
Indo-Bangladesh Relations: Act Now or Never

Arobindo Mitra

The Bangladesh armed forces, particularly the army, have done yeoman service for their country in ensuring free, fair and credible elections in December 2008. Not only has Bangladesh been able to cleanse its electoral system of the rot of partiality and bias which had plagued this institution and the country all along but, in the process it has also renewed a sense of hope amongst the country's people that democracy, though derailed by successive political and military governments, can, once again, be restored. It was commonly said in Bangladesh that if the elections were free and fair, the Awami League would win hands down and that is what exactly happened. The Awami League, a pro-Indian, secular and moderate party, spearheaded by its charismatic leader Sheikh Hasina, won overwhelmingly against its main rival, the rightist, fundamentalist pro-Pakistan Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Hasina's Awami League, thus, got a second term to prove its credentials in clean governance and lead the country to economic progress, while India got another window of opportunity to strengthen its relations with Bangladesh.

India smiled, Pakistan frowned and the Chinese felt apprehensive with the installation of the new government. In an apparent reference to India, Hasina promptly announced that no part of Bangladesh's territory would be used for destabilising other countries and that earnest efforts would be made to improve relations with neighbouring countries. To the discomfort of Pakistan, she also stated emphatically that the issue of war criminals, one of the planks of which the Awami League had fought the elections, would be pursued vigorously and brought to its logical end.

While India was evaluating the turn of events in Bangladesh favourably, a major incident occurred which shook the conscience of the world. In a horrifying

Brigadier **Arobindo Mitra** (Retd) is a national security analyst based in Kolkata.

and gruesome act, some rebellious Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel shot dead their chief, Maj Gen Shakil Ahmed, and 55 other officers. While initial reports stated that inadequate pay, pensions and non-representation of BDR personnel in UN peacekeeping operations, together with the insensitivity of the BDR commanders towards their problems, was the main reason for the uprising, later inputs suggested that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in concert with the Jamaat-e-Islami (a pro-Pakistan political party) was responsible for inciting a small section of BDR personnel to mutiny against their officers, presumably venting their anger on the war criminals issue, in which most of the Jamaat-e-Islami personnel were involved. Such an act would also cause severe embarrassment to the Hasina government and create instability in Bangladesh, possibly leading to a civil war or a military coup. The other angle was that the terrorists of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), whose leaders were hanged, conspired with certain hardliners of the BDR to assassinate the pro-Indian director general (DG) and other BDR officers in an act of revenge. While certain army officers were also blamed for conspiracy with the Pakistani ISI and the ultras, what left the country astonished was that their intelligence agencies had failed once again to warn them well in advance of such an ominous development. While the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) was requested to investigate the incident, it was apparently clear that enemies of the government, be they Pakistan's ISI or the fundamentalists of the JMB and JMJB in active connivance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, were aiming to dislodge the newly elected Hasina government by creating unrest and instability in the country.

The fallout of this incident only strengthened the belief of the Bangladesh establishment that the needle of suspicion was Pakistan backed by the Jamaat-e-Islami and/or the terrorists of the JMB and JMJB which may have resulted in further alienation of Pakistan from the Bangladeshis.

This incident also generated a rethinking in Bangladesh's policy towards Pakistan as also Pakistani interests in destabilising India from Bangladeshi soil. The 26/11 episode had only strengthened the belief that in such wanton and gruesome terror acts, Bangladeshi soil too was being used to promote terror in India by Pakistan's ISI. Intelligence sources reveal that there was incontrovertible evidence of ISI involvement using Bangladeshi terrorists to attack India's religious, educational, scientific and economic targets as also our civil population. It was the state policy of Bangladesh, actively aided by, and under the tutelage of, Pakistan's ISI, to spread terror in India during the pro-Pak Khaleda Zia regime.

Since then and with the recent change in the government, there appears to

have been a national introspection by the politicians, intellectuals, bureaucrats and the armed forces, most of whom feel that Bangladesh must choose between terror and economic development, since such acts were only undermining their sovereignty and Bangladesh was being clubbed with Pakistan as a co-sponsor terror state. In political, administrative and bureaucratic circles, the thinking was growing that Bangladesh stood to gain by improving and strengthening relations with India since Pakistan, dominated by elements of the Taliban, was fast being labelled as a failed state. However, what comes in the way of strengthening bilateral relations is Bangladesh's obsession with the fears of India's "Big Brother" attitude which is exploited by Pakistan to fuel Bangladesh's apprehension that India is striving for regional hegemony, with other neighbouring peripheral countries being subservient to it.

With Pakistan under a cloud of suspicion and close scrutiny by Bangladesh on its alleged covert involvement in the recent BDR mutiny and the issue of trial of war criminals gaining momentum, it is for India now to exploit the situation in dispelling this absurd notion by greater engagement in economic, cultural and military activities with Bangladesh, thereby lending solidity to Indo-Bangladesh relations.

A host of bilateral issues remains unsolved between India and Bangladesh, the most important ones being those of water sharing, trade and incidents of terrorism. India is concerned about the fact that Pakistan is using Bangladesh to sponsor terror in order to destabilise the former's northeastern sector and attack selective economic, religious, scientific and educational assets in the mainland of India. Bangladesh has disowned responsibility for this in spite of India providing conclusive evidence of the presence of terrorists, supply of weapons and ammunition to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the existence of 95 terror camps. Bangladesh is most concerned about the sharing of waters where India supplies less during the lean season as given under the agreement and where India allows an unbridled flow of its waters into Bangladesh during the monsoons. The trade deficit is increasing by the day and while Bangladesh accuses India of not reducing tariffs or non-tariff barriers, India attributes the big trade deficit to Bangladesh's poor export basket. The other important bilateral issues are the contentious maritime boundaries, illegal immigration, ownership of the Talpatty Island, denial of transit facilities to India, the long outstanding problems of enclaves and adverse possession of lands by both sides and non-demarcation of the remaining 6.5 km border stretch.

Among these, the problems of settlement of enclaves and adverse possession of lands are the most contentious. This issue needs to be taken up sector-wise to resolve the issue on a give and take basis, taking into account ground realities to the satisfaction of both parties. This is bound to take a long time to settle but at least a sincere beginning can be made. With the Hasina government now in power, it is felt that we should hasten the process of a dialogue at the highest political and diplomatic levels in working out an agenda. India needs concrete assurance and action from Bangladesh on the removal of terror camps and assistance to militants. At the same time, New Delhi can give more in terms of economic assistance to its poorer eastern neighbour. In fact, India should also use the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) platform to resolve economic issues not implementable through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) where Pakistan is a member. Bangladesh does understand now that its relations with Pakistan have to be cautious and guarded in the present environment when the country itself is battling for survival. This shift in their perception must be worked to our advantage.

'Soft power' too, is having a definite impact in Bangladesh and is drawing the country surely and gradually towards India. The 1,000 miles of geographical separation which helped divide both the wings of Pakistan pre-1971 will keep them separate if only India can take certain timely and bold political, economic, diplomatic, cultural and military initiatives. The Chinese presence has never been, and will never be, accepted by the Bangladeshi people for reasons of racial, language and cultural dissimilarities. China has liberally been offering economic, infrastructural and military assistance to Bangladesh in order to promote its strategic interests in the region and check and contain India's influence over its neighbours. Bangladesh expectedly has openly welcomed China's assistance for its sustenance which helps them to keep India at bay in keeping with its apprehensions of India's "Big Brother" syndrome. While China will continue to exert influence in Bangladesh to make strategic gains, India can at least make a sincere effort in its own interest in dispelling Bangladesh's persisting belief and conviction of our belligerence by generous economic assistance. This may be the harbinger for more concessions, including transit, in the future. In fact, the word "transit" must be replaced by the more palatable "transportation" to begin with, since Bangladesh is very sensitive to the word "transit", and feels its security and sovereignty will be affected by Indian transport and goods plying through its soil.

It is a now or never situation for India to act decisively; to resolve all long outstanding issues or else we will again fall prey to our ignorance as we have done all along since 1975 in our relations with Bangladesh. India's timely and generous assistance to the Sidr cyclone victims, the then Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's prompt visit to Bangladesh to express sympathy, solidarity and support in their time of crisis, the successful visit by the Chief of the Army Staff of Bangladesh Gen Moeen U Ahmed to India in February 2008 and the recent unfortunate BDR incident have made Bangladeshis rethink on their strategy of non-engagement with India.

The people of Bangladesh firmly believe that the future of their country is intrinsically linked to that of India and that the onus lies on India to bring the two countries closer by way of greater economic concessions and resolving bilateral issues particularly the sensitive issue of water.

Bangladesh's language, culture, customs and traditions are similar to ours. We must promote joint exchanges of cultural troupes, film exchanges, book exhibitions, educational exchanges and tours, sports and games and many other activities in order to culturally integrate both the countries.

Track II diplomacy has a very important role to play in promoting better understanding between both countries and whatever steps are being taken by them must be followed up by the governments in all earnestness and speed in this regard.

Our Foreign Office is seized of the whole matter but any further delay will only act to India's detriment. Time is of the essence and we must redress the situation with Bangladesh with the Hasina government now in power in order to make amends for our ignorance and further strengthen relations with them.