



INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

Sreeradha Datta¹

Vivekananda International Foundation

Abstract:

While geographically they share the longest borders in the neighbourhood, the bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh over the four decades have seen several highs and lows. As poised today, they have been able to overcome a phase of uneven times to emerge as close partners on the path of progress and development. Historical and cultural linkages, economic interdependence and geo-strategic interests make India and Bangladesh politically vital to each other. The new phase that began since January 2010 has turned the bilateral trajectory on a path of bilateral cooperation. It is hoped once the benefits of mutual cooperation is conveyed and felt by masses; this phase will be sustained in spite of the irritants trying to threaten growing bilateralism.

Key words: Islamist, Bangladesh, India, Border, Water

Título en Castellano: Las Relaciones entre la India y Bangladés en un mundo en evolución

Resumen:

Mientras que geográficamente ambos Estados comparten las fronteras más largas del vecindario, los lazos bilaterales entre la India y Bangladesh durante las últimas cuatro décadas han visto varios altibajos. Hasta el presente, han sido capaces de superar una fase de tiempos irregulares para emerger como socios cercanos en el camino del progreso y el desarrollo. Los vínculos históricos y culturales, la interdependencia económica y los intereses geoestratégicos hacen que la India y Bangladesh sean políticamente vitales entre sí. La nueva fase que comenzó en enero de 2010 ha convertido la trayectoria bilateral en un camino de cooperación bilateral. Se espera que los beneficios de la cooperación mutua sean transmitidos y sentidos por la gente; esta fase se mantendrá a pesar de los irritantes que intentan amenazar el creciente bilateralismo.

Palabras Clave: Islamista, Bangladés, India, Frontera, Agua

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¹ Dr Sreeradha Datta is Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation
Email: sreeradha@yahoo.com
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1. Introduction

India and Bangladesh are close and friendly neighbours now. This, however, was not always the case. While geographically they share the longest borders in the neighbourhood, the bilateral ties over the four decades have seen several highs and lows. As poised today, they have been able to overcome a phase of uneven times to emerge as close partners on the path of progress and development. Indeed the convergences between India and Bangladesh are rather unique. Historical and cultural linkages, economic interdependence and geo-strategic interests make India and Bangladesh politically vital to each other. India and Bangladesh have much more in common than any other two states within the South Asian region (maybe with the exception of Nepal). Yet the shared borders and cultural-linguistic overlaps have not often been compelling enough for them to establish cohesive political linkages. In the past, apart from a few intermittent bouts of close cooperation India and Bangladesh were never able to take the bilateral engagement to the levels that one had hoped for on the eve of the liberation war of Bangladesh. The new phase that began in January of 2010 with the visit of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India, however, turned the bilateral trajectory on a path of bilateral cooperation. It is hoped once the benefits of mutual cooperation is conveyed and felt by masses, this phase will be sustained.

In hindsight, it's easy to understand that the political differences that often arose were usually related to issues that were borne out of close physical proximity and also from the issues that arose out of a shared history. The common history that India and Bangladesh shared lulled them into a false notion of understanding each other which indeed made them falter and not see the hurdles ahead. The knowledge that they had about each other often did not support the bilateral track. The neighbours had to travel a distance, find their way in the global affairs before they could converge on common grounds for a sustainable cooperative framework. India's role in liberation of Bangladesh gave the neighbours a varying sense of perceptions that they both struggled to overcome in the past decades. Their present bonhomie and the close bilateral ties is not encumbered with the burdens of past, rather it is enriched with that foundation of shared history but essentially one that is forward looking. The attitudinal shift of moving away from past grievances and focusing on the possibilities ahead brought the two neighbours at this present juncture where the idea of shared prosperity has been initiated but not fully implemented yet. But undoubtedly this opening up of cooperation was possible with Bangladesh addressing India's core issues of security and India was willing to examine all the outstanding issues without a display of its usual obstinacy.

The article essentially argues the advent of the Modi led NDA government in India, however, coincided with certain strategic shifts in Indian foreign policy. India in its seeking a larger role for itself in Asia has realized the criticality of its neighbours in this strategy. It has accordingly designed a policy that would find appeal and also enable its greater outreach to the regions beyond South Asia. As evident The process of globalization compelled may powers to forge regional forums and organizations and India was not isolated from that phenomena. Ironically the problems of SAARC the regional organization for development of economic and regional integration in South Asia. What is however relevant here is the impact of the new Indian desire upon its policy toward Bangladesh. In other words, how the nuanced changes in India's self perceptions and foreign policy affect its relationship with Bangladesh?

It also argues, that the past four decades of Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral trajectory has allowed the two states to find a path of development and progress that is mutually beneficial and seek to find more common ground in a regional landscape that has much more to offer when there is convergences between nation states than that is possible through a unilateral mechanism. Before that in its earlier section it briefly delineates briefly the history of the bilateral relations before tracing the turn towards a cooperative framework. This second section



will also explain how while politics as yet determine the bilateral context in the region role of economics India and Bangladesh hopefully have embarked on a path where political affinity will be minimized, and the next generation will see merit in engagement that has mutual wins and irrelevant of the history of cooperation of political philosophy. This section traces the path of bilateral relations that has now emerged into a regional framework of cooperation and finally concluded with the possibility of examining other outstanding bilateral issues within this regional framework. As has been evident in the past the cost of non-cooperation has been higher, there is hope now that Dhaka and Delhi have found convergences on several issues and the mutual benefits translated on the ground will ensure the process may not be stymied or retracted in the future path of Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral ties.

2. Indo-Bangladesh bilateralism in the post-Cold War period

Since the end of Cold War and the disappearance of Soviet Union, the rise of China and an increasingly inward-looking USA, India was looking to play a role in a multi polar world that is reflective of the realignment of powers taking place. The idea of the rise of Asia has been a popular narrative finding resonance with India's political outlook. The resurgence in the Indian economy and growing international trade gave wings to Indian ambitions. India has been fighting to expand the scope of South Asia that has been limiting for more reasons than one. Her forays into the Southeast Asian region and its deepening engagement with the ASEAN and membership of the East Asian Summit forum have translated some of this new imagination into reality.

India in the South Asian mosaic is uniquely located sharing borders with almost all the other South Asian states. The interdependence in the region has been growing in recent decades. Indeed the last decade witnessed a transformation in the Indian economy and mindset. And the recent thrust by Indian PM Modi on "neighborhood first" was not mere political rhetoric but a strategic necessity.² Its new narrative has been one of urging others to join India's growth story.³ A corner stone to this policy has been the attempt to energize sub-regional initiatives. Indeed sub-regionalism within South Asia is now a distinct phenomenon. The India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (BBIN) have found common grounds for many issues that overlap including common water resources as well other natural resources. Thus, apart from the shared prosperity, regional solution enable larger neighbor to engage with others on a common platform in dispelling the fears of larger economy and dominant player. Similarly, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation comprising seven states of South Asian states and South East Asian states. Importantly, Bangladesh is a member of both the organizations and its geographic location gives India a vital link to connect the two regions.

Bangladesh has thus become an increasingly critical factor under the new Indian calculations of increasing its foot prints outside the South Asian region. In this context of a strategic shift in India's foreign policy and political changes in Bangladesh, the NDA government has adopted certain policy postures toward Bangladesh. Bangladesh's location

² Kaura, Vinay: "Grading India's Neighborhood", *The Diplomat*, 1 January 2018 at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/grading-indias-neighborhood-diplomacy/>

³ Speech by PM Modi at World economic Forum, Davos, 23 January 2018, The Ministry of External Affairs of India, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29378/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Speech_at_Plenary_Session_of_World_Economic_Forum_Davos_January_23_2018. In several other speeches Modi has reiterated India's 'Make in India' campaign and has motivated the government to make its policies and processes easier and friendlier, inviting and encouraging others to join India in this journey.



assumed an importance and Bangladesh is increasingly measured by that country's political, economic and physical usefulness in India's great power ambition.

2.1. The historical context

India's role in Bangladesh's liberation war is rather well documented. The close trust between Indira Gandhi and Mujibur Rahman was evident resulting in the signing of the India-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace treaty in 1971. However, the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975 irreversibly ruptured the special relations that the two states shared. In the post-Mujibur phase, as Bangladesh achieved stability its foreign policy became more outward looking.⁴ This and the changing internal dynamics within the country with prolonged period of military rule till 1990 meant that for many years Indo-Bangladeshi relations never could renew the earlier warmth. The political turmoil and Bangladesh's attempts to look beyond India in order to gain more strategic autonomy resulted in limited engagement during the period.

Paradoxically, New Delhi's political proximity with Mujibur Rehman in the early years became a liability for the future of bilateral relations.⁵ The desire and determination of Mujibur's successors to make a break from the past also meant their adoption of anti-India stance. While many have argued, Bangladeshis have not been able to forget the looting and trauma of the immediate post-liberation period which were largely blamed upon the soldiers of the Indian army who fought Pakistani forces in the then East Pakistan.⁶ Arguably, there are more complexities to the volte face that the bilateral ties suffered than just that. A culmination of factors contributed to India becoming a marginal player in Bangladesh's foreign policy overtures.

The bilateral ties have seen many phases but with the ushering of democracy, the bilateral relations became stable if not improved. Soon after a BNP-led government assumed office after the first multiparty elections in 1990 and opted for economic liberalization, its trade and economic relations with India increased manifold. This deepened the economic linkages but the Bangladeshi inability to tap Indian markets effectively created a rapidly growing huge trade deficit in favour of India. While Bangladesh became more dependent on Indian economy it politically moved further away from India. India soon also opened up its economy leading to opening up of may more engagement for India, and Bangladesh fell low in its scheme of priorities in the ensuing years. There was also a distinct trend that developed during this phase; firstly, of Awami League being associated with India and being targeted by the opposition, especially, the BNP of being pro-India to the extent of hurting Bangladesh's interests. Nation building process in Bangladesh developed its own brand of anti-India rhetoric, especially in popular politics.⁷

2.2. The Anti-India rhetoric

The anti-India rhetoric has been used by all political forces in Bangladesh and the resurgent Islamic identity as opposed to the secular identity which is identified with India has led to Dhaka maintaining a political distance from New Delhi. The historic ties during the Mujibur years led to Awami leaders using India as a plank to fight its domestic opposition; but given the alliance

⁴ For economic and other reasons Bangladesh concentrated on befriending countries from the Islamic block as well as other powers like China and Japan

⁵ Hashmi, Taj: "Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh: Genesis, Dynamics and Implications" in Satu P. Limaye Malik Mohan, Wirsing Robert G (ed) (2004): *Religious Resurgence and its implications in South Asia*, Hawaii, Asia-Pacific Center For Security Studies, Honolulu.pp. 35-72

⁶ Ahamed, Emajuddin (2004): *The Military And Democracy In Bangladesh*, Dhaka, ANU E Press.

⁷ For details read, Datta, Sreeradha: *Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy*, (2004) New Delhi, IDSA / Shipra Publisher



politics that has come to stay in Bangladesh the earlier manoeuvrability of the Awami League is now severely restricted. As has been argued earlier, the close identification of the Awami League with India would inhibit it from taking a pronouncedly pro-Indian stance. The 1996-2001 Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina was an improvement from the earlier government but it still fell short of being described as full blown partnership. It was however able to accomplish, two landmark agreements: 1. The Ganga water sharing agreement, and 2. The Chittagong Hills tract Accord which allowed for the Chakma refugees that had fled Chittagong to Northeast India when their homeland was submerged by the Kaptai dam project in early 1960s, to return to their homeland after nearly three decades. The Ganga water treaty of 1996 was remarkable as years of negotiations had finally resulted in signing of this accord. But the goodwill generated during these five years soon distilled away during the 2001-2006 phase under BNP led Khaleda Zia government. For most Bangladeshis, the asymmetry in size, resources, and growth patterns with India has been a source of concern in achieving parity with India. Thus instead of being able to develop a strong symbiotic relations with India and Indian market, Bangladesh increasingly believed that strong economic linkages interpreted as almost virtual dependency could be broken overnight.⁸ The growing bilateral trade deficit and Bangladesh's inability to access India's market was a sore issue that was reflected strongly in Bangladeshi minds.

Ironically a review of this phase reflected India, the first friend of Bangladesh turning into its principal enemy. Bangladesh had invariably felt the need to maintain, strengthen and support a navy, air force and army as well as elaborate defence cooperation with other countries to defend itself from its enemy across the border. Having slotted India as its primary adversary, there was limited scope for any political leadership to argue for greater political cooperation vis-à-vis New Delhi. Driven by this trend, even Awami League has at times been forced to raise the bar to prove its nationalist credentials; for example, its opposition to gas imports to India and suspicion over India's planned interlinking of its rivers. In short, in terms of economic incentives or religious agenda, India was not seen as an attractive proposition for a sizeable segment of the Bangladeshi polity. Evidently, anti-India sentiments have a wider political appeal and support base. Similarly heightened security perceptions and Indian government going to town about Bangladesh nursing Taliban elements brought the bilateral relations to the worst point ever.⁹ The issues surrounding security threats, trade imbalance, incomplete border demarcation, problems of common water sharing were all heightened during this period.¹⁰ The discovery of substantial natural gas in Bangladesh and the possibility of India striking an energy deal were soon dispelled with simultaneous talks over laying of pipeline from Myanmar through Bangladesh to India, collapsing with BNP government deciding against sharing this resources with India.¹¹

India Bangladesh entered another phase during the interregnum period during 2006-2008 when Bangladesh was virtually run by the military through the caretaker government. After a period of prolonged indifference during the tenure of BNP led coalition government (2001-06), the 23-month tenure of the caretaker government (2006-08) led to the relations improving considerably. The military led government reached out to India and the bilateral relations began to take a more positive turn. While it took an elected government at Dhaka to

⁸ "Morshed blasts Delhi for 'unfair trade'", *Daily Star*, 8 September 2004.

⁹ For more details read Karlekar, Hiranamy (2005): *Bangladesh: the Next Afghanistan*, New Delhi, Sage Publisher, pp. 311

¹⁰ For more details about the outstanding bilateral issues read, Datta, Sreeradha: *Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Enduring partnership*, Issue Brief IDSA (2010), at https://idsa.in/issuebrief/IndoBangladeshRelations_sdatta_060110

¹¹ For details, read: Datta, Sreeradha: "Bangladesh factor in the Indo Myanmar Gas Deal", *Strategic Analysis*, vol 33, n° 6 (2009), pp 103-122



initiate deeper engagement with India post 2008, the caretaker government was able to ensure that India and Bangladesh move away from the tension that was most palpable during the past five years.¹²

The spectacular victory of the Awami League-led Grand Coalition in the Ninth *Jatiya Sangsad* elections held on 29 December 2008 marked a landmark development in the annals of Bangladesh. This also offered India a window of opportunity to take bilateral relations to a new trajectory. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to New Delhi January 2009 ushered in a new era of cooperation.

3. Towards a cooperative framework

The coming of Awami League brought in with it new domestic policies and a distinct new trend towards India. The breakthrough was possible due to both sides' understanding and accommodation of each other's concerns and problems. The four-fifth majority secured by the Awami-led coalition would enable Bangladesh to address some of the critical issues that the nation was facing including its foreign policy towards India. Similarly India, reexamined the outstanding bilateral through a more positive lens and accommodative approach ensuring mutual benefit and cooperation.

Both India and Bangladesh seemed eager to maximize the changed political situation in Dhaka now offered. New Delhi and Dhaka were keen to maximise the bilateral potentials that lay untapped. Thus, the visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's to India in January 2010 opened up the panorama of cooperation. The Joint communiqué that was signed during this visit was clearly a leap of faith taken together by the two neighbours. The cornerstone of the bilateral relations was the promise of shared prosperity.

The joint communiqué signed between the prime ministers of the two countries in New Delhi in January 2010 included new areas of bilateral cooperation. The regular exchange of cultural envoys, academicians, think-tankers and journalists buttressed the positive atmospherics that prevailed in the initial months. Indeed the floodgates of cooperation seem to have opened now with Bangladesh expressing its willingness to address India's long-standing security concerns. In 2010, both sides had underscored the need to actively cooperate on security issues with an assurance that the territory of either would not be allowed for activities inimical to the other. Indeed, immediately after coming to power, the Sheikh Hasina government's reopened the Chittagong arms haul case (2004)¹³ and arrested the former national security Intelligence chiefs Maj Gen (retd) Rezaqul Haider Chowdhury and Brig Gen (retd) Abdur Rahim, who were involved in that case. This sent the right signals to India. With the confessional statements of Md. Hafizur Rahman and Din Mohammad, the linkages between Bangladesh security agencies and Indian militants have been proved beyond any doubt.¹⁴

The new Awami League cabinet not only approved the passage of Anti-Terrorism Ordinance, promulgated by the Caretaker Government on June 9, 2008 into law, but also initiated several measures to address the menace of terror faced by Bangladesh in the last few

¹² For greater understanding of this period read, Datta, Sreeradha (2009): *Caretaking Democracy: Political Process in Bangladesh during 2006-2008*, New Delhi, IDSA/Magnum pp. 190, at <https://idsa.in/book/caretakingdemocracybangladesh>

¹³This was the largest arms haul in Bangladesh (10 truck loads of weapons and ammunition, enough to arm an entire brigade), which had taken place on April 1, 2004 in the Chittagong area. Subsequent investigation revealed that the arms were to be supplied to insurgent groups—ULFA and even NSCN-IM-- operating in north eastern India. The BNP government had underplayed the issue because some of the top BNP leaders were involved in this case

¹⁴ Datta, Sreeradha: "Complicity of state actors", IDSA Comment, 9 March 2009, at <http://www.idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/>.



years. The Awami League government's initiative in addressing domestic terror has also led to arrests of some Indian terrorist operating from within Bangladesh. On May 27, Abdul Rouf Daud Merchant, an operative of the mafia organisation headed by Dawood Ibrahim was arrested. This also led to arrest of Arif Hossain alias Chacha, another Indian fugitive from Dhaka in June. The subsequent arrest of Moulana Mohammad Mansur Ali, an Indian national linked to Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) from a madrasa in Dakkhin Khan locality of Dhaka on July 20, 2009. He was also involved in the attack on American Centre in Kolkata on January 22, 2002. The arrest of Mufti Obaidullah, an Indian LeT member in Dhaka led to flow of further information of other Dawood led LeT members. The investigation into the Mumbai attack had thrown up links with not only Pakistan but also HuJI in Bangladesh and led to arrests of several Indian terrorists.¹⁵

This was followed by India providing a \$1billion credit line to Bangladesh for a range of projects including railway infrastructure, supply of locomotives and passenger coaches, rehabilitation of Saidpur railway workshop, procurement of buses, and for dredging projects. The agreement also includes purchase of double-decker buses from India and setting up of a power grid between India and Bangladesh and establishment of state-run standards and testing institute facilities in Bangladesh by India. This would be the largest credit loan that India has offered to any state in the neighbourhood or outside.

India and Bangladesh decided to open up borders for facilitation of bilateral trade besides setting an agenda of engagement spanning a variety of sectors including transit, investment and energy. On one hand Bangladesh opened up its borders land and water to enable India easier accessibility to its Northeast states, and similarly, India, agreed to Bangladesh's long standing demand of transit to Nepal and Bhutan without the past restriction. The agreements encompassing a variety of areas were comprehensive and broad based, and designed to cater to an overall growth in the bilateral trade and economic relations. The two sides would now be connected through land and waterways enabling greater facilitation of trade and business relationship. Indeed in words of another Bangladeshi commentator, 'There has been a critical shift from paired reciprocity - i.e. exchange of individual benefits - to more comprehensive or holistic approach to cooperation. The new approach takes a broad based and long term view of cooperation which produces synergy.'¹⁶

At a very cursory glance, there were gains for both states individually and collectively;

For India

- Indian security concerns were acknowledges and firm commitment to address them
- Transit through Bangladesh as well as access to Chittagong, Mongla and Ashuganj for one time transfer of Over Dimensional Cargo movement of its goods and other materials. India will construct a bridge over Feni River in Tripura to get access to the Chittagong port.¹⁷

¹⁵ On May 27, Abdul Rouf Daud Merchant, an operative of the mafia organisation headed by Dawood Ibrahim was arrested. This also led to arrest of Arif Hossain alias Chacha, another Indian fugitive from Dhaka in June. The subsequent arrest of Moulana Mohammad Mansur Ali, an Indian national linked to Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) from a madrasa in Dakkhin Khan area of Dhaka on July 20, 2009. He was also involved in the attack on American Centre in Kolkata on January 22, 2002. The arrest of Mufti Obaidullah, an Indian LeT member in Dhaka led to flow of further information of other Dawood led LeT members. "The merchants of crime," *New Age Extra*-3-9 July 2009. "Another Lashkar man captured: The Indian national linked to attack on American Centre in Kolkata", *The Daily Star*, 22 July 2009

¹⁶ Rahman, Khalid: "Agreement with India: Context and consideration", *Financial Express*, 26 February 2010.

¹⁷ The route to the port would be through Khaleda's Zia constituency area. Perhaps the gains accrued through transit would change her perspective on India.



For Bangladesh:

- A billion-dollar line of credit from India for infrastructure development, the first state to ever have been given such financial support.
- An assured supply of 250 MW of power from India
- Transit to Nepal and Bhutan

The Framework Agreement on Cooperation for development that was signed clearly had tremendous potential for enormous economic gains by both the countries and the region. Often been cited as 'game changer' this agreement indeed set the tone for the years ahead. Traversing a cross section of transport facilities roadways railways and ports the cooperation has over the years more routes and possibilities and a cobweb of transport connectivity is falling in place. In the past there were several cross border road links but facilitation of road and railway transport systems would now be initiated through these agreements. The bilateral initiatives also led to growing into regional transport corridor. India began to view the common geography to yielding into regional common grounds. This worked for both India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh was not only more comfortable in the regional framework but it was also going to allow it to join the larger infrastructure and connectivity corridor that India has envisioned for itself and for its immediate neighborhood. For India, Bangladesh was a critical factor to allowing India building a network that connected the northeast region to mainland India. This would enable India to now physically access its neighborhood

3.1. The emerging transport corridor

India and Bangladesh trade stands at over US\$ 9 billion presently.¹⁸ Subsequently India over the last ten years India has offered US 7.5 billion in line of credit (The \$4.5bn Loc in 2017, line of credit to \$2 billion, offered in 2016, the first LoC to Bangladesh with a \$1 billion loan agreement in 2010) through line of credit. An array of projects were undertaken by Bangladesh many supported by India, while India also initiated huge number of infrastructural projects within its boundaries to support and complement these bilateral projects.

Over the past eight years India and Bangladesh have been able to improve the cross border transport system. Harking back to the early 20th century when the subcontinent enjoyed easy cross border movement it is being hoped that the efforts of these two neighbours would recreate the cross border movements and further improve upon it further for the entire neighborhood to join the transport corridors. As an economist would explain the several steps required for transport corridors to become functional economic corridors, the setting up of road, rail and water connectivity at this first stage if implementation is a move in that direction eventually. For now the transport corridor between India and Bangladesh has become operational in some sectors, they would once the other agreements and other routes finalized be part of the larger network in the region. This, the June 2015 signing of the above historic agreements has paved the way for the development of a regional multimodal transport network that will increase trade, people-to-people contact, and development of economic corridors as noted by studies made by the World Bank too on subregional connectivity. The transport corridor at present encompasses train, buses and water routes.

¹⁸ Bose, Pratim Ranjan Bose: "India asks Bangladesh to use Kolkata, Haldia as transshipment ports", *The Businessline*, 11 October 2018, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistics/india-asks-bangladesh-to-use-kolkata-haldia-as-transshipment-ports/article25194654.ece>. India-Bangladesh trade grew 38 per-cent to \$9.1 billion over the last four years. On a year-on-year basis, the trade grew 24 per-cent in 2017-18. This was followed by nearly 22 per-cent growth in April-July 2018.



While train service was resumed between Kolkata and Dhaka through the *Maitree* express in 2008, the *Bandhan* Express launched in 2018 connected the busy route of Petrapole and Benapole on two sides. India has also supported building second, one km long Bhairab bridge (US \$75m) and Titas bridge (US \$25m) that has been able to start the train movement between the main Chittagong to Dhaka Trunk rail line.¹⁹ Reiterating the successful bilateral story, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India writes;²⁰

Building a bridge over Feni river, the establishment of rail connectivity between Akhaura and Agartala and the development of Ramgarh-Subroom may look like small steps but those will be ‘game changer’, which will directly connect the North-East Indian States with the Chittagong port. We have opened up new inter-country bus routes between the cities to connect the North-East with West Bengal. Both Governments are currently working on the restoration of eight railway links between West Bengal and the North-East India with Bangladesh which were truncated during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

The roadways have seen similar development with Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus services started in 2015, it now has buses plying on Dhaka-Kolkata, Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati, and Dhaka-Khulna-Kolkata routes while Royal Coach on Dhaka-Agartala route.

The usage of waterways and maritime routes has seen a substantial improvement. In a recent move India and Bangladesh (October 25, 2018) signed three bilateral memoranda of understandings with Bangladesh Government to strengthen inland water transportation from above the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT) was signed in 1972 It was last renewed for a period of five years, with provision for auto renewal, during the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh in June 2015. This Protocol permits the movement of goods on identified inland waterways between India and Bangladesh through specified routes that link points in West Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam.²¹

In addition, they have now agreed to consider inclusion of the Rupnarayan river (National Waterway-86) from Geonkhali to Kolaghat in West Bengal in the protocol route. Kolaghat in West Bengal and Chilmari in Bangladesh have been declared as the new Ports of Call. The new arrangement will facilitate the movement of fly ash, cement, construction materials etc from India to Bangladesh through IWT on Rupnarayan river. Furthermore, Badarpur on river Barak (NW-16) is being developed as an Extended Port of Call of Karimganj in Assam and Ghorasal of Ashuganj in Bangladesh on a reciprocal basis. The Indian side proposed for the extension of the protocol routes from Kolkata up to Silchar in Assam.²²

The maritime network is becoming robust with Bangladesh’s recent approval for India to use the Chittagong and Mongla sea ports for transporting goods to and from its land-locked

¹⁹ “New train between India and Bangladesh begins operations”, *Railway Technology –News*, 4 November 2017, at <https://www.railway-technology.com/news/new-train-india-bangladesh-begins-operations/>

²⁰ Ali, Syed Muazzem: “India-Bangladesh ties: Scaling new heights-II,” *The Pioneer*, 11 March 2018, at <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/sunday-edition/india-bangladesh-ties-scaling-new-heights-ii.html>

²¹ Indian Rajya Sabha: “Unstarred Question, NO.4336 Question NO.4336, Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade between India and Bangladesh”, Ministry of External Affairs, 4 May 2018, at <https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/29786/question+no4336+protocol+on+inland+water+transit+and+trade+between+india+and+bangladesh>

²² D’Silva, Krishtina: “India-Bangladesh sign agreements to strengthen inland water transportation”, *Urban Transport News*, 24 October 2018, at <https://urbantransportnews.com/india-bangladesh-sign-agreements-to-strengthen-inland-water-transportation/>



Northeastern states.²³ This was signed during 2015 giving India access to use the two sea ports to transfer goods through our entry points viz. Akhaura (Bangladesh) and Agartala (India's Tripura), Tamabil (Sylhet, Bangladesh) and Dauki (Meghalaya), Sheola (Sylhet) and Sutarkhandi. Many of the Indian vehicles, trucks buses are being transported through the Mongla port into Bangladesh, one of the main suppliers Indian company Ashok Leyland opened a truck assembly plant in Dhamrai, Savar in 2017.

In keeping with the spirit of creating greater transport connectivity Bangladesh had earlier agreed to India using its waterways to Ashuganj river port to carrying food grains from Kolkata to Tripura. To recall, in one of the first agreements Bangladesh had allowed use of Ashuganj for one time transfer of Over Dimensional Cargo movement of its goods and other materials to Energy project at Palatana, Tripura. Earlier in June 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Agreement which allows goods to move by sea from Kolkata in West Bengal to Chittagong Port in Bangladesh and renewed the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) indefinitely with additional ports of call and routes.²⁴

Similarly, India has urged Bangladesh to use Kolkata and Haldia ports for transshipment purposes. The initiative can make coastal shipping more cost effective for bilateral trade, thereby shifting cargo from the costly land route, and create an opportunity for Bangladeshi garment exporters to reach European and American markets avoiding congestion at the Chittagong port'.²⁵

As an earlier World Bank report outlined, the network of transport systems will enable movement of trade through sea or coastal route from Kolkata Port in West Bengal, India to Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, where bilateral and transit goods to Northeast India would travel by inland waterways from Chittagong Port to Dhaka and onwards to Ashuganj Port. At Ashuganj, the goods would be trans-shipped by road or rail to the border crossing at Akhaura-Agartala to Tripura State in Northeast India. Another option would be for the goods arriving at Chittagong Port using the road route to the Ramgarh-Sabroom border crossing, also on the border with Tripura. The third route would be from Chittagong Port to Thegamukh-Kawrpucchuah on the border with Mizoram.²⁶

4. Regional Framework

India and Bangladesh, working together closely since 2010, is a break from the past for more than one reason. For years India was wary about Bangladesh being a cause of security concern for it while Bangladesh accused India the larger neighbor for behaving churlish. The new transport corridors would successfully changed the rules of the game of the past. Dhaka and New Delhi believed through the demonstration of the benefits of bilateral cooperation, the economic momentum will be able to overtake the political naysayer. According to Sheikh Hasina, once Bangladesh is able to witness the benefit of cooperating with India, the anti-India voices in Bangladesh will be subsumed in the din of mutual gain and benefits. These measures

²³ News Report: "Cabinet approves use of Bangladesh ports for Indian shipments to North-East", *Financial Express*, 17 September 2018 at <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/cabinet-approves-use-of-bangladesh-ports-for-indian-shipments-to-north-east/1316609/>

²⁴ "Project Information Document: Concept Stage", World Bank, 14 January 2016, at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/794651468211152911/pdf/PID-Print-P154511-01-14-2016-1452768829641.pdf>

²⁵ Bose, Pratim Ranjan: "India asks Bangladesh to use Kolkata, Haldia as transshipment ports," *Businessline*, 11 October 2018, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistics/india-asks-bangladesh-to-use-kolkata-haldia-as-transshipment-ports/article25194654.ece>

²⁶ "Project Information Document: Concept Stage", World Bank, 14 January 2016, at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/794651468211152911/pdf/PID-Print-P154511-01-14-2016-1452768829641.pdf>



would be strengthened and sought to be given a shape especially by Bangladeshis once a regional cooperation possibility was introduced alongside. The two neighbours planned to extend the cooperative framework to the entire neighbourhood.

Indeed, two distinct trends allowed for the regional framework to find greater ground support. First, the changing atmospheric between the two neighbours, and secondly, the changing political landscape in India's northeast region. Briefly, India's 'look east policy' had vastly improved India's engagement with the Southeastern Asian economies. India's northeast region (comprising eight states) while remained physically close to these economies on India's east but remained disconnected through lack of physical transport corridors. The Act East policy as a follow up of the Look East policy was soon initiated when NDA government led by Modi was meant to tap that gap.

Thus, India's engagement with Bangladesh and Myanmar both of India's eastern neighbours has led to positive bilateral relations and also opened up the scope of increasing the connectivity linkages to include sub-regional levels. Goods from Nepal and Bhutan can also use these same routes from that India and Bangladesh will be using for moving its goods.

Presently, India is pursuing two regional initiatives in its neighbourhood. The sub-grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) will introduce seamless cross-border trade and transportation through signing of the Motor Vehicles Agreement - although Bhutan has held back for the time being because of environmental concerns - but the three other states are going ahead with the trial runs. The other regional organisation on which Modi has expended considerable focus is that of BIMSTEC (The Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). Dormant for over two decades, it is being infused with a fresh lease of life. BIMSTEC comprises five South Asian states - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka - and two Southeast Asian neighbours Myanmar and Thailand. Although India has attempting to infuse some momentum to this group, Thailand's latest concern over the motor vehicle agreement may likely to slow the process once again. Although at various other levels BIMSTEC countries appear to be moving ahead. Clearly, India is keen to make this organisation effective as it is suitably poised to complement Indian efforts to tap the potential in its Northeast as well as its bilateral efforts to engage with the adjacent neighbourhood that indeed is interlinked through a common ecosystem.

However, there are several operational issues that need to be settled before the entire network of railway lines, roads and waterways lines are fully functional. But once the infrastructure is in place, the regional trade and commerce between India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal has the potential to grow manifold. Presently, the Nepal-Bangladesh bilateral trade is now allowed to move by road only through Kakarvita in Nepal, Phulbari in India and Banglabandha land port in Bangladesh. Thus, there is a growing buzz for regional connectivity and in recognition of the future possibilities several multilateral institutions are lending their support to such endeavours. According to some estimates the ADB will give \$23 million for sub-regional transport project preparatory facility in 2010, \$120 million for regional transport connectivity in 2012, \$335 million for regional power generation and transmission in 2013 and \$275 million for transport corridors in 2011 and 2013.²⁷

India and Bangladesh believe the 'positive impact' of regional connectivity should be felt wider, beyond the borders of the two protagonists, India and Bangladesh. Nepal and Bhutan should also benefit from the result, gaining access to two Bangladeshi ports, and from better facilitation of intramural sub-regional trade among India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.²⁸

²⁷ Karim, Syed Rezaul: "Connectivity the Key", *The Daily Star*, 29 May 2010.

²⁸ Chowdhury, Iftexhar Ahmed: "Hasina's Visit to India and Emerging Indo-Bangla Relations: Implications for the Region", ISAS Brief n° 149, 18 January 2010.



Similarly, the electricity grid could also be extended into regional grid another issue that India has been reluctant to examine for years. The bilateral power grid through which now India and Bangladesh will be transmitting power to each other can similarly be extended to a regional grid and South Asian neighbours will now be able to partake of each other energy potentials as never witnessed before. Bangladesh will thus transform itself into a transportation hub and realise its full potentials as regional hub very soon.

5. Energy grid

The most tangible and immediate benefit that accrued between India and Bangladesh was in the energy sector, a priority for the Sheikh Hasina government given its installed capacity of 15,379 MW, and a daily shortage of up to 1,500MW in Bangladesh.²⁹ Drawing from a basket of types of trade in energy the bilateral cooperation has covered a large ground from the first trade in 2013.

The process began with the signing of two agreements related to purchase of electricity and expansion of trade and commerce, during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in 2010. In a first good will gesture Bangladesh had allowed India to facilitate one-time movement of Over Dimensional Cargo (ODC) for construction of a power plant in Tripura State, through Ashugunj port. And Bangladesh received its first 250 MW of power supply in 2013.

Apart from this, India and Bangladesh have been able to initiate a process of exchanging of energy. In areas close to Bangladesh where India has surplus it can send that power to Bangladesh while India will draw similar amount from Bangladesh in areas in India which suffer a deficit. In accordance to that India and Bangladesh has signed a deal for 35 years. Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) will buy 500 MW power from different power plants of India and India will import it through the Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCI) regional transmission system. Energy cooperation was one that benefitted both and was quick to get off to a great start. Over the years India and Bangladesh were able to strengthen this sector through agreements over exchanging of energy. Tripura was in the forefront of this energy cooperation and through the Tripura Monarchak power project of North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited is planning to increase its supply of 68 MW to 101 MW shortly.

It was also decided in areas close to Bangladesh, India would send surplus power across to Bangladesh, while India will draw similar amount from Bangladesh in areas in India which are deficit, resulting in an agreement for 35 years. Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCI) are to establish trade energy through regional transmission systems.

India and Bangladesh also signed for peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Although there were several domestic concerns about the location for this plant, from Bangladesh's activists, India has been able to make some progress in starting to build this power plant. There are several other projects that have been initiated and some of them include the the Maitre Super Thermal Power Project at Rampal, Bagerhat of Bangladesh, by Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Plant Company (Pvt) Ltd, which is also progressing well. Under this project, 1,320 MW power will be produced. Alongside, a solar power project at Rampal in two blocks is also under progress with a capacity of about 180 MW.

Subsequently, in 2016 Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) agreed to set up LPG terminal in Chittagong. This would make

²⁹ Arguably Bangladesh has a demand of over 5,000 MW energy while its present supply hovers around 3646 MW. The deficit has led to cuts in its industries affecting its quantity of export. Incidentally Bangladesh government has plans to generate 7,000 megawatts of electricity by 2013 and 20,000 by 2021; 7,000 MW electricity by 2015.



it possible for not only Bangladesh to receive gas, but it would facilitate supply of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to north-eastern Indian states, including Tripura, thereby benefitting both the countries. Thus, public and private enterprises like Adani and Reliance Groups have all been engaged in bilateral cooperation in energy trade and it's a robust engagement that has been very beneficial to both the two neighbours.³⁰

The most recent progress in this field has been the possibility of trilateral agreement in this sector; The idea of developing an energy grid is receiving greater traction and is also being discussed at various levels. India is also preparing a draft agreement for regional energy trade. Apparently, a more tangible initiative of energy trade seems in the offing amongst India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also shown interest in signing a mutual Power Trade Agreement with Nepal and has proposed to invest USD 1 billion in Nepal's hydropower sector. During Bangladeshi PM's visit to India had expressed its willingness to facilitate this cross border energy trade between Bangladesh and Nepal. An Indian company has already signed an agreement with the Nepal government to build the 900-MW Upper Karnali project in western Nepal and is in the final stages of acquiring permission for constructing the 600-MW Upper Marsyangdi-II project in central Nepal. Bangladesh will import 200 MW from the Upper Marsyangdi-II project and the remaining 300 MW will be imported from Upper Karnali. Bangladesh has been making several proposals with Nepal for purchase of electricity and India will be provide the transmission lines would need to cross over to Bangladesh through India.³¹

Although delays in completion of projects has resulted in rise of building costs and other issues, each government has expressed its desire to complete the project and initiate a subregional trade agreement. While energy holds immense potential for regional development the issue of common rivers can also be viewed through a similar perspective.

6. River basin management

Thus, unlike in the past there was a greater tendency from India to view some of the common issues through a regional prism. Not only would that enable a comprehensive discussion of the issues on hand but also make way for resolution that factored in views of all the players within the region. It would also to some extent help mitigate the problems of bigger states verses the smaller states that were typical in this region.

To regard water sharing as a contentious issue between India and Bangladesh is too alarmist. It is, however, an emotive issue within Bangladesh, raised frequently to feverish pitch by political parties. River cooperation with has been a highly emotive issue for Bangladesh. They have always expressed the imperative to sign an agreement over the 54 common rivers, which has been resisted by India for long given the different nature of the rivers in question. At the state level, institutional arrangements and ground realities has enabled sensible riparian approaches. India provides to Bangladesh flood data on Farakka for Ganga (from 15th June to 15th October), and the flood data on Pandu, Goalpara and Dhubri for Brahmaputra river and of Silchar for Barak river during monsoon period (from 15th May to 15th October). Data of river Teesta, Manu, Gumti, Jaladhaka and Torsa are also provided. Bangladesh has been able to adopt precautionary measures with the availability of this free information supplied by India. The scope for greater mutual beneficial policies as yet remains unexplored.

³⁰ For details see, "Joint Statement: India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India", 8 April 2017, at <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28362/india++bangladesh+joint+statement+during+the+state+visit+of+prime+minister+of+b+angladesh+to+india+april+8+2017>

³¹ News Report: "GMR India to sell 500 MW power to Bangladesh from Nepal", *Nepal Energy Forum*, 14 August 2018, at <http://www.nepalenergyforum.com/gmr-india-to-sell-500-mw-power-to-bangladesh-from-nepal/>



In keeping with the changing world India stands to strike a better chord with its neighbours initiating a regional framework in managing the regional river basins. For instance, scholars of the region have undertaken studies on the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin systems. The regional focus and frame of analysis are being increasingly applied for effective management of such common resources. It is being increasingly felt that there is a need for greater understanding about the political and other implications of taking a region-wide approach. Bangladesh is also working towards a joint water resources management in a sub-regional context involving Bhutan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh.³²

Integrated River basin management approach of the Ganga-Meghna-Brahmaputra (GMB) has huge hydropotential. Its navigation potentials have also remained untapped for long. Given the recurrent floods in the GBM region demand a regional approach requiring cooperation among all the co-basin countries would be beneficial for all concerned states but also prove more effective in future. Not only each of these three individual rivers are big, but each one of them have tributaries which are important by themselves in social, economic and political terms, as well as in terms of water availability and use. Many of these tributaries are also of transboundary nature. The total drainage area of the GBM region is about 1.75 million km², stretching across five countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India (16 states in the north, east and northeast, in part or fully), and Nepal. Bangladesh and India share all the three river systems, China shares only the Brahmaputra and the Ganges, Nepal only the Ganges, and Bhutan only the Brahmaputra. About 10% of the world's population live in this region, representing only 1.2% of the world's land mass. The average annual water flow in the GBM region is estimated to be around 1350 billion cubic metres (BCM), of which nearly half is discharged by the Brahmaputra. Thus, resources development can play a catalytic role in bringing about wider changes and promoting sustainable development in the GBM region

GBM Basin, agreements have been difficult to negotiate between the co-basin countries because of factors like historical mistrust and rivalries, asymmetrical power relationships, short-term requirements. The basic problem behind the controversy between India and Bangladesh is nature of interpretation. Whereas India considers the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Barak/Meghna as a single integrated system, Bangladesh treats them as three rivers falling within three distinct and separate international basins. Exclusive negotiations on water issues alone (which often reduce the water allocation process to a zero-sum game) have often stymied the negotiating process. Environment issues can be similarly tackled through joint and regional initiatives.

7. Environment and Climate Change and its possible impact on bilateral relations

Similarly, common management of environment degradation and climate change also holds potential for future possibilities. In Bangladesh higher population density increases vulnerability to climate change because more people are exposed to risk and opportunities for migration within a country are limited. In an average year, 40 per cent of the total land area is flooded and annually river erosion washes away one per cent of arable land. Bangladesh would be faced with extraordinary policy challenges due to relentless population pressures, deforestation, and long time lag inherent even if sincere implementation of programmes to control global warming is carried out. Bangladeshi scientists estimate that up to 20 per cent of the country's land may be lost to flooding by 2030, spawning as many as 20 million "climate refugees." There seems little doubt that significant movements of people would continue in Bangladesh. As population grows and the country modernizes, the pressure on land would increase. Continuing natural calamities would exacerbate this trend. It is difficult to predict exact migration rates. But it does seem reasonable to assume that migration rates would

³² "Govt slams Economist Report", *The Daily Star*, 5 August 2011.



continue well into the next century. A substantial number of this population would be migrating towards India too.

India is also afflicted with several of the problems that Bangladesh is grappling with. Bilateral and regional cooperation becomes critical in the face of fragility of ecology of almost all the South Asian states. Thus measures at the national level and at regional level would include generating public awareness of the problem along with adopting measures including forecasting and early warning system, land use planning, and improved relief and rehabilitation mechanism

- South Asian states are largely agrarian and heavily dependent on water. They share common water resources as well as similar water usage patterns
- Nearly 70 percent of the Himalayan glaciers are receding which eventually will lead to severe water shortages in the region.
- Environmental changes have caused the river basins to dry and groundwater supply
- Average temperature in the Himalayan rising resulting in the late arrival of monsoons, adversely affecting agriculture
- A study carried out under the BDCLIM (Bangladesh Climate) project indicate that the average annual runoff in the Brahmaputra basin would decline by 14 per-cent by the year 2050
- National water policies have been formulated by some of the states like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India.
- Lack of poor implementations of the policies. Indeed turf battles within states have not led to optimum utilization of these policies.
- The retreating glaciers would also directly affect the entire sub-Himalayan region,
- lower riparian states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Pakistan, face floods, drought, and shortage of fresh water

South Asia's growing interdependence presents a compelling case for regional cooperation—to deliver regional public goods, manage regional externalities, and helps coordinate policies within the region, as well as acting together to ensure an open global economic environment. Many of the action plans are at a nascent stage of implementation and would demand longer gestation period and popular acceptance. But common resources would need a common strategy is being recognised by the people of South Asia. This could be the beginning of the long battle against several non- traditional threats that face South Asia.

8. Conclusion

It is possible to suggest India and Bangladesh seemed to have turned the corner for the better. The last eight years has been a constant movement in path of progress and development. There are several outstanding issues but it seems for the larger good both are willing to overlook them and focus on the possibilities to build on the strength. Whether it can be said in all certainty that India and Bangladesh will continue to work together irrespective of the governments at Dhaka or Delhi, it will be difficult to hazard a guess. The grey area exists in issues of the neighbours signing a defence agreement, with no clarity forthcoming from either side, although reasons are not difficult to find. For pushing projects that seem unpopular but tactically important, for giving an impression that lets make hay while the sun shines, for turning a blind eye to the undemocratic ways of the Awami leaders.



While none doubt that Awami League is the only option that would uphold a secular fabric in Bangladesh (although recent developments have also pointed to Awami trafficking too close for comfort with fundamentalists groups), the other political parties do not have to offer much. Just before Bangladesh goes for its eleventh *Jatiya Sangsad* (parliamentary) elections the various strands of opposition seem weak and scattered and evidently without a plan. While unlike in the last 2014 elections, the opposition parties will join the elections this time round, however the anti- Awami League plank seems to be the only unifying factor. Bangladesh Nationalist Party the largest opposition stands diluted given the charges against its leader Khaleeda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman who stays exiled in London and will find it difficult to return to Bangladesh. The other political formations are a last minute scramble and are yet to find their moorings. While all these parties at some point or the other in the last year have been in India expressing their support to its policies, past actions have not spoken about their reliability.

What is different at present is the large ambit of the bilateral cooperation that has delivered gains to the common people on both sides. Political leaders on either side will not be able to ignore nor retract them without a serious consequence. While India will be seen as closely associated with the one political party of Awami League, the electoral verdict will hopefully reflect the transformation that was possible given the close bilateral cooperation that ensued between the neighbours for nearly the last decade. The attempts should not be in vain. There will be enough time to address the other outstanding bilateral efforts as long as the people on both sides of the border are convinced about the efficacy of the process of mutual cooperation and progress in bring benefits to them. The domestic politics in Bangladesh and the process of nation building would obviously continue to revolve around sensitivity towards India, but it need not block the possibilities of developing healthy bilateralism between the two South Asian neighbours.

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