



The centre moves east

This article is related to General Studies-
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"Rise of Bangladesh augurs well for the future of the eastern Subcontinent."

In focusing on the scale of Sheikh Hasina's victory in the general election a few days ago and the allegations of rigging by her opponents in Bangladesh, it is easy to miss the significant structural change unfolding in Bangladesh and its long-term implications.

As she begins her third continuous term as prime minister, Sheikh Hasina is destined to go down as one of the Subcontinent's most consequential leaders. Combined with an earlier term as PM during 1996-2001, Sheikh Hasina could eventually become one of the longest serving political leaders in South Asia and beyond.

While many other regional leaders have had the fortune to stay in office for long, few have had the privilege to advance their nations like Hasina has. Even fewer have the opportunity to help restructure their regions. Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic improvement of the country's economic prospects. The stability and continuity provided by Hasina has been critical for this transformation.

Under her leadership, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Its per capita income has doubled over the last decade. It is all set to leave the category of "least developed countries". Hasina's ambition is to accelerate the annual economic growth rate from the current 7 per cent to nearly 10 per cent by the time Bangladesh celebrates its 50th birthday in 2021.

What does this economic transformation of Bangladesh mean for the Subcontinent as a whole? For one, it has begun to change the economic hierarchy in the region, by displacing Pakistan in the second spot. The per capita income of Bangladesh, \$1800, is now larger than that of Pakistan's at about \$1600. The aggregate GDP (\$275 bn) is poised to overtake Pakistan's at \$310 bn in the coming years.

More than mere numbers, it is also a question of direction, momentum and national purpose. In contrast to the widespread international scepticism about Pakistan's economic future, there is pervasive economic optimism about Dhaka's economic prospects. If Prime Minister Imran Khan is travelling round the world to stitch together yet another bailout of Pakistan's economy, Sheikh Hasina talks of reducing reliance on aid focusing on trade and investment.

The transformation of Bangladesh is altering some perceptions in Pakistan. The traditional Pakistani condescension towards Bangladesh is yielding to a measure of admiration. Some in Pakistan are urging Islamabad to adopt the "Bangladesh model" — where the focus is on economic development rather than political adventurism and promoting religious moderation instead of extremism. No one, of course, is holding their breath for such a change in Pakistan. For, its military and civilian leadership finds it hard to break from the policies it has embraced for so long.

Second, as Bangladesh rises, it alters the balance within South Asia by tilting the region's economic centre of gravity towards the east. The economic advancement of Bangladesh helps lift up the whole of the eastern Subcontinent, including India's Northeast as well as Bhutan and Nepal.

Geography has positioned both Pakistan and Bangladesh as natural "bridge states" within South Asia and between the Subcontinent and the abutting regions. Rawalpindi has chosen destabilisation of its neighbours through cross-border terrorism and insurgencies, while Dhaka has chosen the path of regional cooperation.

It was Dhaka's initiative that helped found the SAARC in the mid-1980s. Today, the SAARC remains dysfunctional thanks to Pakistan's reluctance to engage in economic cooperation with India. Rather than criticise Pakistan, we must recognise the sovereign choice that Islamabad has made.



An unintended consequence of Pakistan's choice has been the fillip to sub-regional cooperation in the eastern Subcontinent involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. Equally important has been the re-vitalisation of the BIMSTEC forum that is pursuing trans-regional cooperation between five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand).

Bangladesh is also critical for the success of Beijing's plans to integrate its Yunnan province with Myanmar, Bangladesh and eastern India. Unlike the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, where India has concerns over sovereignty, there are fewer problems with the development of the so-called BCIM corridor. There is no doubt that tensions over the Rohingya have cast a shadow over the future of regionalism in the east. But the rapid growth of both Bangladesh and Burma and the weight of the three large economies — China, India and the ASEAN — flanking them will continue to strengthen the imperatives of regionalism.

Third, thanks also the initiative of Bangladesh, its maritime territorial issues with India and Burma have been peacefully resolved through arbitration. That opens up significant room for maritime economic and security cooperation within the Bay of Bengal. That in turn will deepen the integration between eastern Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

For far too long South Asian geography has been viewed through the prism of India-Pakistan relations. Unsurprisingly, then, the narrative about South Asia has been largely negative. Consider, for example, descriptions like a "nuclear flashpoint", the "most dangerous place" in the world and the "least integrated region".

To be sure, Pakistan remains important but mostly for negative reasons. It is a challenge that must be managed. But the rise of Bangladesh and the expanding regional cooperation centred around it allows us to imagine a positive future for the Eastern subcontinent and its integration with the dynamic East Asian region.

GS World Team...

India-Bangladesh relations

Why in the discussion?

- Recently, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Party Awami League has won a major victory for the third time in Bangladesh's general elections.
- India had a sharp eye on this election. However, this time India was not active in this election.
- Sheikh Hasina's third win is a major lesson for the rulers of South Asia or SAARC countries.

Why is Bangladesh important for India

- Bangladesh is not only a neighboring country of India, but the relations of both countries are also closely linked on linguistic, cultural, and geographical basis. During Sheikh Hasina's tenure, progress in relations between India and Bangladesh was noticed.
- Sheikh Hasina's government is considered to be pro-India in Bangladesh. After coming to power, Bangladesh has greatly overcome the concerns of India regarding the activism of extremist forces and the harm to Indian interests there.
- The government of Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, did not let the international intervention of any third country succeed in this region of the Indian subcontinent, which went in India's favour.
- With the rise of extremism in Bangladesh, India's West Bengal and the Northeast gets directly affected. In such a situation, Sheikh Hasina's government not only banned such forces, but also developed such understanding in the country that India can give important assistance to Bangladesh in the field of development.

- Bangladesh was formed in 1971 after being separated from Pakistan. Until then it was known as Eastern Pakistan. India played an important role in Bangladesh's independence movement.
- After the liberation of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina's father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the first Prime Minister of the country. They had good relations with India. But he was assassinated on August 15, 1975 after a military coup. After this, the Islamic forces started raising their heads in the country and anti-India sentiments started growing there.
- In this military coup, Sheikh Mujib along with his family and personal staff were also killed. Only his daughters, Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana survived, who were then on a tour of West Germany at the time. She was later banned from returning to her country.
- Sheikh Hasina spent a long time in exile in India after this. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave her political asylum in India. During this time however, his political meetings were rare. It is believed that one of the major reasons for this was the emergency in India.
- Sheikh Hasina first came to power in 1996 as prime minister and stayed in office till 2001. During her four-year tenure, there was a scope for improvement in Indo-Bangladesh relations.
- Sheikh Hasina was elected for the second term in 2009 and in 2014 she was elected prime minister for the third consecutive term. During this, progress in trade, public relations, road and rail connectivity, and academic relations were seen in the relations between the two countries.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements regarding BIMSTEC-
1. It has been established by including South Asia and South Eastern Countries.
 2. Its main members countries include- Bangladesh, Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Srilanka, Thailand and Bhutan.
- Which of the above statements is/are correct?
- (a) Only 1
(b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2
2. Consider the following statements -
1. Bangladesh was formed by dividing eastern part after the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971.
 2. Bangladesh left Pakistan's GDP behind through the economic change.
- Which of the above statements is/are correct?
- (a) Only 1
(b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. How can stable Bangladesh play an important role in the development of South Asia? Analyse. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 7 Jan. is 1(b) and 2(b).

