

DEBATE

INDIA AND BANGLADESH – A NEW PHASE IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011 signifies further consolidation in India-Bangladesh relations – a phase which was initiated by the visit of the Bangladesh Prime Minister to New Delhi in January 2010.

The joint statement issued at the end of the visit acknowledges as much: “The two Prime Ministers noted that India and Bangladesh have entered a *new phase in bilateral relations with a pragmatic and practical approach* based on sovereignty, equality, friendship, trust and understanding for the mutual benefit of their peoples and collective prosperity of the region” (emphases added).

Recalling the landmark visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the joint statement notes that during that visit the two sides reached agreement on a “*set of initiatives that had elevated the bilateral relations to new heights*”. The two Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the exchanges of high-level visits in the preceding twenty months, which had helped reach understanding on many of the issues under discussion. They also agreed to encourage more such high-level interactions.

Two agreements – termed as “historic” – a Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development and a Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the Demarcation of the Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh and Related Matters were concluded. Eight other memoranda of understanding were also signed. The 65-paragraph statement includes detailed roadmaps for tackling every single outstanding issue. It ends with expressing the conviction of both sides that the visit and signing of these historic documents marks a “watershed” in the bilateral relationship.

India-Bangladesh relations have had a chequered past, essentially due to frequent changes in the political dispensation in Bangladesh and compounded by, what some commentators insist, “benign neglect” by India. India's preoccupation with its western and northern neighbours, polarization in political and popular opinions within Bangladesh on relations with India, presumption and perception within Bangladesh about India's “intentions”, unhappiness – on both sides – on the issue of water sharing, illegal migration, etc. further vitiated the atmosphere.

The coming to power, with a clear mandate, of Sheikh Hasina in 2009,

her party's enunciation of a vision for Bangladesh, termed *Vision 2021* marking the golden jubilee year of the republic, and realization within opinion-moulding circles in both countries that contentious issues need not have to be looked upon as zero-sum games, inserted more serious efforts from both sides to address all issues, find common ground and put the relations back on rail.

The "big brother–small brother" syndrome that was plaguing the Bangladeshi view had to be addressed up-front, especially in trade matters. Saner thinking on shared prosperity through transparent and freer trade regimes helped in bridging the gap. Oft-repeated complaints about "imbalance in bilateral trade", which were used by the detractors to derail any meaningful economic cooperation, the perceived non-tariff barriers on the Indian side – a few of which were valid – etc. had to be addressed.

Transit and connectivity issues had to be explained in depth to show that addressing them with a practical approach would create a win-win situation for both. The thorny issue of border management and some of the more serious complaints from Bangladesh also needed to be looked into and some lapses from the Indian side had to be accepted and corrected. Water issues had to be tackled in a calm manner and solutions found that would be acceptable to both sides.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India in January 2010. The visit saw broad understanding being reached on many issues, and initiatives were launched on others. In the 50-paragraph joint communiqué, the major points of concern and steps needed to be taken to bridge them were explicitly stated. By the time Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrived at Dhaka, it was expected, most of these points would have found solutions and some of the difficult ones would have found roadmaps to early solutions.

The twenty-month period between January 2010 and September 2011 was used to hold intensive consultations at several levels on all subjects that required dialogue. Both sides walked the extra mile and solutions were found to many of the issues. As the consultations progressed, there was high expectation that the September visit would remove most of the apprehensions accumulated in the past and launch relations on a more pragmatic and practical level. The fact that the Prime Minister was to be accompanied by the Chief Ministers of some of the states bordering Bangladesh, which have a direct stake in these relations, added credence to the seriousness with which India was addressing the issues. When the visit did take place and the understandings were revealed, they were received with satisfaction on both sides.

A hiccough did take place when the West Bengal Chief Minister, on the eve of the visit, expressed reservations on the understanding that had been earlier arrived at on sharing of Teesta waters. This was tempered by a paragraph in the joint statement to the effect that “The two Prime Ministers welcomed that there has been progress on the principles and modalities of interim agreements on sharing of waters of Teesta and Feni Rivers on fair and equitable basis”, leaving it to the officials to work towards concluding the agreements. The document managed to cover a good portion of areas of cooperation, and even in those where final solutions were not found, a roadmap was agreed upon.

The momentum generated needs to be maintained, if these agreements and understandings have to be taken to their logical conclusion and in good time. India and Bangladesh are not just geographic neighbours; they are intricately linked – socially, culturally, economically and indeed politically. It is a common perception that the two countries are organically linked with each other. Through better understanding of each other’s interests, removal of suspicions and not allowing internal politics to colour perceptions, the two countries can indeed assist each other. How India implements the understandings reached will have far-reaching implications for its overall neighbourhood policy. A broad-based successful relationship will also have positive impact on regional and sub-regional cooperation.

In the light of the above, do you agree that recent events have marked a watershed in India-Bangladesh relations? How should the two countries nurture the understanding reached and ensure that these get translated on ground urgently so that the past is kept in the past and not affect the future? What is it that the two neighbours should do in terms of integrated development of their border region, and use it as a gateway to reach South-East and East Asian economies?

The *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* posed these questions to four eminent scholars and policy practitioners.

Deb Mukharji: Former Ambassador of India to Bangladesh and to Nepal, states:

Seize the Opportunity

... the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh does mark a watershed in India-Bangladesh relations. It is a watershed between maintaining a cautious distance and recognition of the benefits that could accrue through genuine cooperation. It is a watershed between a transactional relationship and one of mutual confidence to achieve common goals.

... only the future that would show if the two countries have the commitment and the stamina to translate into reality the vision that has been on display. ... But for a harmonious forward movement on the areas laid out in the Framework Agreement and the Joint Statement, coordination among the numerous agencies involved is essential and, above all, continued political direction and involvement.

M. Harun-Ar-Rashid: Former Chief of Staff of Bangladesh Army; Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji; and, Secretary General of the 'Sector Commanders Forum' established in 2006 by the surviving Sector Commanders of the 1971 Liberation War, writes:

Let Us Prove that Past is Past

The greatest challenge is to transform the agreements and understanding reached between the leaders of the two nations into reality. The two countries need to prove that the past is past. The intended beneficiaries have to be able to reap the benefits of the agreements.

All concerned must rise to the occasion and seize the opportunity to improve the lot of the people of both countries. The people on both sides of the border are willing and eager to cooperate. Only, the administrations have to move faster. It is to be hoped that good sense prevails in all those who are responsible for implementing the agreements in the true spirit in which they were crafted and remain friends in need to each other.

Smruti S. Pattanaik: Research Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, is of the view that:

Make the People the Ultimate Stakeholders

India needs to take speedy decisions and undertake projects that are visible and that will connect it directly to the people of Bangladesh. The people of both countries must be made to feel that they are the ultimate stakeholders in the relationship. This can happen only when the benefits of the cooperation accrue to the people and are also visible. Building a communication networks and providing trade concessions will build such stakeholders, whose interest will be intertwined with better bilateral relations. Any such relationship that has the common people as the major stakeholders would be hard to derail.

Sreeradha Datta: Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, commented:

Show Tangible Results Leading to Visible Benefits

Dhaka and Delhi need to go far beyond just an assertion of their traditional

political and historical links. Gen Next expects much more than just platitudes and hopes to see tangible results leading to visible benefits, right at its doorsteps. While the two countries are now engaged in breaking down many of the trade barriers, which held them hostage for long, it will also be necessary to show visible progress in their various other joint agreements within the shortest possible time.

Mutually beneficial projects and agreements will always find favour irrespective of the governments of the day in New Delhi or Dhaka. The next two years would thus be critical. Bangladesh needs more than ever to feel the tangible gains that only a large neighbour like India can offer.

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Seize the Opportunity

Deb Mukharji

The Approach Note to the debate aptly sums up the nature of India-Bangladesh relations. It also asks the pertinent question whether the recent trend in these relations, exemplified by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011, may be considered a watershed.

To start with, this visit was unlike all earlier bilateral prime ministerial visits in both expectations and content, barring Mrs Indira Gandhi's visit in March 1972. I was in Dhaka for the subsequent visits in 1979, 1997 and 1999. Mr. Morarji Desai visited in March 1979 to underline the good-neighbourly policies of his government, when the government of Major General Ziaur Rahman had barely shed its uniform. Mr. Deve Gowda visited Bangladesh in January 1997, essentially celebrating the Farakka Agreement signed in Delhi the previous month. Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Bangladesh in June 1999, to inaugurate the Dhaka–Kolkata bus service. These visits, though not lacking in cordiality, were formal; and the substance was transactional in nature. Each country had its set positions on issues it considered important (water, trade, migration, terrorism, etc.) and the effort was to gain as much advantage as possible, even if it was in terms of the language used in joint statements, and not take a holistic approach to bilateral relations or a desire or ability to upgrade them to another level.

The stage for Mr Manmohan Singh's visit was laid during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Delhi in January 2010. This visit resulted in an Indian offer of credit of (US)\$ 1 billion and agreement in diverse fields ranging from cooperation to fight terrorism to the opening up of routes from Bangladesh to Nepal and Bhutan, supply of electricity from India, opening of border *haats* (weekly markets), etc. Significantly, the two Prime Ministers agreed to put in place a comprehensive framework of cooperation for development between the two countries, encapsulating their mutually shared vision for the future, which would include cooperation in water resources, power, transportation and connectivity, tourism and education. They agreed on the need to operationalize the various areas of cooperation at the earliest. Significantly, the joint statement stated or implied that the two countries' bilateral relations were not a zero sum game but had prospects of mutual benefit.

The Author is a former High Commissioner to Bangladesh and a former Ambassador to Nepal.

A major outcome of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh, at times inadequately appreciated in distant Delhi, is the conclusion of the "Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the Demarcation of the Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh and Related Matters". This protocol seeks to lay to rest vexed boundary-related issues dating from long ago. Adverse possession by both countries has led to exchange of fire and loss of lives, while the tens of thousands of the inhabitants of these enclaves have lived in a virtual no-man's land for decades. The resolution of these issues, as also the demarcation of the small undemarcated portion of the land boundary, is indeed a remarkable achievement after four decades of near apathy from both countries. It closes a chapter of indifference to victims, largely, of Radcliff's Award and the games of chance played by erstwhile zamindars. At the same time, while the protocol clears the way for final resolution, it remains necessary for India to undertake early parliamentary measures so that the 1974 Indira-Mujib Boundary Agreement can be ratified. Of immediate benefit and significance is the opening up of Tin Bigha to unfettered access by their nationals to the enclaves of Dahagram and Angarpotha. This should always have been possible, but perhaps the political will and the occasion were absent earlier.

Structuring relations with neighbours is always a difficult exercise: disparity in size complicates the process, because the smaller partner has obvious anxieties and concerns. Between Bangladesh and India there is the additional and inescapable burden of the past. The two countries had been, in a sense, one people for long; while this has obvious advantages in cultural connectivities, it also ensures a constant desire to assert sovereignty. Many of the "issues" between the two countries are more a matter of perception and politics than problems of import. However, in all relationships, perceptions are no less potent than the reality.

The last-minute cancellation of an agreement on Tista was, unfortunately, more than a hiccup. Sharing of the Tista waters has been under discussion, however intermittently, for nearly three decades. Both India and Bangladesh have built barrages on the river within miles of each other; their combined performance capacity and the stated requirements of the two countries exceed the flow of the river in the dry season. Tista is not simply another water-related political issue in Bangladesh, but one which does affect the farmers in the command area. While the Government of India must, of course, take into account the requirements of the state of West Bengal – the upper riparian – it cannot remain oblivious of, or indifferent to, the requirements of the lower riparian. New Delhi's intentions were clearly accommodative, but there were

obviously some lacunae in communications or management, leading to the last-minute veto by Kolkata. India's credibility would depend on early resolution of the problem.

For a country defined by its rivers, their flows are understandably of the greatest interest and concern to Bangladesh. All rivers of Bangladesh, some fifty-four, either have their source in India or pass through it. There is some belated recognition that in the long term the whole question of utilization and sharing of waters would require regional cooperation. Some 300 million Indians reside in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, and about half that number in Bangladesh. Nepal contributes major flows to the Ganga and 20 per cent of its discharges come from Tibet. Tsangpo/Siang/Brahmaputra also brings in flows from Tibet. With increasing population in South Asia, augmentation is necessary, but the scope for this in India is largely confined to the north-east. There are possibilities of augmentation in Nepal, but there is resistance in both countries to storage dams.

India has traditionally preferred to deal with water-related issues bilaterally; but given the low level of interstate confidence, the prospect of a holistic regional approach to water management appears remote. With Bangladesh, India should aim at extending credible assurance that Bangladesh's essential interests would not be harmed; and, more importantly, attempt to provide it a stake in water-related projects in India's north-east. India's track record in this regard has been poor. The much-vaunted Ganga-Cauvery link (not heard of in recent years) was made to appear a serious proposition, with no consultation with Bangladesh and even with states of the Indian Union which would be affected by it. Understandably, panic buttons were pressed by both constituents.

The proposed Tipaimukh hydroelectric power project in the state of Manipur is another test case. Shortly after independence, Bangladesh had considered it a worthwhile project. Since then there have been a variety of expert opinions within the country underlining the damage it could inflict downstream in Bangladesh, including in the swamps of Sylhet. India has repeatedly held out assurances that it would not permit the project to cause harm in Bangladesh. This, in turn, has been interpreted in Bangladesh to indicate that the dam would be built only after prior consultations. The nature of this impasse has now been exposed, with the signing of an agreement in Delhi (November 2011) on the construction of the dam, interpreted, at least by some in Dhaka, as a breach of undertaking given by India. There appears no evidence that serious discussions have taken place between the two governments regarding the concerns raised by Bangladesh. It is not good

enough for India to maintain that Bangladesh would not be harmed: if there have been discussions between the two water resources ministries and their experts, their conclusions need to be in the public domain. It needs to be understood in India, however, that questions have been raised regarding Tista or Tipaimukh issues not by habitual India-baiters alone but by objective members of civil society and media. Greater transparency by both governments on this highly sensitive area is a must.

It is understood that Bangladesh cannot have a veto on water-related development projects in India. What would be required is, first, full exchange of information and, second, a process which gives Bangladesh a stake in water-related projects. There is no reason why Bangladesh should not be offered a share in the development of Tipaimukh, in terms of dry-season water availability and the electricity generated on the basis of sharing costs. This will require a far greater degree of open communications than has been the case. Traditionally, the experts of the water resources ministries of both countries are not known for their openness. Clear – and firm – political directives are required. The outline for future cooperation on waters is contained in the Framework Agreement on Cooperation and Development which states, *inter alia*: “To enhance cooperation in sharing of the waters of common rivers, both Parties will explore the possibilities of common basin management of common rivers for mutual benefit.” Such good intentions, of course, need to be taken beyond expressions of political will to ground management; the record of the Joint Rivers Commission does not inspire confidence. India and Bangladesh may not always agree on issues related to water management and development, more so since in Bangladesh (as in Nepal) water-related issues acquire political dimensions that go beyond a sober discourse. We must, however, respect that as a riverine country Bangladesh would always have a legitimate interest in the flow of common rivers.

As we discuss the importance of the Indian Prime Minister’s visit to Bangladesh, it is worth underlining the importance of Bangladesh to India. The “benign neglect” mentioned in the terms of the debate is very much a reality. This attitude is reflected in a former minister for external affairs of India recently holding forth on a “grand bargain for South Asia” where South Asia is confined to India and its western neighbour. This north-India-and-Pakistan-centric approach of the Indian establishment, combined with limited understanding of some of India’s other neighbours, has done the country great harm.

Sentimental and cultural attachments and affinities between India and Bangladesh are indeed important, as we have seen lately in the joint celebrations

of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. But India's stake in Bangladesh goes well beyond these. 1971 was a long time ago; and while we may take some satisfaction that India played an important role in the liberation of Bangladesh, forty years is a very long time in the life of nations. Let us recall that a mere twenty years separated the two world wars. While 1971 does indeed continue to be important to Bangladesh in terms of its internal political dynamics and identity, it cannot be expected to feature in current bilateral relations, which have to be measured in terms of current and prospective national concerns and interests. For India, security is of prime importance, which can be subdivided into four segments.

The territory of Bangladesh is embedded in a most sensitive region of India. The deltaic and riverine border makes it permeable, with or without fences and the Border Security Force. Any hostile regime in Bangladesh, ideologically motivated or otherwise, can be a threat to India's internal security in the border regions and beyond. There is ample evidence of separatist as well as terrorist elements in India receiving the support, overt or covert, from regimes in Dhaka. While India is not able to influence the outcome of elections in Bangladesh, it may at the least attempt to lay the foundations of a positive relationship when that is possible. From India's point of view, over the past couple of years Dhaka has demonstrated an understanding of India's security concerns and has taken measures to curb, if not eliminate, the activities of insurgent groups using Bangladesh as a sanctuary. The November meeting of the Home Secretaries has taken the process further.

A second security concern would be the advent of an Islamist fundamentalist regime in Bangladesh. Some years ago many analysts were concerned about the rise of Islamist fundamentalism in Bangladesh. The consequences of a runaway fundamentalist regime in Bangladesh would be devastating for that country and would have grave consequences for India. Fortunately, given the ethos of the people, this is unlikely to happen. Events in recent years have shown that the people of Bangladesh are alive to the danger and also comprehensively reject fundamentalist views. This is not to discount a small minority which can make a nuisance of itself from time to time.

A third security concern for India would be the advent of external powers in Bangladesh. In years past, the United States attempted a ninety-nine-year lease of a new port at Chittagong with extra-territorial rights. However cordial Indo-US relations may be currently (or in the future), the entry of a global power in the Bay of Bengal cannot but be a matter of concern for India. India should also reflect carefully what its reactions may be if Bangladesh were to offer Gwadar-like facilities to the Chinese.

India's fourth security concern would be large-scale immigration from Bangladesh. The land-man ratio and the possible consequences of global warming on Bangladesh may create intolerable push factors. There are no simple answers to this, but it would remain in India's interest to see an economically prosperous Bangladesh. India does not determine the economic policies of Dhaka, but fullest economic cooperation and assistance for the economic well-being and development of Bangladesh is required.

The issues as well as the possibilities in the relations between India and Bangladesh are known. Eminent and informed members of the civil society in the two countries have discussed them over the years and continue to do so. It is worth recalling here at some length some of the conclusions reached with regard to diverse areas of interaction. These are:

- Lack of political will and direction has stood in the way of closer collaboration between the two countries. It is necessary to have frequent interactions at the political level.
- Terrorism poses a threat to all. It is necessary to create mutual confidence in bona-fides. There must be a mechanism for exchange of real-time information with regard to activities of terrorists/insurgents.
- There is need for institutional exchange of visits between civilian officials in neighbouring districts of the two countries to discuss common problems and solutions.
- The issue of investment has to be focused upon in the proposed bilateral free trade agreement (FTA).
- Early conclusion of FTA. Under the BFTA India needs to open its markets at greater speed.
- A major objective of BFTA would be stimulating intra-regional investment. The main objective of trade facilitation must be improved conditions for investment.
- Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) are an irritation and reduce mutual confidence. Real and perceived NTBs need to be identified and dealt with.
- A Motor Vehicles Agreement needs to be concluded.
- Adequate infrastructure at the border to facilitate trade needs to be developed.
- Bilateral issues need to be pushed higher on the political agenda.
- Bangladesh should become the transport hub of the region.
- Third-country trade of Nepal and Bhutan using Bangladesh ports should

be facilitated. Other allied facilities need to be developed.

- Container movement from north-west India to Kolkata-Chittagong-Dhaka (instead of present Mumbai-Singapore-Chittagong-Dhaka) needs to be promoted.
- Interaction between respective parliamentary committees needs to be fostered. An active India-Bangladesh parliamentary forum needs to be established.
- Inland water transport, now under-utilized, has enormous potential. This needs to be developed.
- The three issues of investment, trade and transport are interconnected and should be addressed together.
- A fibre-optic network and microwave link between the two countries needs to be established.
- Trade in energy on commercial basis needs to be promoted.
- Transmission of gas from Myanmar/Tripura across Bangladesh needs to be considered.
- Electricity from north-east India could be supplied to Bangladesh in exchange for gas.
- Bangladesh could use Indian coal-based energy.
- A power grid could be established for the region, including Nepal and Bhutan.
- There needs to be a regional approach to development of water resources.
- India being a large country with many languages, its composite nature needs to be factored in any communication programmes that are thought of by Bangladesh.
- The use of Internet could be promoted to cover areas of society, culture, economics and migration. Available technologies could be harnessed for mutual understanding and empowerment.
- Interaction and exchanges between the universities of Bangladesh and India should be encouraged. Short-term fellowships and travel grants and exchange of faculties between various universities should be instituted.
- Theatre artists and directors from Bangladesh could come and work with India's National School of Drama to produce Bangladeshi plays in Hindi and other Indian languages.
- A multi-arts festival of Bangladesh, involving theatre, dance and music

could be organized, which could travel to different parts of India.

- There could be a joint anthology of Bangladeshi and Indian women writers in different Indian languages. Institutes like Katha could be involved in the project.
- Historians could work together on issues of freedom struggles, partitions, subaltern history, etc.
- An annual arts cruise could start from Dhaka, going all the way to Assam, with Bangladeshi and Indian artistes performing together.
- There should be joint excavation of common archaeological sites. Possibilities of cooperation in the conservation of monuments and excavated remains should be explored.
- There could be joint surveys of ancient temples, zamindari buildings, study of archives associated with historic monuments and archaeological sites.
- Professors and eminent people from both countries should visit each other on a regular annual basis, for creating better understanding of each other and dispelling misconceptions.
- The two countries should collaborate to prevent the illicit traffic of cultural material.
- They could also join hands in trying to restore their authority on the India Office Library Collection in London.
- There should be joint media investigation to enquire into specific problems or incidents.
- Indian and Bangladeshi newspapers and associations could invite each other's correspondents and columnists to spend time with a particular newspaper and to use this as an opportunity for more insightful understanding and reporting on the other country.
- Market Bangladesh as both a tourist destination and a source of major programmes in the electronic media, which could find much greater exposure in the Indian electronic media.
- An Indo-Bangladesh Cultural Foundation should be set up to promote cultural ties.

The absence of an agreement on the sharing of the Tista waters aborted greater understanding in the matter of transit. Nevertheless, what distinguished the Prime Minister's visit was an agreed vision of future cooperation in diverse fields. Of particular significance is the Framework Agreement on Cooperation

and Development between the two countries. A visionary document of this nature has not figured in India-Bangladesh exchanges since the early 1970s. It is the spirit behind this document that would have prompted the current debate on whether there is a new phase in the India-Bangladesh relationship, a “watershed”. I am not sure if there is a comparable agreement between India and any other country of South Asia. It has often been commented that one of the problems of a united South Asian view is the difference in the security perceptions of the countries involved. The affirmation at the bilateral level that “cooperation at the bilateral, sub-regional and regional levels will accelerate development and enable the two countries to realise their developmental aspirations, shared destiny and common vision of a peaceful and prosperous South Asia” is a breath of fresh air. It does not bypass SAARC, but underlines equally the importance of sub-regional and bilateral constructs. No less significantly, the signatories agreed “to cooperate closely on issues relating to their national interests ...” and, of significant interest to India, to “cooperate on security issues of concern to each other while fully respecting each other’s sovereignty. Neither party shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the other.”

Specifically, the Framework Agreement envisages meaningful cooperation in the development of water resources, trade and investment, transport connectivities by land and water, disaster management, scientific and educational exchanges and cooperation, generation and transmission of electricity (including physical connectivity and joint development of projects) and protection of the environment.

The Agreement also envisages the setting up of a Joint Consultative Commission for effective and smooth implementation of the Agreement that shall meet once a year.

The 65-paragraph Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the visit expressed convergence of views on matters of national and international importance and went into the minutiae of existing and proposed projects and issues of connectivity and environment. It described the agreements signed as a watershed in the relations between the two countries.

It would be a fair assessment that the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh does mark a watershed in India-Bangladesh relations. It is a watershed between maintaining a cautious distance and recognition of the benefits that could accrue through genuine cooperation. It is a watershed between a transactional relationship and one of mutual confidence to achieve common goals.

That said, it is only the future that would show if the two countries have the commitment and the stamina to translate into reality the vision that has been on display. Officials of both countries have done a remarkable job in sifting and highlighting the possibilities that exist. Their work in untangling the hugely complicated issues related to the boundary is commendable. But for a harmonious forward movement on the areas laid out in the Framework Agreement and the Joint Statement, coordination among the numerous agencies involved is essential and, above all, continued political direction and involvement. The Joint Consultative Commission envisaged in the Framework Agreement could play an important role. From India's side, it may be worth considering if the Indian party to this Commission should also be vested with the authority to ensure that India's side of the bargain, whatever issues it may involve, is assiduously kept. The opportunity for constructing a relationship of partnership created by the visit must not be allowed to languish.

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Let us Prove that Past Is Past

M. Harun-Ar-Rashid

India and Bangladesh are two close neighbours of South Asia sharing almost 4096 km of land boundary. India surrounds Bangladesh on three sides. Bangladesh has an outlet to the Bay of Bengal, which is also shared with Myanmar and India. India-Bangladesh relations since the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971 have gone through many ups and downs. They have moved from cordial to strained, depending on change of government and administration in both countries. After the Awami League came to power in Bangladesh in 2009, things have started looking up and a new phase has begun.

It is said that a friend in need is a friend indeed. India and Bangladesh have been friends in each other's need. India-Bangladesh relations started at a crucial time, when the people of Bangladesh were fighting for existence during the War of Liberation in 1971. In the past, before partition, the people of both countries fought together against the British rule. The people of the two countries share common language, common history, common culture, and enjoy common literature and music: they have more commonalities than differences. During the Liberation War the people of India, particularly of states neighbouring Bangladesh, hosted more than ten million refugees for ten months, providing shelter, food, medicine and other essentials of daily life. This needed not only effort on the part of the Government of India to allocate adequate resources, but also the active cooperation of the local administration as well as people in general. The people of Bangladesh cannot forget the support they received from the population as well as administration during their stay in India in 1971.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made personal efforts to support the cause of Bangladesh. She went the extra mile to inform the international community about the gravity of the problem as well as convince them to support the cause of an independent Bangladesh. Without this extraordinary effort the liberation of Bangladesh within nine months would have been very difficult. Unfortunately, Bangladesh took forty years to recognize this contribution. The government of Sheikh Hasina is to be commended for honouring Indira Gandhi with the highest National Award of Bangladesh, though belatedly.

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The armed forces of India also made significant contributions. In the initial days they provided valuable training and equipment to the freedom fighters. As the war progressed, they also got involved in operational activities. Finally, on 3 December 1971 an all-out offensive was launched under the banner of India-Bangladesh Joint Forces Command. In the war, India lost about seven thousand officers and men. The friendship, which began on the basis of such sacrifices and understanding for each other, cannot be undone or even fractured for any reason.

Because of such intimate relationship and understanding the Indian troops left Bangladesh soil within three months of completion of the war. The father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, visited the Indian capital on his way to Bangladesh after his release from a Pakistani prison. He again visited Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1972. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Bangladesh in 1973. On this occasion the two countries signed a 25-year treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation. Such was the foundation on which the India-Bangladesh relationship was based.

Unfortunately, the high-profile relationship suffered a setback, particularly from 1974, primarily due to the withdrawal of water at Farakka. A border dispute, particularly the issue of enclaves and adverse possession of lands, added to the problem. The relationship nosedived after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib in August 1975. Thereafter, Khondaker Moshtaque Ahmed and General Ziaur Rahman reversed the basic principles of the state. The junta brought back and rehabilitated into power the fundamentalist anti-Indian forces defeated in the Liberation War. India on its part did not make serious effort to win over the changed administration: rather, the culture of mutual distrust and suspicion took firm root. The withdrawal of water at Farakka, unabated killing of Bangladeshi civilians on the border by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), the problem with demarcation of sea boundary and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), ever widening trade imbalance, and shelter and support to Santi Bahini insurgents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) by India, kept afloat this mistrust and suspicion. India remained concerned with the perception of large-scale illegal migration of Bangladeshi population into India and that Bangladesh was harbouring terrorists from India's north-eastern states. The post-August 1975 administration in Bangladesh, which was running the country in the spirit of the 1947 partition, convinced a substantial proportion of the Bangladesh population that India was anti-Bangladesh and wanted Bangladesh to remain subservient to India. Depending on the change of government on both sides, the relationship fluctuated. Even after a democratic government came to power in Bangladesh in 1991 led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

(BNP), which was founded by General Ziaur Rahman, the earlier anti-India approach continued.

Against this backdrop, the Awami League, which had led the War of Liberation in 1971, came to power in 1996. Its leader, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, daughter of Sheikh Mujib, realized that normalization of India-Bangladesh relations was of utmost importance for the economic well-being of both countries and for regional stability. She made extraordinary effort to resolve some of the outstanding issues. But the pro-liberation forces had come back to power after twenty-six years of rule by the anti-liberation forces, and they needed the support of a rightist group, the Jatio Party led by General H.M. Ershad, to survive in power. Yet we see two major achievements during her tenure in improving the relationship between the two neighbours. One was the Ganges Water Treaty for sharing the water of the Ganges during the lean period between January and April each year. This treaty brought some relief to the people of Bangladesh because India would not withdraw water unilaterally anymore. The second achievement was the signing of the peace treaty with the Shanti Bahini. This treaty ended twenty-three years of protracted insurgency and enabled all the tribal refugees living in India to return to their homes. Significant progress was also made in improving the bilateral trade relationship.

After the Awami League lost the election in 2001, the relationship deteriorated again, with mutual recriminations of the past resurfacing. In the election of 2008 the Awami League came to power, this time with three-fourths majority in Parliament. The new government gave appropriate importance to improvement of relations with the neighbours of Bangladesh, and particularly with India. In the words of Sheikh Hasina, "It is the season of renewal of India-Bangladesh Friendship".

It is appropriate at this juncture to look at the major challenges bedeviling India-Bangladesh relations:

- a) *Sharing of water of common rivers*: There are fifty-four rivers which flow to Bangladesh through India. Bangladesh agriculture and economy and ecology are dependent on these rivers. Being a lower riparian country Bangladesh depends on the water released by India. For example, the Teesta basin, which is one-fourth of the country in the north-west, suffers from "Monga" (short of famine) in every dry season. Because of water scarcity there is no agriculture, no production, and no employment, and the government has to support the huge population of the area with food doles. Similar effects are

felt elsewhere in the country when the major rivers dry up during summer. Most Bangladeshis consider the sharing of river water to be the most contentious issue between the two neighbours.

- b) *Delineation of Sea Boundary*: Bangladesh's exit to the outside world is through the Bay of Bengal. Being rich in mineral as well as marine resources, the Bay is also a source of economic growth for Bangladesh. The sea boundary claimed by India and Myanmar denies both these facilities to Bangladesh. Such a situation is not acceptable to Bangladesh as a sovereign and developing nation.
- c) *Border Management*: Bangladesh and India share approximately 4096 km of land boundary. About 85 per cent of this border is porous, having no natural feature to identify the border. There are 112 enclaves in India and 32 enclaves in Bangladesh under adverse control. Thousands of people living in these enclaves are virtually stateless. An agreement for exchange of these enclaves was signed by the two countries in 1974. Bangladesh has ratified it and handed over Berubari enclave to India as part of its obligation. India is still to ratify the agreement.
- d) *Trade Imbalance*: Bangladesh's trade deficit with India has been increasing steadily over the years by 9 per cent annually. Currently, India is the largest source of Bangladesh imports. Bangladesh's export base is very narrow; different tariff and non-tariff barriers by India are escalating the problem of trade deficit.
- e) *Cross-border infiltration by Insurgents/Terrorists*: It is India's perception that insurgents of its north-eastern states are harboured by Bangladesh or at least have safe havens in its territory with the consent of the state authority. India also claims that terrorist organizations like the Lashkar-e-Taiba have their presence in Bangladesh for launching terrorist activity against India. India also believes that some fundamentalist groups of Bangladesh have links with Indian fundamentalist/terrorist groups and provide support to terrorist activity in India. Bangladesh in its turn complained that the Shanti Bahini was patronized by the authorities in the neighbouring states of India.
- f) *Environmental degradation*: Deforestation in the hill region of India and building of structures on the common rivers are eroding Bangladesh's economy and ecology. Droughts and floods are becoming more and more devastating every year. Thousands of

villages disappear every year in the floods, which also damage infrastructure like roads and bridges. In addition, they destroy crops on millions of acres of land.

- g) *Illegal Immigration*: India perceives that a huge number of Bangladeshi people illegally cross over to India every year. The estimated figure of such immigrants varies between two and twenty million.
- h) *Communal Violence*: Both countries remain concerned about communal violence that takes place in the other's territory, as it has spill over and destabilizing effect in the whole region.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken courageous steps to resolve as many issues as possible and enliven the bilateral relationship. The first step was to visit India and sign a few agreements. In her new tenure, she had the option of visiting China or India first: a visit to China first is considered by local pundits as balancing the relationship with India. But she chose India for her maiden visit in January 2010 and addressed four major issues:

- a) *First: Indian security*: She made it clear that Bangladesh territory would not be allowed to be used by any terrorist/insurgent group. She directed her country's law-enforcing agencies to show zero tolerance to any such group. Apprehended insurgents were handed over to the Indian authority for appropriate legal action. This action on the part of Bangladesh was much appreciated by the Indian society. Dr Monmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister, while talking to journalists before his departure to Dhaka for his return visit, stated: "My primary concern was to emphasize how much effort the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had made to deal with our security concerns; and that we owe it to the people of Bangladesh to constantly strive to improve relations."
- b) *Second*: She agreed to provide a number of transit facilities to India through its railway, roads, ports and waterways to connect India's north-eastern states with the state of West Bengal and the rest of India. When implemented, these facilities will not only improve the economic situation in India's north-east, they will also contribute to better integration of that region with the rest of the country. Furthermore, they will help in establishing linkages between the economies of India and Bangladesh with the rest of South Asia and with South-East Asia.
- c) *Third*: Agreement was also reached to start *hats* (weekly markets)

for trade at selected places along the border. It is assumed that these *hats* will make significant contribution in reducing smuggling/informal trade.

- d) *Fourth:* For the first time Bangladesh officially supported India's candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

India in reciprocity announced extension of US\$1 billion credit for improvement of Bangladesh infrastructure, provision of railway transit through India to Nepal, 250 megawatt of power for Bangladesh with inter-grid connectivity, and a joint venture for a coal-based 1320 megawatt power plant. The 50-point joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit laid down a roadmap of future relationship. It highlighted agreement on development of overall economic relationship, implementation of the 1974 agreement for transfer of enclaves and adversely possessed land, joint management of border and sharing of water of common rivers. On the Indian side two most desired issues, i.e. security of India and connectivity with the north-eastern states through Bangladesh were resolved to the satisfaction of all. New areas of cooperation were also identified, particularly in education, IT and disaster management. A significant achievement was the realization by the Indian hierarchy, who had hitherto been mesmerized with the western and northern border states, that Bangladesh is important in overall policy planning.

Considering Bangladesh's internal politics of anti-Indian sentiment, Sheikh Hasina had taken a brave step to break the ice and start a new era of India-Bangladesh relationship. Her critics, particularly the BNP, leader of the four-party opposition alliance, came down heavily on her. They stated that Bangladesh had surrendered to its big neighbour. However, the intelligentsia and media supported her decisions.

There were great expectations in Bangladesh from the reciprocal visit of the Indian Prime Minister, which ultimately took place on 6–7 September 2011. According to a survey carried out among selected English and Bengali newspapers of both countries from June to mid-September 2011, it was seen that the Indian print media highlighted only two issues: terrorism and illegal migration. Contrarily, the Bangladesh media highlighted the issues of transit, water sharing, trade and overall improvement of bilateral relations. Prior to the Indian Prime Minister's visit there was a series of exchange of visits by ministers and high officials from the two countries to each other's capital to work out the details of the agreements to be signed and arrangements for the Indian Prime Minister's visit. Within a year Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Commerce Minister Anand Sharma,

External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and Home Minister P. Chidambaram visited Bangladesh. Vice President Hamid Ansari visited Bangladesh to join the celebration of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindra Nath Tagore. The President of the Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, also visited Bangladesh. In the history of India-Bangladesh relations this was the first time that such a number of high-profile visits had taken place in quick succession. It was obvious that India was giving much more attention to Bangladesh now than in the past.

However, just before the Indian Prime Minister's visit, the Chief Minister of West Bengal withdrew from the Prime Minister's entourage and also vetoed the Teesta and Feni River agreement signed by the two countries earlier. In quick reaction, Bangladesh withdrew from signing the transit/connectivity agreement. Notwithstanding this drawback, the visit went ahead smoothly. The achievements of the visit may be listed as follows:

- a) The visit itself was a positive development. The Indian Prime Minister was visiting Bangladesh after a long period of twelve years. Moreover, his entourage included the Chief Ministers of states with whom Bangladesh shares borders. This symbolism shows the extent of interest India has taken in developing relations with Bangladesh.
- b) The Prime Minister visited the National Mausoleum at Sarver and showed respect to the martyrs.
- c) He made a courtesy call on the President, Mr Zillur Rahman, and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia.
- d) He visited the Dhaka University, where he addressed a cross-section of people.
- e) An agreement on exchange of enclaves and adverse possession of land was signed. This will bring to an end a problem lingering since the British left in 1947.
- f) Agreement was reached and signed to complete the demarcation of undemarcated land boundary.
- g) Agreement was signed for a Coordinated Border Management Plan to prevent not only criminal activities and illegal movement but also acts of violence and loss of life.
- h) India allowed 24-hour access to Dahagram and Angarpota through Tin Bigha corridor with immediate effect.
- i) An understanding was also reached that there would be no killings on the border by the security forces of either country.

- j) An understanding was also reached to develop seven integrated check posts by India to facilitate trade between the two countries.
- k) Border *hats* to open at convenient places as soon as possible. Since the agreement, one *hat* has been opened.
- l) An agreement was reached to provide transit facility to Bangladesh through Indian territory to Nepal by train.
- m) India declared duty-free access to 46 Bangladeshi items, mostly garments, to the Indian market. Of late, another 15 items have been added to the list.
- n) The most substantive achievement is signing of “Framework Agreement on Future Cooperation”. It highlights possible fields of cooperation in future, particularly in the field of security, trade, joint investment, water sharing, environmental protection and disaster management.
- o) The 65-point joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit shows clearly the commitment of both nations to develop the relationship on the basis of equality and respect for the benefit of the people of the region.

Both parties assured each other about signing the Teesta and Feni river water sharing and transit agreements in the near future.

The achievements of both the prime ministerial visits are remarkable. The visits have addressed most of the contentious issues and have reached a solution to the satisfaction of both parties. Most significantly, understanding of goodwill and trust has been evoked, replacing the old blame game and mistrust. However, there is no scope for complacency. There still remain issues to be resolved.

- a) The Teesta and Feni water sharing deal has to be signed at the earliest. Two months after the summit meeting, on 10 November 2011 the two leaders of India and Bangladesh met again on the sidelines of the SAARC summit at Maldives and discussed the issue. Yet no specific date for signing the agreement could be reached.
- b) The delineation of sea boundary has to be resolved. Though the matter has been referred to the International Arbitration Court, it is possible to reach settlement as an atmosphere of goodwill and understanding has been created between the two neighbours.
- c) Both countries have to work out detailed modalities for fighting

terrorism. Both nations may consider setting up some joint institution like joint intelligence network or at least a joint coordination centre to share real-time information. Modalities also have to be worked out as to how the security forces of the two nations can work together to root out terrorism from the region.

- d) A major challenge for both countries is fighting poverty. Still 40 per cent of the people of the two nations live below the poverty level as defined by the United Nations. Both nations need to combine their political will as well as resources to mitigate this problem. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her address at the recently concluded SAARC summit has called for an integrated labour network to be developed. India and Bangladesh need to consider the issue seriously. Worker exchange programme, as has been done between India and Sri Lanka and India and Nepal may be considered as a model and made applicable to Bangladesh as well.
- e) Fighting the effect of climate change in the region is a major challenge, which no individual country in the region can meet on its own. Concerted efforts by the regional nations as well as China are needed to address this issue. India and Bangladesh must seize the opportunity that has emerged as a result of the two summits between them to address this issue.
- f) Water will remain one of the most contentions issues between the two neighbours. A comprehensive basin management plan to share the water of all common rivers needs to be worked out to the satisfaction of both parties. The issue was discussed during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Dhaka at different levels but nothing crystallized.

The greatest challenge is to transform the agreements and understanding reached between the leaders of the two nations into reality. The two countries need to prove that the past is past. The intended beneficiaries have to be able to reap the benefits of the agreements.

All concerned must rise to the occasion and seize the opportunity to improve the lot of the people of both countries. The people on both sides of the border are willing and eager to cooperate. Only, the administrations have to move faster. It is to be hoped that good sense prevails in all those who are responsible for implementing the agreements in the true spirit in which they were crafted and remain friends in need to each other.

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Make the People the Ultimate Stakeholders

Smruti S Pattanaik

India-Bangladesh relations have seen an upward surge after the Awami League came to power in a landslide victory in the election of December 2008.

The relations had started improving even under the earlier Army-backed caretaker regime. For example, Indian Army veterans of the 1971 liberation war were invited to joint celebrations of Victory Day with their Bangladeshi counterparts in March 2008. This had been preceded by the February 2008 visit of the Bangladesh Army Chief to India after a gap of a decade – that was soon reciprocated by the Indian Army Chief's visit to Bangladesh in June 2008. These developments indicated that the Bangladesh Establishment, including the Army, is not only not averse to openly recognize India's role in the liberation but also is ready to change the dynamics of the relationship. It is also pertinent to point out that this high level Military Exchange has now become a regular feature. The present Indian Army Chief, Gen. V. K. Singh visited Bangladesh in June 2011 and his Bangladeshi counterpart was in India in December 2011. These positive developments firmly point to the Bangladesh Army being onboard. This will have enormous significance for the future continuity of the relations.

The two major political parties of Bangladesh – the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – have pursued differing policies towards India. For long-term sustainability of relations, addressing their views is necessary; Bangladeshis at large, often victims of the views of their political patrons, have also to be taken onboard. Thus, this paper argues that India would require dialogue at multiple levels in Bangladesh to develop stakeholders to ensure stable and long-term bilateral ties. This is possible, as the forces of globalization have rendered individual-centric approaches of nation states almost redundant in matters of economics and security.

To understand the approach of the major political parties in Dhaka towards relations with New Delhi it is necessary to understand their support base and ideological background: they have circumstantial difference in their birth and their rise to power. The Awami League, born in 1949 as Awami Muslim League and which dropped the word Muslim in 1953, has throughout stood for secularism and democracy. Its role in the liberation war, the close

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collaboration of its leaders with India during the nine months of the war, and their experience about Pakistan greatly shaped their idea of politics. The 1972 constitution reflects this ideological outlook of the Awami League. Given India's role during the war of liberation and later in the reconstruction of its war-ravaged economy, the Awami League signed the 25-year Treaty of Peace and Friendship with India in 1972. Though the bonhomie cooled towards the end of Mujib's rule because of domestic factors, the fundamentals of their relationship endured.

The BNP, founded by General Ziaur Rahman, also a freedom fighter, came into existence after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib in 1975. Zia assumed power after the coup. An officer trained in the Pakistani military tradition, he quietly resented India's role in the liberation and nursed a grudge against Mujib and India for sidelining the Army, signing the 1972 treaty, and creating the paramilitary force, the Jatiyo Rokkhi Bahini. General Zia made several changes in the 1972 constitution, partly to legitimize his rule; some of the other changes were to have far-reaching consequences on the ideological foundation and ideals that the liberation war stood for. He repealed the constitutional provision on secularism, deleted secularism as a foundational principle, lifted the ban on religious political parties and rephrased the war of liberation as the war of independence. Constitutional space was created for centre-right politics, which the BNP prominently occupied. Zia replaced Bengali nationalism with Bangladeshi nationalism. The BNP was established as a political vehicle to give a democratic colour to his military dictatorship. He cultivated rightist elements to strengthen his ideological leaning and made special efforts to cultivate closer ties with the countries of the Middle East – which were opposed to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 – for economic and, more importantly, political reasons.

Thus the BNP, born in the cantonments, established itself as an ideological opposite of the Awami League and for obvious reasons distanced itself from India. Its constituency has been right of centre even though many of its leaders fought the liberation war and were formerly associated with the Awami League. The constituencies of the two political parties and their electoral alliances with like-minded parties have resulted in an ideological and political polarization in Bangladesh. This in turn is reflected in their approach towards India.

Awami League Regimes and India

The current phase has generated a hope of a new beginning in bilateral relations. However, there is a need to revisit India's relations with the previous Awami

League regimes to understand the trend in the relation. In the 1972–1975 phase, when the Awami League was in power, India extended a supporting hand to the reconstruction effort. It also withdrew its army completely before March 1972 so as not to be seen as an occupying force. Indira Gandhi politely declined Mujib’s proposal to build a monument for the Indian soldiers killed in the war, since it could become a target of vandalism in the changing temperature of bilateral relations. Even so, Mujib’s political opponents made India the political target to attack him. Bangladesh’s relations with India were over-scrutinized in the nationalistic prism. While the discourse of the radical left on India was couched in the narrative of imperialism, the pro-Chinese left, following their ideological mentors, were not only anti-India but also carried on a systematic campaign against Mujib. By targeting Mujib, some of the left political parties, who were essentially secularist, weakened the ideology that the Awami League stood for and strengthened the rightist elements.

By 1974, the change in Bangladesh politics was visible. The rousing welcome given to Bhutto, who was despised in erstwhile East Pakistan, signalled the departure of the state from its foundational principles. Unsurprisingly, Mujib began using Islamic greetings in addressing the people, establishing Islamic foundations and expressing his desire to join the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This period also saw the birth of the one-party state under the Bangladesh Krishak Shramik Awami League (BAKSAL). The dissatisfaction against the regime grew exponentially as the people were facing enormous economic difficulties brought on by natural calamities and widespread corruption.

The Awami League assumed power, after a twenty-one-year gap, in 1996. Its electoral defeat in the 1991 election had made the party cautious about its stand on various issues. In 1991, its election manifesto mentioned restoration of the 1972 constitution; in the 1996 election the party was silent on this issue. Given the politicization of the 1972 treaty, it explicitly stated in the 1996 election manifesto that “Friendship treaty with India shall not be renewed.” Sheikh Hasina publicly apologized for the mistakes committed by her father, referring to BAKSAL.

After it was elected in 1996, the Awami League government signed the landmark Ganges Water Treaty and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord with India. The former, to a large extent, resolved a nagging problem between the two countries. Sheikh Hasina was convinced that resolution of the water issue would help the two countries consolidate their bilateral relations in a meaningful manner. She adhered to a bilateral framework and refrained from raising bilateral issues in multilateral fora and took personal interest to

see that the problem got resolved. However, the new government was politically cautious not to allow transit facilities to India and sign any deal on gas export to India. The BNP kept up pressure on the government against taking any favourable decision on these two issues. The Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry in a report submitted in 1997 supported the issue of transit but the government was reluctant to take a decision.

BNP's Relations with India

The BNP's relations with India started on a discordant note. India was extremely critical of the military takeover in Bangladesh and the assassination of Sheikh Mujib. Zia's right-wing constituency and the ideological base of the party, as opposite of Awami League, also acted as an inhibiting factor. Zia himself was not eager to forge close ties with India. His foreign policy to distance the country from India also set in motion a certain dynamics. After Mujib's assassination some of the anti-Zia elements took shelter in India. Adding to the political discomfiture between the two, the insurgency in the CHT saw many Chakmas taking shelter in India. The Shanti Bahini operating from Indian soil added to the downward slide in the relationship, coupled with increased militarization of the CHT. The porous border, illegal migration and the BNP regime's refusal to cooperate affected the ties. The problem of Ganges water sharing also added to the troubled relations. The relations improved marginally during the Janata regime in India, with a short-term agreement on the water issue.

The BNP's recurrent theme has been that the election of the Awami League would lead to erosion of sovereignty and emergence of Bangladesh as a client state of India due to the League's "subservient foreign policy". The fear of "Islam in danger" is often evoked by the BNP in its political discourse against the Awami League. Nevertheless, the BNP has made limited attempts to forge close economic relations with India. This is understandable, given that the party has a large constituency amongst the businessmen. In 1991, after getting elected, Prime Minister Khaleda visited India and the two countries signed an agreement on the Tinbigha corridor. However, she publicly supported the separatist movements in India's north-east, referring to them as "freedom movements".

In the 2001 elections India was not a prominent issue, unlike the 1991 elections. While the BNP manifesto did not have a stance that could be considered as anti-India, the party in its election campaign frequently referred to the Awami League as "a stooge of India". On the other hand, the BNP

stated that it would look into the gas export issue to India in a positive manner. Nevertheless, given the electoral arithmetic and the fact that Jamaat Islami was the largest coalition partner, the tri-nation gas pipeline initiative was stalled. The BNP linked the pipeline to bilateral issues of its trade with Nepal and Bhutan. Politics dominated the economics of cooperation even though there was a clear case that Bangladesh would benefit from the transit fee accruing from such a pipeline. Similarly, the offer of the Tata group to invest (US)\$2 billion in Bangladesh got politicized over the gas issue. Growing radicalism, large-scale arms hauls in Chittagong, and country-wide bomb blasts in Bangladesh created apprehension in India. New Delhi's frequent reference to the state of affairs in Bangladesh caused the BNP to accuse India of tarnishing Bangladesh's image as a moderate Islamic state. The fact that Dhaka did not take any steps against the insurgents from India's north-east region also led India to conclude that under the BNP dispensation improvement in bilateral ties might not be plausible. India-bashing continued as the BNP's method of asserting nationalism and independence.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's 10 per cent Hindu minority has emerged as a crucial factor in the election. Therefore it is not surprising that before relinquishing office in 2006 Begum Khaleda visited India and spoke about the sacrifice that India had made in the liberation war. This was to allay any fear that the minorities might have regarding post-election violence: after the election of 2001 both the Hindus and other Awami League supporters had been targeted. The BNP in the past has consistently taken the stance that it would scrap the Ganges Water Treaty, accusing the Awami League of short-selling the country's interests. It had also stalled the implementation of the CHT Accord that was mediated by India and which saw the return of Chakma refugees.

The 2008 Elections and India

The Awami League won a landslide victory in the election held in December 2008, winning 230 seats on its own and a total of 262 seats with its allies in the 300-member National Assembly. The BNP managed to get only 31 seats; its electoral alliance partner the Jamaat got 2 seats. The Awami League individually also received 48 per cent of the vote compared with the BNP's 33 per cent.

The Awami League election manifesto, in addition to clearly mentioning maintenance of friendly relations with all the neighbours, also noted: "we envision a liberal, progressive and democratic welfare state." The BNP's political discourse hinged on itself being a "saviour": it claimed that it had

saved the nation from an autocratic regime and from loss of sovereignty to its powerful neighbour India. Begum Khaleda urged the people to vote for the BNP in order to “save the country and Islam by voting for BNP and its alliance”. The Awami League, on the other hand, broadly defined the election as an opportunity to restore Bangladesh’s “core principles of nationalism, democracy, and secularism”.

India and Bangladesh Domestic Politics

India looms large in Bangladesh’s economic and political life, impinging on the domestic political discourse. Whether it is the price of beef or sugar in the market, flood and drought or foreign policy, the India factor is important to the ordinary Bangladesh citizen. A substantial quantity of the vegetables, fruits, consumer items, poultry and meat that are sold in the Bangladesh markets originate in India. Therefore India-Bangladesh relations have many dimensions touching the emotional chords of the people. These have been manipulated by the political parties for their regime interests.

Many have observed that given its nationalist stance, the BNP is better poised to break new ground in India-Bangladesh relations. However, narrow political interests and its ideological position have not allowed the BNP to free itself from the historical baggage to forge new ties. In the past India has tried to develop a bipartisan approach, and in this exercise has underplayed certain issues. For example, India underplayed the extent of the post-electoral violence that targeted Hindus. However, India has been vocal on issues that impinge directly on its security. The issue of north-eastern insurgents being provided shelter in Bangladesh and the activities of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJi) have been among these problems. The BNP vehemently denied the presence of Indian insurgent groups on Bangladesh soil; it also denied the growing extremism in Bangladesh that was responsible for some of the terrorist attacks in India. The attack on the US consulate in Kolkata was one of these incidents. The illegal immigration issue also became a constant source of irritation, which was heightened when some gypsies were stranded in the no-man’s-land and both countries refused to own them as their citizens. Given the political sensitivity, these people were allowed to slip back in the night; and both countries denied that they had taken them back.

India-Bangladesh relations improved significantly during the caretaker government regime. For the first time, Dhaka felicitated Indian soldiers at a ceremony in Savar by inviting the veterans to participate in the celebration of Victory Day. High-level exchange between the two Chiefs of Army Staff also

paved the way for close interaction. The two armies held a joint exercise in counterterrorism in Jorhat, Assam, nicknamed Operation Sampriti I; and in October 2011 a joint exercise in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in Sylhet division called Sampriti II. Relations between the two armies are conducive to forging closer ties.

The visit of the Prime Minister to Dhaka after a gap of twelve years has generated hopes of a better future in India-Bangladesh relations. Begum Hasina's January 2010 visit to India had been criticized by the opposition, who accused her of not being transparent. Begum Khaleda also accused her of signing a secret treaty with India and urged the government to make the agreements that it signed with India public. Prime minister Manmohan Singh during his visit had a one-to-one meeting with Begum Khaleda. This meeting broke the ice between India and the main opposition party in Bangladesh. Earlier, the BNP was perturbed when the Indian Finance Minister during his brief visit to Dhaka did not call on Begum Khaleda. In the current instance, Begum Khaleda was critical of some of her party members who were contemplating a hartal during the Indian Prime Minister's visit. Prior to the visit the BNP was also critical of the manner in which the Awami League decided to go ahead with a transit agreement with the Government of India; during their interaction Begum Khaleda conveyed to the Indian Prime Minister that the BNP is not against transit and wants her country to be linked to South East Asia and China. She also requested the Indian Prime Minister to provide elbowroom in the deals that had been signed during his visit so that the agreements could be modified in future, if necessary, in the interest of both countries.

Changing Dynamics: Can the Relationship Sustain?

The ascent of the Awami League to power has brought in significant changes in India-Bangladesh relations. The party's election manifesto clearly stated, in the regional context: "Friendly relationship will be maintained with India, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar, our neighbouring countries, in the context of further strengthening cooperation with all. Regional and sub-regional cooperation will be further strengthened including relationship with the member countries of SAARC, BIMSTEC and D-8." The change in approach was born out of the Awami League's conviction that good relations with India are beneficial to Bangladesh. The party's landslide victory also attested to the popular support to the party. The Awami League's own experience with terrorism, in which Sheikh Hasina was targeted on 21 February 2004, bolstered her conviction to

root out terrorism. This cannot be achieved by supporting insurgent groups from India, some of whom operated with close support of the intelligence agency and political forces within the BNP government. One of the policies of Sheikh Hasina has been not to allow Bangladesh territory to be used against India. The government's decision to flush out ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) leaders reflected her commitment to walk the extra mile for the common benefit of the two countries.

Bangladesh has a sustained economic growth of average 6 per cent. The global recession has had an impact on Bangladesh exports. For economic development, improving trade ties and finding markets for Bangladesh's exports are important. In this context, connectivity, port facility and infrastructure are key factors that would determine Bangladesh's integration to the regional market. Finding gainful employment for the youth of the country, which voted overwhelmingly for the Awami League, is also a major concern of the government. To facilitate trade and connectivity that would generate economic activities in the country, the Bangladesh Prime Minister has agreed to provide transit facilities to the countries of the region, which includes Nepal, Bhutan and India.

With India, Bangladesh has certain leftover problems of partition, such as the demarcation of a 6.5 km portion of the boundary, exchange of enclaves, and issues related to the porous border which has led India's Border Security Force (BSF) to frequently resort to firing. Some of these issues has been resolved during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit. Bangladesh realizes that to deal with the non-traditional challenges of climate change, small-arms proliferation and non-state actors who often take advantage of the porous border, cooperation with India would remain a logical prelude.

To forge a new beginning, Bangladesh took the initiative to address Indian security concerns by arresting top leaders of ULFA and handing them over to India. Dhaka is now mulling handing over Anup Chetia of ULFA to India. The two countries are considering signing an extradition treaty.

The two countries have also agreed on a number of initiatives like connectivity and building road infrastructure. India has extended a loan of \$1 billion, the largest bilateral credit line provided to any country, at a very low interest. India has also agreed to supply 250 MW of electricity to Bangladesh to help it overcome power shortage.

Demarcation of land boundary and exchange of enclaves are two important landmarks in the evolving political relations. For the past four decades bitterness in Bangladesh has revolved around the land boundary issue. Exchange of land

under adverse possession would help address the frequent border skirmishes, the most important being the Pirduwa incident of 2001. The decision to exchange enclaves is likely to address the longstanding humanitarian issue that concerns the rights of their inhabitants as citizens.

The trade gap between the two countries is growing. Coupled with this the non-tariff barriers (NTBs), bureaucratic red tape, delay in completing customs formalities, etc. have contributed to an anti-India feeling amongst Bangladesh traders. The two countries signed a Business Investment Promotion Agreement in 2009. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit India lifted tariff on forty-seven products that Bangladesh has been demanding for a long time.

The recent developments in India-Bangladesh relations are indeed a watershed, given the historical misgivings and mistrust that have characterized the relations. Many have termed this as *a new era* in the bilateral relations. Notwithstanding the fact that Teesta water sharing issue is yet to be formally settled and the two countries are yet to sign the transit agreement pending the Teesta deal, the relations appear to be on a stable track. India has already signed agreements amounting to \$750 million to develop infrastructure and connectivity from the \$1 billion credit line that it has pledged. Border *haats* have already been established to address the problem of smuggling daily essential items; this will also help the economy of the border region. The Comprehensive Border Management deal has already been agreed upon during Home Minister's visit and it is expected that this agreement would help develop synergies between the border security forces of the two countries.

India, while being eager to invest in and strengthen its relations with Bangladesh, has also been trying to develop goodwill with the BNP. The sustainability of the current bonhomie between the two countries would depend on India developing good relations with both the major political parties. S.M. Krishna, India's Minister for External Affairs, during his visit to Dhaka in July 2011 had a meeting with Begum Khaleda lasting forty-five minutes. The BNP's coalition with the right-wing parties makes it difficult to smooth its relations with India. Speaking at the Atlantic Council on 25 May 2011, Begum Khaleda emphasized that the BNP wants good relations with India, while arguing that India needs to talk to all political parties to resolve outstanding issues with Bangladesh. The BNP at the same time has reservations about the close relations that Sheikh Hasina shares with many Indian political leaders.

Is the current phase of India-Bangladesh relationship sustainable? The effects of globalization have not only led to market integration but have generated new threats that are beyond the capacity of a single nation-state to

meet. The common challenges of terrorism, proliferation of small-arms and managing the porous border that extends over 4000-plus kilometres require cooperation of the two countries. They are victims of terrorism and religious radicalism. The stability of one is linked to the stability of the other. Joint management, including joint patrol, would be important to manage the border. Though most of the time the temperature of political relations has determined the dynamics at the border, there is wide acknowledgement of the need for cooperation.

Economic development would be a prelude to any kind of security arrangement. But economic development cannot be pursued in isolation. Whether for trade or market, the region requires close integration. To resist integration would lead to smuggling, illegal migration and problem of border management. Economic integration would require close collaboration in market, raw material, movement of labour and connectivity.

India needs to take speedy decisions and undertake projects that are visible and that will connect it directly to the people of Bangladesh. The people of both countries must be made to feel that they are the ultimate stakeholders in the relationship. This can happen only when the benefits of the cooperation accrue to the people and are also visible. Building a communication networks and providing trade concessions will build such stakeholders, whose interest will be intertwined with better bilateral relations. Any such relationship that has the common people as the major stakeholders would be hard to derail.

Show Tangible Results Leading to Visible Benefits

Sreeradha Datta

The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in September 2011 did deliver on a few outstanding issues, but it is also true that the lack of agreement over water issues disappointed Bangladesh.

To understand the present state of relations, it is necessary to recapitulate the period from the Awami League's coming to power, the expectations thereafter, and the developments leading to the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The varying perceptions on both sides, the internal politics in Bangladesh, etc., need to be kept in view, notwithstanding the fact that the September visit did attempt to open a new page in bilateral relations.

The present Awami League government headed by Sheikh Hasina came to power in Bangladesh in 2009. It was indeed a momentous event. The nation's jubilation was many-fold. The country had come back from the altar of military rule to fully functional elected democracy once again, after nearly two years of postponement of the elections and being run by an interim government. The nearly 80 per cent voter turnout, many of whom were first-time voters and included a substantial number of women, was a clear reflection of the choice Bangladeshis had made. The victory of the Awami League-led coalition, with over three-fourths majority, reaffirmed the faith of Bangladeshis in democracy and its polity. Indeed, this victory was hailed as a game-changer. It was nothing short of an extraordinary moment for Bangladesh when its secular fabric was brought back with zealous gusto. The results were unprecedented. The Awami League won 230 of Jatiya Sangsad's (national parliament) 299 seats. Along with its coalition partners, the ruling combine got 262 seats, limiting the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to merely 27.

The Awami League victory was a cause for celebration for Bangladesh undoubtedly, but India too basked in that joyous moment. India was keenly looking forward to a political change in Bangladesh. During the Caretaker government (2007–8) India was able to recover, to some extent, ground lost during the BNP coalition government in Dhaka (2001–6). The triumph of democracy along with the emergence of a secular government in Bangladesh gave India immense hope for the future of stable bilateral ties.

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Both countries seemed eager to grab the opportunity that the post-2008 political conditions offered. Both wanted to maximize the potential that could be tapped. The visit of Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 opened up a panorama of cooperation. The joint communiqué that was signed during the visit was clearly a leap of faith that the two neighbours had taken. The cornerstone of the bilateral relations was the promise of shared prosperity. In the ensuing milieu, heightened expectations were evident on both sides.

During the first few months of the Awami League assuming office the atmospherics on both sides were upbeat and it seemed that the bilateral ties were poised to take off as never before. A comprehensive bilateral roadmap was delineated during the highly successful, albeit emotional, visit of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, within a year of her taking over. But during the following year and a half thereafter, there was a perceptible lack of progress, at least in the eyes of the ordinary Bangladeshi. While the officials on either side assured that all was on track, there was very little to showcase progress in the public domain. It was thus inevitable that the innate anti-India rhetoric in Bangladesh would once again trickle back to the surface.

The common perception was that while Bangladesh was addressing Indian security concerns, India was not moving fast enough towards agreed economic measures. The impatient Bangladeshi population was unable to see any tangible benefits of being friends with India. The expected overnight gains that the bigger economy should have been able to deliver were not visible. Many began to question the rationale of “cozying up” to the big neighbour.

The effect Bangladeshi domestic developments have on bilateral ties with India also needs to be remembered. As time passed after the euphoric visit to India in January 2010, with little perceptible movement on the ground, the popularity of the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina was dipping and the India card was once again out in the open. The anti-India constituency was able to manoeuvre more space in the rapidly changing Bangladeshi political conditions.

Awami League and India

Given its historic close links with India since independence, and thus the “pro- India” tag that the Awami League has had to carry, any deterioration of its domestic political support naturally has a corresponding effect on how Bangladeshis perceive India. With the passage of time, the euphoria of 2009 had gradually given way to disappointment and disenchantment. As Kuldip Nayar recently wrote in his aptly titled article “Between the Lines, Hasina,

India in bind”,

Popularity is a rare quality which begins to elude rulers when they need it the most. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is in a similar situation. Her stock has shrunk at a time when she requires it badly. People had returned her with a sweeping majority. Yet they increasingly feel, three years after her being in power, that her non-governance, if not mis-governance, has only made their life miserable....

... she has not only lost her sheen but also the trust she enjoyed once. People expected her to deliver but there is nothing they can recognise as her achievement.... People wanted to see large power stations to come up.... What India promised is yet nowhere in the horizon.

A Bangladeshi tabloid put it bluntly, when it said that “Political analysts are already considering the almost three year old Awami League government as ‘clinically dead’.”

In January 2011, the Awami League won 88 mayoral posts, in contrast to the opposition BNP which won 92 posts out of the 236 municipalities that went to polls. The BNP winning the Habiganj-1 constituency, traditionally an Awami League stronghold, reflected the mood of the day. The Awami League’s stock had indeed plummeted.

There also prevails a growing belief within Bangladesh that it has conceded to India much more than what it has received in return. Given the sharp domestic polarization, the anti-government constituency will be awaiting an opportunity to see the Awami League stumble on its promises if not actually fall. To recall briefly, even before Sheikh Hasina returned to Bangladesh after her visit to India, opposition leader Khaleda Zia had described the visit as a “failure” and a “sell out to India”. There were also constant references to “secret deals”. Sheikh Hasina was accused of “returning home after giving away everything possible to India”. While it may be easy to dismiss several of these comments as routine rhetoric, it is also a reality that naysayers on both sides are constantly voicing their concerns. The opposition that Sheikh Hasina faces is not necessarily confined to BNP and its allies. There is a chorus within Bangladesh that believes that the country has conceded much more than what it has received in return. If Bangladeshis do not soon see visible gains from this new relationship, the anti-India rhetoric will reach jarring levels. As columnist Bhasker Roy opined, “if they are dismayed, the battle may have been won but the war lost. To avoid falling prey to the anti-India

constituencies, albeit small but certainly powerful, both states need to quickly move and produce visible results.”

Going back to the Hasina visit of 2010, it did result in tangible gains to both sides, which may be broadly summarized as:

For India:

- Indian security concerns were acknowledged and firm commitments made 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.

For Bangladesh:

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

The agreements to upgrade border land customs stations, introduce more trading points and opening up of border *haats* would be beneficial to both.

The fact that the two countries took eight months to work out the actual credit transfer did not bode well for the new-found upswing in relations. However, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's much-publicized return visit was expected to put a balm on many such festering issues. The large delegation of north-eastern Chief Ministers and officials was expected to add importance and substance to the much-awaited visit. But as the events unfolded, India's last-minute inability to conclude the agreement on Teesta water sharing took the sheen away from the other successes of the visit. The much-awaited visit clearly floundered over this single issue.

However, the framework agreement on cooperation for development has the potential for enormous economic gains for both countries and the region.

Indeed, the momentous breakthrough over the resolution of border issues, which includes demarcation of the contentious 6.1 km boundary and swapping enclaves and territories, including 24-hour access to Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves through the Tin Bigha corridor, were overshadowed by the lack of resolution over water sharing, which gave a convenient handle to the opposition to take swipes at the ruling coalition.

Leading commentator Ziauddin Choudhury noted that “these failures put a sour note on a much hyped visit of the Indian PM, despite many other

positive achievements including revival of the much delayed enclaves transfer between the two countries.” He believed that the media at large and political leaders in Bangladesh consider the failure on Teesta agreement as the “litmus test of India’s good will and good neighbourly relationship”. This of course led to the withholding of finalization of the transit agreements. Clearly, Sheikh Hasina had to be seen to await what she could get from India before she could concede what India wanted.

Varying Perceptions

Perceptions amongst Indians and Bangladeshis are indeed at variance. On the Indian side, there is a clear perception that Bangladesh has a genuine interest in improving bilateral relations and that it is committed to addressing Indian security concerns; and on connectivity, Bangladesh has shown the willingness to assist Indian plans and expectations. On the other hand, some in Bangladesh are questioning Indian motives. Indians consider that India’s extension of several concessions to Bangladesh on trade and boundary issues is an indicator of its willingness to be large-hearted in dealing with smaller neighbours. Larchis Mohan wrote in *The Telegraph* on 6 December 2011 that from the Indian perspective, “the Dhaka visit is our message to our smaller South Asian neighbours that India will not be niggardly or tight-fisted in its dealings with them but play a role that behoves its large size and strong economy.” Detractors are quick to point out that in the backdrop of Indian delay in building of promised cyclone shelters and gift of 500,000 tonnes of rice, as relief measures post Cyclone Sidr, the Indian perspective could be considered to be rather one-dimensional.

Indians also have their share of grievances vis-à-vis Bangladesh. The presence of illegal Bangladeshi nationals in India has been the other most contentious issue on the bilateral agenda. Dhaka has consistently maintained that there are no Bangladeshis in India. Irrespective of internal differences, Bangladeshi leaders of all shades vehemently deny Indian contentions over illegal migrations.

Open and poorly managed borders and the absence of a sound and comprehensive immigration policy in India have greatly facilitated illegal immigration. Rampant corruption among the border guards and the cynical policy of turning the foreign migrants into captive voters by political parties have made the problem more intractable. On the other hand the stubborn denial by the Bangladesh government of the very existence of the problem thwarts any meaningful dialogue and search for solutions. India is worried

about the long-term adverse impact of the massive and unrestrained immigration, not only on its sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity, but also on the fragile demographic landscape in the border-states and -regions.

Similarly, the lack of clarity on the Indian request for transit rights has given way to several ill-informed, misinformed and mischievous voices in Bangladesh. Disinformation to confuse the issues involved and creating an environment of fear and suspicion by the detractors has been a major problem. India has clearly and categorically stated that it does not want any corridor and certainly is not interested in grabbing any land. It has been argued that while Bangladesh calls for improving its trade imbalance that is restricted to balance of trade in goods only, the balance of payment can be improved in favour of Bangladesh by balance of trade in services also. Transit facility can thus be seen, and should be seen, as a service.

In fact, the one-time transit facility given to India for the use of Ashuganj port, now in existence for over a year, to bring large containers from Kolkata port for despatch to the Palatan power project in Tripura can be cited as a win-win arrangement. One of the objectives of this project is to export power to Bangladesh to sizeably cover the 1000–1500 MW gap in its power requirement.

While it is true that the recent summit is a step forward in bilateral ties, minor criticisms and setbacks can be overcome if India is able to step in with support in the area of power, which is critical to Bangladesh growth and development. Energy export has the potential to ensure that India and Bangladesh can be partners in progress and development in the next decade. Bangladesh, despite efforts, has not been able to cover the electricity shortage although the grid has been improved to absorb the increase. India has tremendous opportunity to help Bangladesh in this sphere. Apart from other joint projects, the July 2011 agreement between the Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) and Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL) for a thirty-five-year power transmission agreement, designed to import 500 MW of power, starting with 250 MW from late 2012, will be a welcome development.

Further Possibilities

The way ahead for India would be to engage neighbours not only through the bilateral prism but also through regional frameworks. This would not only facilitate regional support for bilateral initiatives, but also add a degree of

comfort to smaller countries when dealing with their giant neighbour. The power grid envisaged now between India and Bangladesh is poised to grow into a regional grid and other South Asian neighbours will now be able to partake in the advantages of such arrangements. Bangladesh will thus transform itself into a transportation hub and realize its full potential as a regional hub very soon.

In the perception of Gowher Rizvi, one of Sheikh Hasina's advisors and a proponent of stronger India-Bangladesh relations, "the opposition will not spare any opportunity to embarrass the government and will look for areas of vulnerability. It is, therefore, important to manage the relationship and move away from a zero-sum game mentality, to recognize that peace and cooperation create a positive-sum, win-win situation for all." That message to India seems worth noting.

Bangladesh has been moving in the direction of such a regional framework and has been discussing the subject with others. Bangladesh has agreed to grant both Nepal and Bhutan the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports for transit trade to third countries. Indeed, Bangladesh is keen to extend it through Myanmar to the countries of South-East Asia and beyond.

If some of the infrastructure development projects to which India has committed itself get underway soon, Bangladeshis would be in a better position to appreciate India's contribution to the development of their country. These include:

- Financing the construction of the 10 km Akhaura-Agartala rail link.
- Construction of a bridge on river Feni at Ramgarh in Khagrachhari district and Sabroom in South Tripura district, connecting it to Chittagong Port.
- Upgrading of Bangladesh's internal waterways through dredging of the choked river channels.

India would also be able to strike a better chord with its neighbours by 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. It is necessary to revive the regional focus. 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 itself. Environment issues can be similarly tackled through joint and regional initiatives.

Dhaka and Delhi need to go far beyond just an assertion of their traditional political and historical links. Gen Next expects much more than just platitudes and hopes to see tangible results leading to visible benefits, right at its doorsteps. While the two countries are now engaged in breaking down many of the trade barriers, which held them hostage for long, it will also be necessary to show visible progress in their various other joint agreements within the shortest possible time.

Mutually beneficial projects and agreements will always find favour irrespective of the governments of the day in New Delhi or Dhaka. The next two years would thus be critical. Bangladesh needs more than ever to feel the tangible gains that only a large neighbour like India can offer.
