



Indian Foreign Secretary's visit to Bangladesh

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Background

A visit to Bangladesh on 11 and 12 May 2016 by India's Foreign Secretary Dr. S. Jaishankar happened at a time when the country was marred by the rise of militancy and its relationship with Pakistan was at nadir because of reasons rooted in its liberation war of 1971. To a great extent, the two are interrelated. One of the prime reasons of the rise of militancy in Bangladesh is the revival of groups which supported the Pakistan Armed forces to carry out all forms of brutalities against the Bengali speaking people in East Pakistan. They were against the liberation of the Eastern wing and formation of Bangladesh. Even after forty-five years of mass violence, these groups have not been apologetic for their actions. Instead, they violently attack those who raise questions against their politics and ideology. Unfortunately, in post Mujib period, the military regimes and political parties in Bangladesh had provided patronage to these groups, which helped them to settle down and religiously radicalise civil society. Some of the members of Jamat-i-Islami (JI) held important political offices during military regimes and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led democratic government.

In 2010, as a part of a 2008 electoral promise, the Awami League (AL) set up International Crime Tribunal 2 (ICT2). The tribunal tried many guilty men and as soon as it started giving its verdict, the level of violence escalated. Those opposing death sentences to the perpetrators of heinous crimes in 1971 began violence on the streets to mark their opposition. As the guilty men once helped Pakistani establishment, Pakistan had expressed its concern over their execution

which has led to deterioration of diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The latest one is the diplomatic spat between the two countries over the execution of Motiur Haider Nizami, who was founding member of Al-Badr and head of JI.

As militancy has increased, there is a rise in killings of members of sectarian, religious and ideological minorities. Also, internal violence in Bangladesh has deep repercussions on the Indian states bordering that country. In 2010 and 2011, several members of *Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) crossed over to India. They set up hubs to provide training to prospective militants in manufacturing explosives and establishing links with international terror outfits. Facts uncovered by Intelligence Bureau (IB) and National Investigation Agency (NIA) show that the JMB had begun operations in 2010 at Beldanga and Lalgola with around 10 to 25 men. Within four years, the module successfully recruited 180 men spread across seven districts of central and north Bengal, Howrah and Kolkata, from where it drew logistical support to carry out its operations in India and Bangladesh.¹ In 2014, the group hatched a plot to kill the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but their plot was foiled by the police and NIA. Shahnur Alom alias "doctor Ilias", a top JMB operative after his arrest by the Assam police confirmed that several top leaders from JMB had visited at least one madrasa in the state and conducted motivational training there.² Many of the Bangaldeshi groups have symbiotic relationship with the insurgent groups from the northeast states of India.

Bilateral Relationships and Concerns

In such a background, the visit by the Indian Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh and his discussions over the issue of militancy has been significant to both countries. Repeatedly, although it is an internal matter, India has voiced its concern over the killing of minorities in Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh's national daily, *The Daily Star*, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance in India has voiced concern over the recent killings of religious minority people, particularly the Hindus, attacks on temples and grabbing of their properties in Bangladesh and called for an immediate halt to such incidents.³ The report in paper, quoting leaders of Hindu community in Bangladesh, wrote that a few days before the visit by the Indian Foreign Secretary, representation from Bangladesh Hindu-Bouddha-Christian-Oikya Parishad had a meeting with the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka.. During the meeting, the minority community leaders informed the Indian envoy about the repression

on religious minorities.⁴ “I believe he [High Commissioner] would brief his Foreign Secretary about the situation the religious minorities in Bangladesh are faced with,” the leader of the group said. On April 22, the rights body at a press conference in the city claimed that ten religious minority people were killed, 366 injured and eight women were raped across the country in the first three months of this year. In most of the cases, the perpetrators used political power and influence to oppress the religious minorities, said a report titled, “Human Rights Situation of Minorities in Bangladesh – Jan-March 2016”, which was launched at the press conference. On March 5, the Oikya Parishad at another press conference claimed that around 24 religious minorities were killed and 1,562 families were affected in 262 incidents of attack and repression last year.⁵

On the issue of militancy in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi media reports talked about the combined effort by India and the USA to tackle it. The report was based on the visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary, just after the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal's visit to Dhaka on May 4-5. Biswal had high-level talks on the security situation in Bangladesh.⁶ In Dhaka, she had an exclusive meeting with the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Harsh Vardhan Shringla on May 4. The two agreed that India and the US did not want instability in Bangladesh.⁷

Rejecting speculations and media reports, on condition of anonymity, official sources suggested that the “ basic purpose of the visit by the Foreign Secretary to Dhaka was to review the bilateral relations between the two countries. The Foreign Secretary took a stock of developments over the the agreed agendas between India and Bangladesh” , during the June 2015 visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dhaka.

On the issue of joint effort with either Bangladesh or the USA, the Foreign Secretary said that he had learnt about it from the media reports in Dhaka, to which he said “ I don’t think there is any base to it”⁸. But he highlighted India’s concern over rising militancy in Bangladesh. Indian Foreign Secretary conveyed India’s strong support to Bangladesh in its fight against extremism and terrorism, particularly in response to recent attacks against vulnerable sections of society.⁹ After meeting his counterpart Shahidul Haque, he said, “I told the Foreign Secretary that I am here to convey the government of India's strong support to the government of Bangladesh as it battles terrorism and extremism.”¹⁰ “This is an issue which is of direct concern

to us as neighbours,"¹¹ Jaishankar said, adding, "We are in touch and we work closely bilaterally and closely together on those matters."¹² Briefing reporters after the 90-minute meeting, the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary said that Bangladesh and India are working bilaterally to eliminate extremism and terrorism. "We are also working regionally and internationally..."¹³ He said that during the meeting they exchanged notes and said, "Our and their [Bangladesh and India] analysis have a lot of similarities." When asked about Bangladesh, India and the US working together to counter violent extremism and terrorism, Foreign Secretary Shahidul said, "We are working bilaterally [Bangladesh and India] in this regard. We have discussed about further strengthening the existing mechanism to contain terrorism more effectively."¹⁴

Besides discussing the issue of militancy, the two countries also took stock of the bilateral issues and developments over the agreements entered into during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015. On the latter issue, the Indian Foreign Secretary said, "So we sat down to look at the progress in all those issues. I must tell you we had a very good report to present ... we have really moved forward in a number of areas."¹⁵ After a meeting with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the Foreign Secretary said that India and Bangladesh have set "a model" in bilateral cooperation as he called. He said, "The model is being highly appreciated in India."¹⁶ The Foreign Secretary told the Premier that India made 14 commitments during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Dhaka visit in June 2015 and eight of them have been fulfilled. "We have made good progress as eight commitments have already been fulfilled in nearly one year and we are vigorously working to meet other pledges," Jaishankar said, particularly pointing out notable developments in cooperation in energy and power sector.¹⁷ Sheikh Hasina said, "The bilateral ties between the two neighbouring countries reached a new height following his (Modi) visit ... we are in fact enjoying the best of relations."¹⁸ The Foreign Secretary also thanked the Bangladesh government for its support to India for its initiatives for launching the SAARC Satellite.¹⁹ On a question about Modi's letter to Hasina, he said that the Indian Prime Minister invited the Bangladesh Prime Minister to attend a summit of BIMSTEC member countries on the sideline of the BRICS Summit to be held in Goa in mid October.²⁰ He said that the Prime Minister has decided in principle to attend. Responding to a question on the Teesta water sharing issue, the Foreign Secretary said that problems regarding water, drought and the environment have been discussed.²¹

Conclusion

The visit of Indian Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh in such a situation is a sign of India's support to the country in fighting against militancy and terrorism. As developments in Bangladesh have deep impacts on India, helping it to fight against the menace will naturally help India to check any incident of violence in the states bordering Bangladesh.

The stock taking over the developments on agreements would help the two countries to move ahead in other areas of cooperation instead of remaining stuck on a particular project. This will also boost the confidence of investors and infrastructure developers in the country.

Finally, the aim of this visit was also to set up a platform for Joint Consultative Commission meeting in Bangladesh which is likely to be attended by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj in July 2016.²²

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ Dwaipayan Ghosh, "Boundary of Terror" (2014, 31 October) *The Times of India*.

² "Burdwan blast: JMB tried to induct boys from Assam madrasa to create modules" (2014, December 7) *Indian Express*.

³ "Minority Repression likely on Agenda" (2016,12 May) *The Daily Star* Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/minority-repression-likely-agenda-1222426>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ "US, India to work together to help Dhaka to fight terror" (2016, 10 May) *The Daily Star*, Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/us-india-work-together-help-dhaka-fight-terror-1221427>.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ “Together against all terrorism” (2016, 13 May) Retrieved
<http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/together-against-all-terrorism-1222996>.

⁹ “Visit of foreign secretary to Bangladesh” (11-12 May 2016) Retrieved from
http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26819/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_May_1112_2016.

¹⁰ “Together against all terrorism” (2016, 13 May) Retrieved
<http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/together-against-all-terrorism-1222996>.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ “BD, India set model in cooperation, Jaishankar tells PM” (2016, 12 May) *Daily Observer*

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ “Together against all terrorism,” (2016, 13 May) Retrieved
<http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/together-against-all-terrorism-1222996>.

²¹ Ibid

²² “Visit of foreign secretary to Bangladesh” (11-12 May 2016) Retrieved from http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26819/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_May_1112_2016.