

Reinforcing Ties: Analyzing Recent Developments In India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations

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ABSTRACT

The evolving vital dynamics of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations with a specific focus on the recent challenges and developments become the key research of this study. With the political dissent of Sheikh Hasina's government, increasing domestic challenges, and economic pressures, the ramifications of Indo-Bangladesh relations are profound. This study aims to analyze the challenges and developments in the bilateral relationship against the scrim of these political changes. By examining key areas of trade agreements, border security and cultural exchanges, the study tries to understand and assess how a transition in leadership could influence diplomatic strategies and cooperative initiative between the neighbours. The economic partnership and social interactions are the analysing subjects of this paper which aim to assess the challenges and developments that contribute to regional stability and mutual growth. Within the relationship between the neighbours, there are challenges and opportunities. Ultimately this study tries to provide a comprehensive understanding of how India and Bangladesh can navigate contemporary issues to foster a stronger, more cooperative partnership.

Key words: India Bangladesh Relations, Bilateral Relations, India Bangladesh Political Issue, India Bangladesh Recent Trends.

INTRODUCTION:

Indo-Bangladesh relations are marked by shared cultural ties, economic interdependence and strategic cooperation. The ties have significantly strengthened in recent times guided by collaborative efforts in trade, security and regional cooperation and development. With the shift in the political landscape in Bangladesh and the decline of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government, the ties between India and Bangladesh have witnessed the strand off, raising questions about the future trajectory of the relationship. The historical view of India-Bangladesh relations can provide a framework for a comprehensive study of the current relationship. This study and analysis take into consideration external factors, including regional geopolitical dynamics and the roles of international actors. This study tries to understand the resilience of India-Bangladesh relations while trying to understand the challenges that may arise in the changing and developing political environment. The rise of new situations in Bangladesh including political shifts, economic challenges and social movements, had a significant impact on the relationship between India and Bangladesh. The impacts on the relationship between India and Bangladesh did not only affect the political sphere but also the economic arena as in the last decade there was a fast pace of growth and development witnessed in the economic arena. Bangladesh has emerged as one of India's leading export destinations in the world and the largest in the South Asian region in the past decade and this is affected by the political and social turmoil in Bangladesh with the bilateral trade relations having a negative effect with adversity.

The BackDrop:

Economic Backdrops:

Impressive economic progress in the last decade has been one of the biggest achievements of the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheik Hasina. During the tenure of Sheik Hasina as Prime Minister from 2009 to 2024, the economy of Bangladesh had grown at an average rate of 6.3% per year (Durgesh K Rai, 2024). The Gross Domestic Product of Bangladesh has trebled with a steep increase from US\$ 123 billion to US\$ 455 billion. Bangladesh has also seen an increase in per capita GDP from US\$841 billion in 2009 to US\$ \$2,650 in 2024

(Durgesh K Rai, 2024). This booming economic growth in the youngest South Asian Nation i.e. Bangladesh has moved the country from a low-income group towards an upward trend in 2015. The international trade profile of Bangladesh has also witnessed an upward growth. There was a steep decrease in the extreme poverty line from 12% in 2010 to 5% in 2022. There has been a significant development in the human development index (HDI) in the recent past. The bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh has taken new heights in the past one and half decades which is driven by the intra-industry notably in the textile and clothing industries. The trade relationship between India and Bangladesh started declining in 2022 due to a decrease in demand for imports in Bangladesh which was a result of multiple facets like high inflation and the Russia-Ukraine war-induced disruptions in the supply chains. The new socio-political turbulences and turmoil further helped in deteriorating the socio-political and economic environment in Bangladesh and India's trade relations.

Political Backdrop:

Bangladesh under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been a key ally to India since her taking the oath in the year 2009. She played a crucial role in fostering a new healthy relationship between Dhaka and New Delhi. During her tenure till 2024, continuous efforts were made to eradicate anti-India terrorist groups that operated in the safe places of Bangladesh apart from flourishing socio-economic and cultural ties. The peaceful student movement against discrimination i.e. Baishamyabirodhi chhatra andolan an anti-quota protest on university campuses that started alongside all the universities in Bangladesh rapidly took an unstoppable face turn when Sheikh Hasina's government tried to resist it with the chauvinists of Awami League's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League and the law enforcement groups. Unprecedented since 1971, Bangladesh's political arena has taken a major change making it historic. The resistance from the government escalated violence and the protests were converted into a landscape of civil disobedience with the demand for the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. On 5th August, Sheikh Hasina resigned from the Prime Ministerial post and left the country to take shelter in India. Though this is being claimed as the 'Second Liberation' in Bangladesh by many, the authenticity of the liberation can be done by time alone. The climate in the political fields of Bangladesh has become a tense atmosphere ever since the elections were conducted in January 2024. The elections were unacceptable for other political parties and became a travesty for democracy. The consecutive fifth term for Sheikh Hasina by winning the Jatiyo Sangsad i.e. national elections in January 2024, she became the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh to hold the office for such a long time. When Hasina came to power in 2009 January she was praised for enforcing, reinstating and upholding democracy and uprooting fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Her government became intolerant to the complaining and grumbling voices according to her critics. There has been a growth of public animosity, hate and anger against her since her taking office for the second term in 2014. This was turned a blind eye by Hasina who regarded it as anti-incumbency. She lost her popularity and acceptance in the consecutive elections of 2014, 2019 and 2024 according to critics. This was also considered as an uprooting of democracy in Bangladesh under the fake cover of democracy itself.

Social Backdrop:

On 5th June when the High Court overturned the government's decision of 2018 to completely trash the reservations of 56% in various government placements (Ankita Sanyal, 2024) it became an intriguing point for the protests that led to complete unrest, social problems and human rights violations. This decision of the High Court led to the student's unrest and even after a gap of almost six years they responded to it with equal fervor or intensity. At a time when Bangladesh has been under economic crisis, the demand of the students to cancel the 30% quota for freedom fighter's descendants in government jobs has gained the approval of all the sections of the society (Ankita Sanyal, 2024). Whereas there was increasing unemployment among the youth which led to unrest among them. The quota reserved for the liberation fighters was considered a misuse by the Awami League party loyalists and the merit-based quota distribution in the government jobs was also considered unjust and unsatisfactory.

International Backdrop:

The West especially among the international community was raising concerns about the Jatiyo Sansad or the national elections which were considered by them as rigged or not being fair and free. The social rights groups and the national and international human rights groups came together against her government during the January 2024 elections. A government that won the international appraisal for hosting the largest number of Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar once was criticised for the violation of rights and public safety. Her government set up a war crimes tribunal to give justice to the victims of the genocide of the 1970s and was criticised for the violation of human rights. The nation she built for the last 15 years came down as the "Iron Lady" (Stanley John, 2024). of Bangladesh resigned and fled the country.

Consequences and eventuality:

This dramatic turn of events one after the other in Bangladesh has changed the trajectory of Bangladesh and left the nation with uncertainty internally, in the neighbourhood and geopolitically. A student-led movement with extensive and widespread demonstrations and protests ignited a critical situation within the nation with the military refusing to act against the protests on the orders of government. Sheikh Hasina fled to India and an Interim government came in place in Dhaka with the advice of Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus. Sheikh

Hasina's regime was considered a "Competitive authoritarian" (Staniland. P., 2024) by political scientists. It is considered that although there were elections the Awami League political party utilized the state's workforce to undermine the opposition and convert the situation in its favour and advantage. With Hasina's resignation and fleeing the country the whole system came into a state of flux. The interim government that came into existence needs time to fix the situation and pursue reforms. As was feared the takeover of government by the military and the assassination of democracy in Bangladesh, the interim government that came to power could hold the dream of continuing democracy. This kind of transition can be affected by different environments like the Elite power struggles, military coups, dilemmas and standoffs among the political parties, pressure groups and the sudden rise of civilian leaders to a stature of authoritarian and despotic leaders. In all such cases, democracy can cease to exist leading to the breakdown of the state.

In the background of so many lapses, challenges and dangers awaiting. The most immediate one is the breakdown of law and order, and the mobilization of anti-Hindu and anti-discretion sentiments which may lead to mob violence and political instability and then to lack of economic investment. A big crisis in front of the interim government is dealing with the relationship between Islam and Bangladeshi nationalism. Since the Covid pandemic, Bangladesh has been under a severe economic crisis which became a key source of discontent among the people with Sheikh Hasina's government. Another challenge the interim government has its front is the need to show economic progress along with political progress. At this juncture, the political leadership needs to be wide-eyed at the ways in which the transition to a new effective democratic system could be taken and at the same time to threats in which it could be slackened.

India's Perception:

India was initially dismayed by the events that followed the collapse of Hasina's government. The major concern in India was about the anti-Hindu violence and the refugees that would flee to India. Secondly, it was about the insurgents operating in the remote areas of Northeastern India who got support from Bangladesh. India was viewed as an unconditional supporter of the Hasina government (Staniland. P., 2024) in Bangladeshi extremist groups. There was a wider feeling in Bangladesh that Sheikh Hasina's growing strength was because of the support it received from New Delhi which has led to anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. In the last couple of years, India and Bangladesh's bilateral relations have reached new heights with many agreements and treaties working in their place. Some of them are the water sharing agreement on river Kushiya in the year 2022, the success of the joint study on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in the same year, and most importantly conclusion of cross-border trade settlement in Indian rupee in July 2023. There was initiation for three India-assisted development projects – the Akhura – Agartala cross-border rail link, the Khulana-Mongla port rail line extending to India and the Maitree super-thermal power project (Ankita Sanyal, 2024). With a trade surplus in favour of India, in the financial year 2023-24, the bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh reached 13 billion dollars. These agreements came into existence when Dhaka was engulfed in an economic crisis which was marked by rising inflation, currency depreciation and most importantly the depletion of its foreign exchange reserves gradually. India to a large extent was able to regain its mistakes and recover from the foreign policy errors in the case of Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives, but in the case of Sheikh Hasina's association, it became little more than harder as she even got a temporary residence in India. When the Western countries raised reservations about Bangladesh's "Jatiyo Sansad" or national elections, India refrained from Dhaka's conduct of "Jatiyo Sansad" as its own 'internal matter'. These developments within Bangladesh didn't affect Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations as it was shadowed by India's collaboration in Japan-spearheaded Matarbari deep-sea port construction in Bangladesh in May 2024 and also the recent agreement to expand defence cooperation during Sheikh Hasina's official visit to New Delhi in 2024. In the Indo-Bangladesh relations, Bangladesh is not in a position to alienate India as its size and closeness or proximity with India give that leverage which cannot be tied with any other country even with China or the West. In the initial days, the interim government had a tough time establishing a stable balance between the two countries, eventually, it is expressing hopes to establish a stable balance in the India-Bangladesh relationship. The interim government has to navigate the internal forces and pressures and also the political and economic challenges that come externally.

As the mass movement intensified with the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's political power in Bangladesh, there were demands on the Indian government to surrender Sheikh Hasina from some of the leaders of Bangladesh, popular sentiments were expressed against India as well. There were growing concerns about the possibility of inflows of refugees from Bangladesh to India. India took preparations for security on a war footing basis along the 4096 km long shared borders with Bangladesh. There was continuous news of mobs targeting Hindu minorities, combined with anti-India slogans and sentiments. These acts brought the bilateral relations to a standstill for a while. The crisis has affected Indian companies established in Bangladesh and the local Indian businesses along the border. Many Bangladeshi citizens visiting India for medical, business or any other reasons were stranded.

Many geopolitical forces had their share in the crisis. Whether it is the United States, China or India, these factors had a long-lasting impact on Bangladesh's political and economic development. There were different opinions between India and the United States of America regarding the 2024 elections in Bangladesh and their

strategic difference was seen in their approach towards the elections and the aftermath of the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's rule. When the US considers its diagnosis of the nation's instability came true, India considers that there is a "foreign hand" in the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government. The US perceives the concept that by helping Mohammad Yunus lead the interim government to rebuild democracy it can fairly keep China far from Bangladesh. India considers this as a new opportunity for the Islamist influence at the forefront and limiting Indian power and domination in the region on the other end. Geopolitically there is far play of different forces at different ends beneath the soil of Bangladesh. India is also concerned about China's control and influence in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina tried to balance close ties with New Delhi and Beijing on the same scale. India is worried and anxious about the restoration of law and order in Bangladesh and the continuous monitoring of the situation of minorities.

CONCLUSION:

The political future of Bangladesh has been waiting for it may take the turn of antagonism, sheltering the insurgents from the northeastern states which can create unrest in India. Bangladesh's state political transition is expected to move towards state restoration, reorganisation and reformation. Policy reforms aimed to address socioeconomic issues, improve governance and enhance service delivery are very essential for rebuilding the trust of the people and legitimacy in the institutions of the state in Bangladesh. This political transition in Bangladesh prompts to strengthen the institutions of Democracy i.e. elections and electoral bodies, Judiciary and law enforcement agencies helping to create a more accountable and transparent state. This political transition in Bangladesh needs to ensure that diverse groups are represented in the process of decision-making and work towards fostering national unity and enhancing social union and adherence. As the interim government's head, Muhammad Yunus is an economics noble laureate, he is expected to introduce development agendas aimed at boosting economic growth with infrastructure development, and foreign investment which are very vital in the reconstruction of the state. There is a wider condemnation of the attacks on the minorities and India is appealing to the interim government against such attacks and the interim government has assured the protection of the minority interests. The hope now is that Bangladesh's political transition be one of the most successful and all-encompassing democracies as their national freedom fighters had envisioned and sacrificed their lives for. The impact of political transitions on state reconstruction in Bangladesh depends on the nature of the transition period, the political culture, the socio-economic conditions, and their effect on the people's mindsets.

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