

A lot is at stake for India-Bangladesh ties

Writer - Syed Munir Khasru (Chairman of the international think tank, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance)

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While they have deepened ties, the Hasina and Modi governments have failed to resolve long-standing issues

In August, while addressing devotees gathered to celebrate Janmashtami, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdul Momen requested the Indian government to ensure that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stays in power when Bangladesh goes to the polls next year. He claimed that both India and Bangladesh would gain political stability by ensuring this.

These out-of-the-norm comments from the senior cabinet member created a stir on both sides of the border. Senior leaders of the ruling Awami League distanced themselves from these remarks, while India maintained silence. Mr. Momen's comments came before Ms. Hasina's visit to India from September 5 to 8, 2022.

Trade and connectivity

Following the conclusion of the seventh round of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission in June, the two neighbours have expanded their partnership to include Artificial Intelligence, Fintech, cybersecurity, startups, and connectivity. Trade will be a focal point during Ms. Hasina's visit as the two countries gear up to sign a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The two Prime Ministers are also expected to inaugurate a joint venture power plant soon.

CEPA comes at a time when Bangladesh is set to lose the duty-free and quota-free market-access facility to India after 2026 when it graduates to a developing country. Bangladesh is India's sixth largest trade partner with bilateral trade rising from \$2.4 billion in 2009 to \$10.8 billion in 2020-21.

Bangladesh imports critical industrial raw material from India on which its exports are reliant. According to a World Bank working paper, Bangladesh's exports could rise 182% under a free trade agreement. This could become 300% if combined with trade facilitation measures and reduced transaction costs. Bangladesh also could improve several manufacturing industries by leveraging Indian expertise in service sectors.

India and Bangladesh have implemented several projects to boost eastern India-Bangladesh connectivity. India's connectivity projects with ASEAN and Bangladesh will open up the region to economic growth. Bangladesh has expressed its interest in joining the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project.

India-Bangladesh bilateral waterway trade will get boosted as India can now use the Mongla and Chittagong ports. India is rallying Bangladesh to divert its exports through Indian ports in place of Malaysian or Singaporean ports. Enhancing connectivity through India's Northeast and Bangladesh is important for bilateral cooperation. Currently, three express trains and international bus services operate between Indian and Bangladesh.

The sharing of the waters of the Teesta has remained a thorny issue between the two countries since 1947. For West Bengal, Teesta is important to sustain its impoverished farming districts which comprise 12.77% of its population. For Bangladesh, the Teesta's flood plains cover about 14% of the total cropped area of the country and provide direct livelihood opportunities to approximately 7.3% of the population. The countries are expected to sign at least one major river agreement during the upcoming trip.

In 2015, India and Bangladesh resolved the decades-long border dispute through the Land Swap Agreement. Indian Home Minister Amit Shah recently reviewed the security arrangements in the Assam-Meghalaya-Bangladesh tri-junction, which used to be a smugglers' route. In 2019, India enacted the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which created an uproar within and beyond the borders. Ms. Hasina termed the move as "unnecessary". But her government has mostly kept silent on India's "internal matter" even as political commentators and citizens have feared it could have ripple effects for Bangladesh. The detainees caught at the border that year claimed they were Bangladeshi citizens who were returning to the country on failing to obtain Indian citizenship.

Regional geopolitics

Chinese inroads into the neighborhood have been a cause of worry for India. China has been actively pursuing bilateral ties with Bangladesh. Bangladesh had successfully approached China for a mega project to enhance Teesta river water flow. Bangladesh also requires China's support in resolving the Rohingya refugee crisis. Bangladesh is the second biggest arms market for China after Pakistan.

Bangladesh has also been warming up to Pakistan. The two shared frosty ties for decades after Pakistani politicians made unwarranted comments on the International Crimes Tribunal set up by Bangladesh. Although memories of 1971 remain, Bangladesh has expressed its interest in establishing peaceful relations with Pakistan.

India-Bangladesh ties witnessed the lowest ebb during the 2001-2006 tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In 2004, a 10-truck arms and ammunition haul took place in Chittagong. Investigators believed that the delivery of the smuggled arms was intended for the United Liberation Front of Asom, a militant group seeking Assam's independence from India. These illicit activities created tensions between the countries.

The BNP's short-sighted and unwise handling of relations with India cost it dearly, for Delhi's corridors of power lost confidence in the party. But by openly flouting its warm relations with India as a safeguard for continuity of power, the Awami League is not playing smart with the electorate either.

In Bangladesh, there is a prevailing perception that India's goodwill towards the country is aligned to one particular political ideology or school of thought as opposed to Bangladeshi society at large.

For India, the challenge is to earn the trust and confidence of Bangladeshis across the spectrum and strata. Ms. Hasina has deepened ties with the Narendra Modi government, but the two have failed to resolve long-standing issues such as Teesta water-sharing and killings at the border. The question is, how these factors may affect elections in Bangladesh.

For India it will take more than cosy relations with one particular government to have long-term stable relations with its most trusted friend in the neighbourhood. Just as Bangladeshis remain grateful to India for the generous support extended by India during the Liberation War of 1971, they are equally sensitive to being treated with respect and fairness, no matter who rules their country.

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Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements-

1. The border of India and Bangladesh is about 4096.7 km. It is long and the two share 54 rivers.
2. The India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement came into force in the year 2015.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Ans. (c)

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. While overviewing at the historical background of India-Bangladesh relations, discuss what areas both countries need to focus on in future? (250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.