

Furthering this neighbourhood friendship

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"There is scope for India-Bangladesh ties to move to the next level, based on cooperation, coordination and consolidation."

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will make her first official visit to India from October 3-6, post the general elections in Bangladesh (December 2018) and India (May 2019). She will address the World Economic Forum's India Economic Summit followed by the bilateral visit. India and Bangladesh today enjoy one of the best periods of their relationship, with positive development in the areas of diplomatic, political, economic and security relations.

Despite gains, the issues

The current Bangladesh government has uprooted security threats and acts of insurgency against India and today, the India-Bangladesh border is one of India's most secured. The signing of the Land Boundary Agreement in 2015 was a milestone, where the two neighbours amicably resolved a long-outstanding issue.

Bilateral trade was a little over \$9 billion in FY 2017-18 and Bangladeshi exports increased by 42.91%, reaching \$1.25 billion in FY 2018-2019. Removal of non-tariff barriers will help Bangladeshi exports such as harmonising the standards for goods accepted by India. In 2018, in addition to the 660 MW of power imported by Bangladesh, Indian export of electricity increased by another 500 MW. A 1,600 MW power station with a dedicated transmission system is being developed to boost power trade.

Land routes have gained popularity over air travel, and are preferred by 85.6% of Bangladeshis visiting India. Train services on the Dhaka-Kolkata and Kolkata-Khulna are doing well, while a third, on the Agartala-Akhaura route, is under construction. Five additional bus services were introduced in 2018; this March, the first ever Dhaka-Kolkata cruise ship was launched. Bangladeshi tourists accounted for 21.6% of the total percentage of tourists visiting India in 2018 (83.7% tourists and 10.28% medical patients). Today, Bangladesh contributes 50% of India's health tourism revenue.

A few major outstanding issues still remain, with the most pressing being the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's refusal to endorse water-sharing terms agreed upon by Prime Minister Modi in 2015 has resulted in the current impasse. A lack of water has affected 100,000 hectares of land, with contamination affecting the soil; the increased cost of pesticides and irrigation has made farming less profitable. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) has left out 1.9 million Assamese from the list with a group labelled as "illegal immigrants from Bangladesh" living in Assam post-1971. Bangladesh remains firm in its stance that no migrants travelled to Assam illegally during the 1971 war of independence and that the controversial NRC risks hurting relations.

Border killings have decreased. India's Border Security Force (BSF) claims that most of the firing is in self-defence in tackling cattle trafficking. However, since the ban by India on cattle export, cattle trade has fallen from 23

lakh in 2013 to 75,000 till the end of May this year — which makes the argument unconvincing. International rules of engagement entail that military action must be “proportional to provocation”, which makes such killings a serious violation of human rights. It must not be forgotten that in 2018, the BSF DG had said: “Relations between India and Bangladesh and the two border guarding forces are at their best right now.”

Since 2010, India has approved three lines of credit to Bangladesh of \$7.362 billion to finance development projects. Due to bureaucratic red tape, just \$442 million has been disbursed till December 2018. While Bangladesh has been slow in implementation, India’s requirement of the disbursement process to be approved by India’s Exim Bank has not helped either. During Sheikh Hasina’s visit to Delhi in 2017, two defence pacts were signed; in 2018, India extended a credit line of \$500 million to purchase armaments; two memoranda of understanding were also signed for cooperation between the naval forces.

Subject of Rohingya

The Rohingya issue and India’s remarks in 2017 on the issue have been upsetting for Bangladesh which has been facing the challenge of providing shelter to more than a million Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution by one of the world’s most brutal military regimes. The recent visit to Dhaka by India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (August 19-21), saw a marked departure in India’s position; he had said then: “We agreed that safe, speedy and sustainable return of displaced persons (Rohingyas) is in the national interest of all three countries - Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India.” However, it is China that is mediating when, given its geographical proximity, it is India which is ideally positioned to play a positive role in regional leadership.

India-Bangladesh relations have matured in the last decade with development in many areas of cooperation. In a neighbourhood where distrust and cynicism prevail over friendship and hope, the relationship between the two countries has given hope for optimism. But the sooner existing challenges are resolved, the better it is. On the sidelines of the 74th UN General Assembly late last month, Mr. Modi assured Sheikh Hasina that she would not need to worry about the NRC and water-sharing as bilateral relations are very good. It is now time to walk the talk.

The shared colonial legacy, history and socio-cultural bonds demand that the political leadership of the two countries inject momentum into India-Bangladesh relations. Sheikh Hasina’s trip to India will hopefully help relations graduate to the next level of strengthening the three Cs: cooperation, coordination, and consolidation.

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India-Bangladesh Relation

Why in News?

- Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will arrive in India to start her four-day official visit of the nation, during which she would hold talks with her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and the two sides are likely to sign nearly a dozen agreements.
- This would be Hasina’s first visit to New Delhi since parliamentary elections were held in Bangladesh and

India.

- Hasina and Modi will hold bilateral talks on October 5. She will also be the Chief Guest at the India Economic Summit, which is being organised by the World Economic Forum on October 3 and 4.
- On Wednesday, Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen said that the two countries are expected to sign a dozen bilateral agreements in different areas, and the two prime ministers were also expected to review issues of

sharing of water in common rivers (including Teesta) and the Rohingya crisis.

Importance of Bangladesh

- Bangladesh is key to India's plans to connect with South-East Asia, as well as developing the landlocked Northeast.
- India's plans to forge a viable alternative to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation rests on Bangladesh, given its location bridging South Asia and South-East Asia.
- India's 'neighbourhood first policy' has focused on Bangladesh, which is a key part in India's 'Act East Policy' and sub-regional groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal).

Background

- India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh as a separate and independent state and established diplomatic relations with the country immediately after its independence in December 1971.
- India and Bangladesh share more than 4000 km of border, which is the longest land boundary that India shares with any of its neighbors.

Security & Border Management:

- The Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) was signed in 2011 to help both of the Border Guarding Forces for checking cross-border illegal activities and crimes as well as for maintenance of peace and tranquility along the India-Bangladesh border.
- Power Projects: India is poised to export around 1100 MW of power to meet the energy deficit in Bangladesh. Power projects totaling more than 3600 MW are under implementation by Indian companies.

- India is also a partner in Bangladesh's nuclear power programme, with the beginning of construction at the Rooppur nuclear power plant.
- In 2017, 13 agreements worth around \$10 billion were signed in the power and energy sectors.

Trade Ties:

- Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia with an annual turnover of around \$9 billion plus an estimated informal trade of around \$8-9 billion.
- Indian investment in Bangladesh has reached \$3 billion. To enable the flow of Bangladeshi exports into India, duty-free entry was granted in 2011 under the South Asian Free Trade Area.

River water sharing:

- India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. A bilateral Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) is working since June 1972 to maintain liaison between the two countries to maximize benefits from common river systems.

Connectivity:

- The Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT) operational since 1972 permits movement of goods over vessels from India through the river systems of Bangladesh on eight specific routes.
- Apart from this India and Bangladesh also have air, rail and bus connectivity.

Capacity Building and Training:

- India offers a number of training courses for interested Bangladesh officials/nationals including personnel of administration, police, judiciary, nuclear scientists, teachers etc.
- Capacity building under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme is an important strand in bilateral ties and people-to-people interaction.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the changes after cooperation, coordination and consolidation in Indo-Bangladesh relations-
1. India Bangladesh border has become the most unsafe border area of India after the signing of land boundary agreement in 2016.
 2. Removing non-tariff barriers will encourage Bangladeshi exports.
 3. Currently, Bangladesh contributes 50% to India's health tourism revenue.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3
- (b) 1 and 2
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. 'India-Bangladesh relations are in the best phase under the tenure of Sheikh Hasina, although some issues need to be addressed.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? Also present an argument in support of your opinion.

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 1 Oct., is 1 (a).

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