



Sheikh Hasina's India Visit

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On Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina arrived at the New Delhi Airport on April 7, 2017 for a four day state visit to India. The warmth & depth of the India-Bangladesh friendly relationship, mutual trust & respect for each other, and the cooperative approach in dealing with the complex issues was at its full display throughout the visit. One can simply understand the importance India attached to this visit with the fact that, ignoring the official protocol, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself went to the airport to receive his Bangladeshi counterpart and accord her an effusive welcome.

During her visit, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made it a point to publically honour the Indian martyrs who had fought alongside the Muktibahini guerrillas in the run up to the liberation of Bangladesh back in 1971. For this very purpose, on April 8, a ceremony was organised at the Manekshaw Centre in New Delhi. Both the top leaders—Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina—presided over the ceremony and addressed the gathering. With the public honouring of martyred Indian soldiers, Sheikh Hasina officially accorded due recognition of the important role played by India in the liberation war of Bangladesh. Reciprocating the good gesture, India renamed a road in New Delhi in memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The two prime ministers, on April 8, held discussions on a range of issues including terrorism, regional security & stability, defence cooperation, water sharing, space technology, connectivity, development partnership, energy, trade & investment, and people-to-people relationship. The two leaders also undertook a comprehensive review of the bilateral relationship and underlined that the relations between India and Bangladesh were based on fraternal ties and an all-encompassing partnership that goes far beyond the strategic partnership. The joint statement issued, thereafter, provided the essence of the discussion held at the highest level and areas in which the two countries agreed to cooperate and strengthen the relationship further.

Major Issues in Hasina-Modi Meeting

Barring a few exceptions, the recent visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been termed highly successful in India and satisfactory in Bangladesh. The joint statement issued after the meeting of two Prime Ministers on April 8, rightly and positively addressed most of the concerns of the two countries and laid down the framework for strengthening the friendly relationship in future. The two countries recognised the gravity of challenge posed by terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation in the region and pledged to work together to create stable and secure environment in the region. The two countries also agreed that effective implementation of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) would resolve most of the pressing problems pertaining to the India-Bangladesh border. Killings at the border have been a contentious issue between the two countries for quite some time. To address the issue, both the prime ministers not only reiterated the need to bring down the number of deaths to zero, but also directed the concerned authorities to work together to achieve the objective.

The development partnership, cooperation in the power and energy sector, trade and investment promotion, and connectivity figured prominently in the joint statement. The two countries noted with satisfaction the progress made so far in these areas and agreed to intensify their bilateral cooperation further. The two top leaders shared the view that there existed a lot of potential for the growth of bilateral trade and emphasised the need for removing all trade barriers including the port restrictions. They also directed the concerned authorities in the respective country to facilitate the setting up of Indian Special Economic Zones (SEZ) quickly on already identified location. They hoped that SEZs would encourage Indian businessmen to bring more and more investment to Bangladesh.

On connectivity, the two sides expressed satisfaction over the operationalisation of the Coastal Shipping Agreement and stressed the need to expedite the construction of the Ashuganj Inland Container Port (ICP). The two leaders jointly inaugurated the recently restored Radhikapur-Birol railway link which is expected to facilitate cargo movement between the two neighbour countries. They also witnessed the trial run of Khulna-Kolkata passenger train, and hailed the launch of Kolkata-Khulna-Dhaka bus service.

Apart from this, the two countries emphasised the advantages of sub-regional cooperation in a number of areas including power, water resources, trade, transit and connectivity. The two sides reaffirmed their shared commitment to deepen regional cooperation for mutual benefits in all the areas. They felt satisfied with neighbouring countries' decision to participate in the South Asia Satellite Project that would offer application of space technology for development of the region. The two leaders also agreed to cooperate in the peaceful use of outer space.

The two sides underlined the importance of a strong United Nations and emphasised the need to reform the powerful body of United Nations Security Council (UNSC). They also reaffirmed their commitment to support the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) for taking up the comprehensive reform of the UNSC. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reiterated her support for India's candidature for a permanent seat in an expanded and reformed UNSC.

The Agreements and MoUs

As expected, after the high level meeting, the two countries signed over thirty documents. Out of the signed documents, 11 have been listed as agreements, while 24 belong to the MoU category. Additionally, two Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) were also agreed upon but the SoPs were not included in the official document list. Out of the eleven inked agreements, four belong to the power sector, three come under the category of cooperation in the nuclear field strictly restricted to the peaceful purposes, and one each pertains to the regulation of Motor Vehicle Passenger Traffic, Petro-refinery cooperation, construction of thirty six community clinics in Bangladesh, and audio-visual co-production.

The list of MoUs included among others, the mode of operation of Border Haat, passenger and cruise services in coastal and protocol routes, peaceful uses of outer space, information technology & electronics, supply of Regassified Liquefied Natural Gas (RLNG), defence cooperation framework, cooperation in the field of national security and strategic studies, extension of Defence Line of Credit (\$500 million), and setting up 500 mmscfd LNG terminal by Reliance Power.

The MoUs on Defence Cooperation

Although a whole range of issues, mentioned above, were taken up for discussion resulting in the signing of thirty five documents, but the MoUs on bilateral defence cooperation received the maximum attention in both the countries. Although the full details are yet to emerge, it is believed to be the first deal of its kind signed by Bangladesh with any country formalising defence cooperation. There are four MoUs that come under the defence category. Out of these four, only one talks about the Defence Cooperation Framework. The other important defence MoU is exclusively meant to benefit Bangladesh under which India has extended a \$500 million Defence Line of Credit which could be used to buy defence equipments from India. The other two MoUs are signed between the training institutions of the two countries. The MoU between Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (nilgiris) Tamilnadu and Defence Services Command and Staff College, Mirpur, Dhaka is meant to enhance cooperation in the field of National Security and Strategic Studies. The MoU between National Defence College, Mirpur and National Defence College, New Delhi is again meant to enhance cooperation in the field of National Security and Strategic Studies.

Ever since the possibility of defence MoUs appeared in public domain, intense debated had started in the respective countries. In India, given the changing geo-political realities in the region, it was seen as a natural move to strengthen the friendly ties between the two countries. However, that was not to be the case with Bangladesh. Some sections in the country, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), strongly objected to any such development. It was argued that the deal would result in Dhaka's complete dependence on New Delhi on the one hand, and jeopardise its relations with Beijing on the other.

BNP has been at the forefront, and quite vocal too, in targeting Hasina government over the issue. Soon after learning about the matter, it warned the government that any defence deal

with India would be suicidal and a threat to the country's sovereignty. Now, after the completion of the visit and signing of the documents, BNP chief Khaleda Zia has termed Sheikh Hasina's India visit as a "failed one" and stated that the Prime Minister returned home "empty handed." She also added that, if voted to power, her government would review all the "anti-state" deals and MoUs signed with India.¹ Many Bangladeshi analysts and commentators view the recent development in India-Bangladesh relations as a response to Dhaka's growing defence ties with Beijing.

Though a section in Bangladesh has raised voices against the defence cooperation framework, the MoU is a natural culmination of close bilateral security cooperation between the two countries and is in the interest of both the countries and the region. Given the changing realities in the region and an omnipotent challenge of militancy at home, Dhaka herself was equally willing to enter into a formal understanding with New Delhi. Bangladesh government, in a report shared with India's Home Ministry in recent past had conceded that extremist elements belonging to Harkat-ul-Jihadi al-Islamia (HUJI), and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) increased their infiltration bids manifold and crossed over to Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.² India's National Investigating Agency (NIA) too had found a direct role of JMB in October 2014 blast in Burdwan. The intelligence wing of the Border Security Force (BSF) had also briefed Assam Police about over three thousand JMB and HUJI militant who crossed over to India from Bangladesh.³

The above developments suggest that the two countries have had genuine concerns about peace and stability in the region. Their decision to cooperate with each other in a number of areas including defence will not only be helpful in this regard, but also be in the national interest of the two countries.

Non-Conclusion of Teesta Agreement

There is a perception in Bangladesh for quite some time that India has not been forthcoming to address some of the genuine concerns of Bangladesh. Sharing of water is an important as well as contentious issue between the two countries which needs urgent attention. Given the opposition by the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banarjee, it was almost clear that the Teesta water sharing agreement would not be included in the final list of agreements. The general impression in India was that the matter would prominently figure in the Hasina-Modi meeting on April 8, 2017. However, in Bangladesh some believed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi might make a last minute attempt to deliver on the issue.

Teesta water treaty was originally drafted in 2010 after several rounds of talks and it was supposed to be signed during former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit in 2011. However, due to the strong opposition by Mamta Banerjee the treaty could not be signed. During Prime Minister Modi's visit in 2016, many had high hopes of inking the deal but that too could not happen. Mamta Banerjee was not happy with the sharing formula because of the interests of the farmers in Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, South and North Dinajpur, and Darjeeling. These districts have considerable minority population and are electorally important for Trinamul Congress (TMC).

As expected, the Teesta deal could not be signed for obvious reasons. Sheikh Hasina's meeting even with Mamta Banerjee did not melt the ice. Instead, Mamta Banerji bluntly surprised everyone by proposing an alternative. She said that there was no water in Teesta to share. She proposed that the Indian government should look at other river systems to share water with Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina did raise the issue during her meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and requested him to conclude the interim agreement on sharing of the water of Teesta as agreed upon by the two countries in January 2011. To this Prime Minister Modi responded by saying that his government was working with all stakeholders in the country for an early conclusion of the agreement. The two prime ministers directed the concerned officials to finalise discussions over the sharing of waters of seven other rivers including the Feni, Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla, and Dudhkumar. They also appreciated the positive steps taken for jointly developing the Ganges Barrage in Bangladesh.

Although, the much awaited Teesta deal remained inconclusive and a cause of disappointment in Bangladesh, the visit by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was important in many ways. It has significantly brought the relationship to a new level. The visit has strengthened the friendship bond between India and Bangladesh on the one hand, and opened new arenas of cooperation on the other.

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

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/pm-returned-empty-handed-1390516>

² <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/86303>

³ <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2017/03/18/jmb-huji-militants-india/>