD \$1.6billion. BHEL was chosen out of three bidders including a Chinese public company. BHEL has to arrange the finance from the Indian Exim Bank. Of this finance, \$1.39 billion will be in foreign currency and another \$101 million in local currency. Also, due to growing bonhomie between India and Bangladesh, the Executive Committee of the National

Economic Council (ECNEC) approved the 'Inter District Border Road Construction: Mymensingh and Netrakona Districts Part' with an outlay of Tk 457.30 crore, aiming to boost connectivity and trade between Bangladesh and India.

During his visit, the External Affairs Minister of Bangladesh met his Indian counterpart, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj. The two ministers reviewed the progress on bilateral cooperation and relationship since the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015. The ministers also discussed the matters of mutual interests including future political exchanges, security, connectivity and transit, power, energy, water, etc. Mrs. Swaraj also referred to the issue of growing incidents of violence against the minorities in Bangladesh, to which the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister assured her that necessary action will be taken to check the rise of radicalism in his country. He also assured about safeguarding Bangladesh's secular, progressive and liberal character. They agreed to have next meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) in Dhaka, in July 2016 cochaired by the two ministers.

Prior to the visit of the Foreign Minister to India, in an interaction with the Indian journalists, Syed Muazzim Ali, Bangladesh's high commissioner to India, said "We shouldn't spend all our time only trying to resolve past problems. We should also look at the future." The current warmth, according to Ali is at its "highest" since 1974 – when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, had met and signed several key pacts – is rooted in a major breakthrough in 2015. The High Commissioner added, "Today, interstate relationship is pretty much based on economic cooperation, technical cooperation and investment, among other factors. There are other problems, but I am sure that we will be able to resolve those with goodwill and sincerity. We should not spend all our time resolving the past issues, we should also look into the future." According to him, a strong neighbourhood is in the "common interest" of Bangladesh and India. "Security has always been a problem in our part of the world. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has dealt with the issue with an iron hand," he mentioned. The Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali, during an interactive dialogue at think tank India Foundation, shared similar spirit, and used almost same words to describe current status of India-Bangladesh relationship.

Despite such bonhomie or close relationship, measures are must to secure India's long term interests in Bangladesh. Charu Sudan Kasturi writes, "New Delhi also knows that in the volatile neighbourhood it inhabits, today's warmth can evaporate quickly, especially if there is a change in regime in Dhaka. Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has traditionally viewed India with suspicion and stirred anti-India sentiments for political gains". That's the reason why, the Indian policy makers are very keen to use the current bonhomie to gain a deeper strategic footprint through long-term projects which they find earn goodwill that would be difficult to erase.

One of the major areas where India and Bangladesh are venturing into cooperation is over maritime affairs. This became easier for the two countries after they settledtheir Maritime Boundary Disputes with the help of Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague. On July 7, 2014, the PCA in its final verdict awarded 19,467 sq km of the total 25,602 sq km sea area (76 percent) to Bangladesh, leaving 6,135 sq km (24 percent) to India. <sup>5</sup>The judgement also allows Bangladesh a 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and access to open sea, thus, preventing it from turning into a land locked country. Further decoding the legality of the judgement, Ashwita Ambast writes, "The tribunal in its award created "grey areas". This area is where India's 200 nautical mile EEZ and inner continental shelf overlaps with the outer continental shelf of Bangladesh, resulting in dual claims over a single zone. While India has claims over the subsoil as well as the water column above it, Bangladesh's claim is limited to the former."<sup>6</sup>

Indian maritime experts are expected to visit Dhaka in March 2016 for a meeting of a joint task force on exploring greater cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. The decision to set up this joint task force was taken during the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015. As India has an advanced technology, it will help Bangladesh tap oil and other mineral resources in the Bay of Bengal.

Although the relationship between the two countries is passing through a constructive phase, taking into consideration *real polity*, the Government of India should also take steps to bridge at least a favourable working relationship with the BNP. The early

steps in this direction starts from stop branding the BNP out rightly an 'anti-India' group; and engaging its members in various capacities and at different forums, though cautiously so that the present dispensation does not find itself 'ditched'. This is necessary to secure India's long term economic and security related interests in Bangladesh.

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## **Ent Notes:**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Charu Sudan Kasturi (2016, 28 February) 'Bangla Strategic Hug –Neighbours Look Beyond Disputes to do Business' *The Telegraph* Retrieved from http://www.telegraphindia.com/1160229/jsp/nation/story\_71903.jsp#.VuaSu335jIU on 2 March 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Harun ur Rashid 'India-Bangladesh : UNCLOS and the Sea Boundary Dispute 'Retrieved from http://www.ipcs.org/article/india-the-world/india-bangladesh-unclos-and-the-sea-boundary-dispute-4557.html. Acessed on January16, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ashwita Ambast (2014, 28 August) 'Divvying up the Bay of Bengal' *The Hindu* August 28, 2014.