



Indian Defence Minister's Visit to Bangladesh

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Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar's visit to Bangladesh from 30 November to 1 December 2016 is largely seen by many analysts and commentators as an attempt by India to neutralize China-Bangladesh defence cooperation. The media across the world is rife with this rumour because of the timing of the visit which has taken place a month after the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka, and two weeks after Beijing has delivered two submarines on 14 November 2016 to the Bangladesh navy. This may be a concern to Indian Defence Minister but not the only reason for the visit. The visit was to take a stock of new developments in the region and its impact on India. This was the first visit by an Indian Defence Minister to Bangladesh in last forty five years.

Engagements in Dhaka

In Bangladesh, the Indian Defence Minister led a defence delegation that included Vice Chiefs of Army, Air Force, and Navy along with the Director General of the Coast Guard. He met the President of Bangladesh Abdul Hamid. The Bangladesh President recalled with gratitude the contribution of people and the government of India in the country's liberation war in 1971. Many valiant soldiers of Indian defence forces embraced martyrdom in the war.ⁱ During the meeting the Indian Defence Minister stressed the need for taking joint efforts to enhance defence relations between India and Bangladesh.

The Indian Defence Minister also met, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 1 November 2016. The Prime Minister vowing "zero tolerance" against terrorism assured India that Bangladesh will not allow its soil to be used for terror acts against any country. "We won't tolerate any sorts of terrorism and militancy and won't allow our land to be used for carrying out terrorist acts against any country," Hasina told Parrikar. ⁱⁱ According to Hasina's press secretary Ihsanul Karim, she recalled with gratitude the contribution of Indian armed forces to Bangladesh's Liberation War

and told Parrikar that during her upcoming visit to India , which is expected from 18-20 December 2016, she would honour those Indian soldiers who died during the 1971 freedom war. On his part, Parrikar said "it was our moral responsibility to extend help to Bangladesh in the War of Liberation as a friendly country and we provided that assistance." ⁱⁱⁱAfter the meeting, the Defence Minister handed over Hasina a replica of a helicopter that India used during Bangladesh's liberation war and photographs of paratroopers who took part in that war.^{iv} Parrikar offered India's expertise to train Bangladesh Coast Guards for enhanced capacity building to guard the country's southern coastlines along the Bay of Bengal.^v The Indian Defence Minister also met premier's security adviser Major Gen (retd.) Tariq Ahmed Siddiqui.^{vi}

Security Situation in the Region

The visit by the Indian Defence Minister to Dhaka has to be contextualised and linked to the deteriorating security situations in the region which have short or long term repercussions and also influences current developments in both countries.

As a result of fresh ethnic strife which began in the middle of November 2016, a large number of Rohingya Muslims from the Rakhine state in Myanmar are crossing into the borders of Bangladesh.

This is not the first time that they are being displaced from their home; in past also they had crossed the borders to secure themselves from persecution. After crossing into Bangladesh's border many try to get into India. Earlier some of them managed to cross into India and have reached up to Delhi. This often creates tensions between the migrants and the locals.

Bangladesh is turning into a hub of militancy. As alleged, the *Daesh* and *Al Qaeda* are trying to set up their foot prints in Bangladesh. Even if it remains an accusation, the local militants are growing strongly in Bangladesh. Their organizational capacity can be estimated by their 1 July 2016 act when seven members from a radical group carried out horrific attack in Gulshan area of Dhaka in which more than twenty people were killed. According to Bangladesh security officials, two local militant groups, Ansar-al-Islam and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) were behind that heinous crime. These militants due to having a porous border often cross into Indian side. Sometimes they also engage in conspiracy against their own country's leadership. 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.^{vii} In both situations India is affected. Therefore, India has extended its support to Bangladesh. During his visit to Dhaka in May 2016, the Indian foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar conveyed India's strong support to Bangladesh in its fight against extremism and terrorism, particularly in response to attacks against vulnerable sections of society.^{viii} After meeting his counterpart Bangladeshi 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”.^{ix} “This is an issue which is of direct concern to us as neighbours,” he added.^x To fight against extremism and militancy, the two countries are also carrying out joint military exercise since 2010. The Sixth edition of India-Bangladesh Joint Military Exercise “SAMPRITI-2016” commenced at Bangabandhu Senanibas, Tangail on 4 November 2016. Main focus of this edition of the fourteen day joint exercise was on Counter-Terrorism Operations in mountainous and jungle terrain under the United Nations Mandate.^{xi}

Finally, the nature of political relationship between India and China is such that the presence of Chinese ships or submarines in Bay of Bengal (BoB) is a matter of concern to the Indian security establishment. Since 2010, Beijing has supplied Dhaka with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets, as well as surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.^{xii} That is in addition to a new Ming-class submarine Bangladesh ordered from China, which joined the Bangladeshi fleet in November 2016.^{xiii} In January 2016, for the first time, three Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy vessels, including two missile frigates, sailed through the BoB before they docked at Chittagong port in Bangladesh. It included the PLA Navy's 21st fleet, comprising of the guided-missile frigates Liuzhou and Sanya, and a comprehensive supply ship Qinghaihu.^{xiv} The Chinese white paper on the ‘Belt and Road’ mentions that the BCIM EC is “closely related to it”.^{xv} Bangladesh features in the Belt and Road both as a part of the overland component – via the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor – and as a port hub for the Maritime Silk Road.^{xvi} The graduation and closeness of relationship can be assess from the words used in the joint statement released after the visit of Xi Jinping to Dhaka in October 2016 ; it uses the phrase ‘Strategic Partnership of Cooperation’ in the title. This is different from what was used in 2014 when Sheikh Hasina visited China. At that time the joint statement used the phrase ‘Deepening the Closer Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation’ in title.^{xvii}

Conclusion

In the light of above mentioned developments the visit of India’s Defence Minister to Bangladesh was significant to secure India’s interests in the region. The Defence Minister also visited Chittagong Military Academy. To tackle internal challenges India offered military hardware and offshore patrolling vessel to Bangladesh.

On the issue of China-Bangladesh cooperation, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Abul Hasan Mahmood Ali , a day before the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s to Bangladesh on 14-15 October 2016 , had clarified that Bangladesh is still following the foreign policy principle set by the country’s founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which was “friendship to all, malice to none”.^{xviii} The foreign minister may be correct about his country’s approach towards India and China, but India has to act rationally and take steps to protect its security related interests in south Asia.

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

Endnotes

ⁱ ibid

ⁱⁱ Retrieved from <http://www.news18.com/news/world/wont-allow-bangladesh-soil-to-be-used-for-terror-sheikh-hasina-1318424.html>. Cited verbatim.

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid

^{iv} ibid

^v ibid

^{vi} ibid

^{vii} ‘Burdwan blast: JMB tried to induct boys from Assam madrasa to create modules’ (2014, 7 December) *Indian Express* .

^{viii} ‘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

^{ix} ‘Together against all terrorism’ (2016, 13 May) Retrieved <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/together-against-all-terrorism-1222996>

^x ibid

^{xi} Retrieved from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=153334>. Cited verbatim.

^{xii} Tiezzi, Shannon (2015, 4 December) “China, Bangladesh Pledge Deeper Military Cooperation,” *The Diplomat*, Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-bangladesh-pledge-deeper-military-cooperation/> on 18 April 2016.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Anant Krishnan, “In first Chinese Frigates dock in Bangladesh,” Retrieved from <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/in-a-first-chinese-navy-frigates-dock-in-bangladesh/1/582133.html> on 25 April 2016.

^{xv} Retrieved from http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm

^{xvi} ibid

^{xvii} <http://mofa.gov.bd/media/joint-statement-between-peoples-republic-bangladesh-and-peoples-republic-china-deepening>

^{xviii} Retrieved from <http://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=38103>