

CHINA AS A FACTOR IN INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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Abstract:

India and Bangladesh are the South Asian neighbours, which have maintained a friendly relationship despite the occasional disputes. Due to historic, cultural as well as geographical reasons, the two nations have been considerably close to each other. The two nations were strong allies during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Bangladesh shares 4094 kilometres of land border with India on three sides, the fourth side being open to Bay of Bengal. Various issues need to be resolved if the relationship between the two are to be improved. India's relationship with the other South Asian Countries should not be dictated by its relationship with Pakistan and China, with whom it has undergone prolonged conflict and competition. If the two countries wish to continue their relationship with each other, they need to take a good look at the stand they take towards other South Asian Countries also. Apart from the SAARC region, Bangladesh is an important conduct for India's Look East Policy. Facts show that India -Bangladesh relations today are highly imbalanced and lopsided. At present China's growing influence over Bangladesh has serious impact over India – Bangladesh relations. It is of greater interest for both India and Bangladesh to foster the bilateral relations based on mutual understanding, respect and reciprocity, and to adopt all the multifarious mutually beneficial cooperative efforts for the overall socio-economic development.

Keywords- Bangladesh, China, Disputes, Development, Look-East-Policy, Relations.

India is often seen as a big power amongst its neighbours in the subcontinent. Bangladesh, in relation to India, has to take notice of the large anti-Indian sentiments reigning in its soil. After all, no successful democracy can escape the feelings and sentiments of its people. In fact, the nourishment of a democracy depends on the will of the people, and the performance of democracy is calculated by the scale of fulfilment of the wills of its people. For several years, Bangladesh has shared a sense of anxiety of living next to a bigger neighbour. Thus, geographical proximity, asymmetric economies, feeling of insecurity, necessity to help Bangladesh and negligence of Indian leaders have been the defining factors in Indo-Bangladesh relationship. Given this situation, China has silently made deep inroads into Bangladesh and with time it has sought to expand its footprint in the

region. Bangladesh, has identified China as a security guarantor, to counter the influence of India, the perceived hegemon. Recent developments in the economic relationship between China and Bangladesh have sent a few alarming signals to India. At first glance it seems that Bangladesh is interested in the relationship with China to increase its bargaining capacity with India, as Nepal did at the time of Kingship. Over the year, China and Bangladesh have signed a plenty of bilateral agreements including economic agreements, soft loans, social contracts, infrastructural development, military sales etc. at reduced prices, with China. But India's advantages of physical compulsions of Bangladesh, which is locked by India on three sides, historic-cultural linkage, etc. has sought to a close alliance with India.

India, as the largest democracy of the world, likes to have democratic governments in its neighbourhood. Bangladesh, where democracy is yet to take firm roots, is always threatened by extremist Islamic forces who hardly believe in democratic values, and therefore would naturally like to go nearer to the countries that do not practice democracy. Thus, China emerges as a natural choice for such forces. This rings alarm for India. Bangladesh has always used China as a counter balance against India. This strategy has made New Delhi suspicious of growing Chinese interference in Bangladesh. Dhaka sought Chinese help in constructing a highway passing through Myanmar to Yuan province in China. Further Bangladesh along with China and Myanmar agree to build 900 Km. Kunming highway linking Chittagong with Kunming through Myanmar to boost trade. Dhaka also influenced Beijing to develop and use the Chittagong Port and develop a deep sea port at Sonadia Island. This becomes problematic for India who fears Chinese access to the Myanmar naval base in Hanggyi Islands and the monitoring stations established at Coco Island in the north of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India fears China, in encircling India as part of its' String of Pearls' strategy. China has been giving huge aid for modernizing and upgrading of port facilities in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which could be used by China as a possible base for operating against India if situation demands. In 2002 Bangladesh signed Defence Cooperation Agreement with China. Subsequently China emerged as the major supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh. It supplied most of arms and equipment at reduced prices. In 2005, China signed Cooperation Agreement on the Peaceful use of Nuclear Energy with Bangladesh. This Indian concern is exploited by Dhaka which always tried to bargain between India and China. Bangladesh's relations with China can deeply affected India's foreign policies with Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh says that it is trying to maintain an equal relationship between India and China, it is clearly trying to extract more benefits from India. To take the matter further, sometimes in its relationship with China, what are advantageous for Bangladesh are not necessarily so for India. In 2008, Bangladesh set up a missile launch pad near Chittagong Port with assistance from China. This is quite similar to China's involvement in the development of Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Baluchistan. Chinese presence in Chittagong has enough potential to endanger long term Indian security interests mainly North East states. This has posed a major security dilemma for India. These developments have made India apprehensive.

At the SAARC meeting, Bangladesh proposed the name of China to become an observer state. The proposal was approved by Nepal and Pakistan. This paves the way for China to make an entry into SAARC. This has caused an anxiety to India. Beijing has given economic assistance for infrastructural developments such as sea port, railways and roadways developments and its assistance to modernize military forces and airfields in Bangladesh and other countries in South Asia in general. The strategic nexus between China and Pakistan has also been reflected in the behaviour of Bangladesh towards India. Due to the highly polarized party system in Bangladesh of which one (Awami League) is known for its pro-India stand and the other (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) for its China- tilt, India has become a target of the later. As a result the Indo-Bangladeshi Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace signed on March 19, 1972 forging close bilateral relations for a period of 25 years became the subject of resentment and controversy in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh must not forget its geopolitical difficulties being sandwiched between two rising states China and India. Bangladesh is aware of the fact that it is bounded on its three sides by India and that may be a limitation on its developmental prospects if it displeases India. Presence of China on its soil may at times enforce Bangladesh to make adjustment with its sovereignty. In this regard Bangladesh Army Chief General Mohammed Abdul Mubeen's statement during his visit to Pune (India) on November 29, 2011 gives a positive message. He was quoted saying that "Dhaka's relations with Beijing in no way affect India-Bangladesh ties since they are not strategic" and "China is only helping Bangladesh in infrastructure development". Expressing concern over terrorist activities in the region, he said "Bangladesh does not allow terrorist hide-outs or camps on its territory".

China aligned with Pakistan and had opposed Bangladesh independence. Bangladesh's ties with China have come a long way since the country split from Pakistan, China's ally, in the 1971 liberation war. Cold War realities meant China aligned with Pakistan, its all-weather friend, and opposed Bangladesh's independence. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China used its first veto power to deny UN membership to Bangladesh in 1972. They eventually established formal bilateral relations in 1975 but prior to that China's approach consisted primarily of countering Bangladesh to reassure its ally Pakistan. Sino-Bangladesh relations have improved steadily since then, evolving into a cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Convergences in their strategic calculations – for instance, their mutual view of India as a common threat – and economic incentives are the principal drivers of improving relationship.

Chinese officials made their first high-level visit in 1978, which set off improvements in bilateral relations. Greater momentum came in 2013, with the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Dhaka formally joined the BRI during President Xi's visit to Bangladesh in 2016, when relations were upgraded to a strategic partnership. BRI membership has brought Bangladesh an influx of Chinese investment totaling USD 38.05 billion, roughly equal to 10 percent of Bangladesh's gross domestic product, the largest sum ever pledged to Bangladesh by a single country. China is now Bangladesh's top trading partner, direct foreign investor, trade

importer, and military hardware supplier. In 2020, China also granted duty-free access to its market for 97 percent of Bangladeshi products.

Defense cooperation has been the main building block in the Sino-Bangladesh relationship: China's economic footprint is a relatively new and an ever-increasing dimension, but defense cooperation has been the main component of the relationship. China has become Bangladesh's top source of military hardware. Dhaka, likewise, is China's second-largest arms export destination, behind only Pakistan. In the 2010-19 period, China accounted for 72 percent of Bangladesh's total arms imports.

Bangladesh recognized the new opportunity that China represents; realpolitik began to dictate its foreign policy calculations, powered primarily by economic incentives. China's appeal lay in the contrast with India's hegemonic posture, coercive tactics, and resource scarcity, especially when garlanded with China's practice of non-interference in Bangladesh's domestic affairs. Massive investments in infrastructure and other sectors sealed China's allure. As Bangladesh-China ties continue to deepen, India worries that its traditional regional partner may follow the same path as Nepal and Sri Lanka which are clearly hedging towards Beijing.

Consequently, Dhaka faces the risk of becoming embroiled in a China-India tug of war for regional influence. It has so far avoided this trap by maintaining balanced relations with both, emphasizing political and cultural affinities with India and economic ties with China. This balancing act is growing more challenging as competition between Beijing and New Delhi for regional influence intensifies. China is gaining ground in the fierce competition between India and China. India-Bangladesh relations have been on an upswing since 2009, in terms of security and economic cooperation. In 2015, it displaced India as Bangladesh's top trading partner, knocking India out of the position it had held for 40 years. Imports from China represented 34 percent of Bangladesh's total imports in 2019. Given China was also the origin of Bangladesh's highest investment from a single source, and the bilateral strategic partnership between them, New Delhi naturally felt it was falling behind. In response, India has deployed a wide variety of tools – rather asymmetric but significant - to counter China's inroads.

Bangladesh has long wanted to build a deep-sea port on the Bay of Bengal, giving the project a high priority on the national agenda. China had pursued the Bangladesh government for decades to construct the Sonadia project. However, India's opposition led to the scrapping of the Sonadia project altogether. Recognizing geopolitical realities, Bangladesh welcomed Japanese funding to build a deep-sea port in Matarbari.

While the Bangladeshi population's perception of China is overwhelmingly positive, the degree of enthusiasm varies among the political, military, and business elites and ordinary citizens. Bangladesh's military and business community tend to be the strongest advocates of deeper Bangladesh-China relations. Military planners see a convergence with China in strategic calculations, given that India engulfs Bangladesh on three sides and hostile neighbor Myanmar shares the only other land border. Likewise, China sees long-term strategic interest in strengthening ties with India's neighbors. It therefore provides sophisticated military hardware at comparatively

low prices that Bangladesh could not obtain elsewhere. However, Bangladeshis have reservations about China's ties with Myanmar to weigh against their positive attitude to convergence with China to buffer against India. Nonetheless, military ties with China are long-standing and deep-rooted.

Despite its mounting dependence on China, Bangladesh has been careful to balance its relations with India and China. The Awami League government has shown sensitivity to India's security concerns. It has, for instance, avoided involving China in projects that would have implications for India's security. It has also played an important role in supporting India's counter-insurgency efforts in the Northeast by sending back to India militants taking sanctuary on its soil and shutting down insurgent training camps.

It is India that has underperformed in strengthening the India-Bangladesh relationship. Successive governments in New Delhi have failed to deliver on their promise to settle the Teesta dispute, making it hard for the Awami League government to justify its cooperation with Delhi on issues of importance to India. The Citizenship Amendment Act as well as the National Register of Citizens have serious implications for Bangladesh.

The June 15th clash between Chinese and Indian forces in Eastern Ladakh, and China's expanding footprint in South Asia has generated a growing sense of alarm in New Delhi. China's debt-trap diplomacy in Sri Lanka, its close relationship with Pakistan, and deepening ties with Nepal, underscore the extent to which China has leveraged its Belt and Road vision to cultivate new relationships across the region. Many Bangladeshis are now asking whether Bangladesh will turn closer to Beijing, or seek to smooth over its turbulent relationship with India in the face of China's growing presence in South Asia. Dhaka's ruling Awami League has sought to smooth over many of these developments. In the days following Modi's adoption of the controversial CAA and the NRC in 2019, which generated international outrage across the Muslim world, Bangladeshi policymakers remained silent and largely dismissed these developments as an internal matter of India.

Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Bangladesh's GDP growth is now higher than both Pakistan and India. Despite New Delhi's recent diplomatic disregard for its smaller neighbour, it is unlikely that Bangladesh will openly break with India. While this decades-old alignment with India will not be threatened by China's recent moves in Bangladesh, it should raise alarm in New Delhi that after the June 2020 border clash between India and China, all of India's South Asian neighbours, including Bangladesh, remained silent and did not condemn China. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's rare phone call to Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, highlight the challenges faced by New Delhi to rebuild bridges with Bangladesh. China's increasing footprints in South Asia over the years has been a matter of concern to New Delhi for some time. As per as the approach of the Bangladesh government towards the issue is concerned, the author argues that Sheikh Hasina government has dealt with the situation very carefully. Rather than playing one against another, Sheikh Hasina government had made a perfect balance between New Delhi and Beijing in its foreign policy framework. In other words Sheikh Hasina government recognizes the importance of India and China both to further its

national interest. The similar argument has been put forward by the noted scholar Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

On the whole, rapid transformation in the international geo-economic and geo-political structure after the end of the Cold War has had a profound impact on the Hasina government's adoption and pursuit of India-centric positive foreign policy. Keeping in mind India's geographical and economic vastness in South Asian region, it is necessary for Hasina government to maintain a positive policy approach towards India. Bangladesh's geopolitical location makes it India-dependent in many aspects. The key factor is that it is impossible for Bangladesh to make progress by pursuing an anti-Indian foreign policy and maintaining a hostile relationship with the country. However, if these bridges are rebuilt, Bangladesh could play a critical role in helping shape India's strategic environment. Hence, a friendly relationship with India is therefore significant for Bangladesh. Finally, recent trends indicate that India- Bangladesh ties have cemented further after Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina government becoming the Prime Minister of both country.

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