

DEBATE

INDIA–BANGLADESH RELATIONS: WHAT LIES IN STORE?

Ever since its independence in 1971, India's relations with Bangladesh have, for all practical purposes, resembled a roller coaster ride, but with more downs than ups. This may seem inexplicable, given the role that India played in Bangladesh's liberation. And yet, the complexity of that nation, coupled perhaps with inflated expectations and missed steps by both sides, did not enable the relationship to blossom as would normally have been the case. Indeed, till a few years ago, Bangladesh had, for all practical purposes become a major security concern for India. However, with the coming to power of the Awami League (AL) government in December 2008, and a desire on the part of both governments at the highest level to learn from past mistakes and look to the future in a practical and pragmatic manner, have altered the relationship considerably for the better. Unfortunately, however, India's inability to deliver on the Teesta River accord and the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) has cast a dark shadow over the process of further improvements in the relationship.

India's inability to deliver has also begun to impact on the ability of the Awami League government to sustain itself in power in the forthcoming national elections. However, it does not mean that if the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) comes to power following the general elections, the growing relationship will necessarily falter, or be reversed. At the very least though, the dynamics will change, and new arrangements will be sought by the new Government. The growth of fundamentalist religious forces in Bangladesh, and the wide schism between the AL and the BNP would not help matters even though, of late, in its public pronouncements, the BNP has shown more positive intent towards the relationship with India.

India's relationship with Bangladesh is, for a variety of reasons simply too important to be left to regional considerations within India, or to be treated with an element of casualness.

While there is no doubt that it needs two hands to clap, it is important to seriously reflect on the mistakes that India may have made in the development of its relations with Bangladesh, how best to rectify these, and also to mutually exploit the series of complementarities that would bring substantial benefit to both countries. Such an exercise is particularly desirable at this point in time, for not only are national elections to be held in Bangladesh in the coming

weeks (these have to be held before end January 2014) but also because India itself will hold national elections by May 2014, and could bring about a new government at the centre in New Delhi.

As we look ahead, several issues arise. With the underlying assumption that the India–Bangladesh relationship is one of India’s most important foreign policy priorities, some of the questions that follow are:

- What can, and should, India do to build greater trust and understanding with Bangladesh? Has India done enough to project and utilize commonalities so that there is much greater integration in different sectors?
- The regional factor (in terms of Indian states) has always been important vis-à-vis Bangladesh. Here one may recall the war of Liberation, the Farakka negotiations, migration issues, etc. This issue has today gained excess salience especially after the recent contretemps over the Teesta issue, and India’s inability to ratify the LBA. How best should the Union government in Delhi bring on board, and where necessary enforce decisions, on bordering state governments when these are in greater national interests? At the same time, it is necessary to draw up an integrated roadmap for the development of the states bordering Bangladesh, taking into account the complementarities with the latter. How best should this be done?
- While bilateral economic integration is desirable for mutual benefit, and the process has begun, it must be underlined that for this to move forward, there has to be stability in policy on both sides on a long term basis, along with a clear mutuality of benefits. This need not necessarily be equality of benefits.
- Bangladesh must help India resolve the problem of the illegal migration of its citizens to India. This has serious security and economic implications for India and cannot go unheeded indefinitely. How best can this be achieved?
- India holds no conceivable security threat to Bangladesh. Greater transparency in the latter’s defence posture and policies would be helpful to build greater trust and understanding. So too would more interaction between the defence forces and industries of both sides. Can this be expected to happen?
- What are Bangladesh’s own threat perceptions?

Two years ago, the Journal had examined the subject in the Debate section of its October–December 2011 issue.* Four experts had expressed their views

*<http://www.associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Vol6/6.4/DEBATE.pdf>

in the debate, titled, “India and Bangladesh: A New Phase in Bilateral Relations”.

The above are posers that follow from the earlier debate, and developments since. They are not necessarily comprehensive but are considered particularly pertinent in today’s context and for the purpose of the proposed debate to look ahead at the prospects of India–Bangladesh relations.

(The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect the views of the *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)

Developing Multiple Areas of Mutual Advantage

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Bangladesh is currently going through a protracted political crisis. Pre-election pyrotechnics are not unusual in Bangladesh; and the only two occasions of a peaceful transition through the ballot after the restoration of democracy were in 1991 and in 2009, under the vigil of the army on the latter occasion. Presently, the ruling Awami League appears set to hold the elections on schedule, on January 5, 2014. The main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has declined to participate in any election not supervised by a neutral caretaker government. This has been ruled out by the government as being not permissible under the Constitution as it stands amended two years ago. Efforts by UN representatives and others to bring about an agreement by which free and fair elections, with participation by political parties, have not so far yielded results. A large number of people have been killed in recent weeks by the firebombing of vehicles during *hartals* and blockades called by the opposition, allegedly largely by Jamaat activists. The lives of ordinary people have been severely affected, in cities as well as in the countryside, and the economy is under increasing stress. As uncertainty hovers over Bangladesh, it is useful to engage in the debate about the future of India–Bangladesh relations. The following comments seem relevant, and need to be kept in mind as we look at the changing political scenario in India’s eastern neighbour.

It requires recalling that Bangladesh itself was born of the determination of its people to sustain democratic rights as expressed in the Pakistan elections of 1970, but denied them by Bhutto and his military regime. After a fifteen year hiatus under the military and qua-military regimes of generals Zia and Ershad, for the first time in South Asia, the people reclaimed their democratic rights through non-violent street action in 1990. Since then, a parliamentary form of democracy has prevailed. Its shortcomings have not been more singularly short than in other parts of South Asia. The fecklessness of the political classes led to quiet army intervention in 2007. But it delivered free and fair elections within two years. The Bangladesh army is qualitatively different from the Pakistan army, and has neither the need nor the desire to be involved in the governance of the country.

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The other dangers to democracy could lie in miscalculations by a ruling party, such as Indira Gandhi's Emergency, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's BAKSAL, Gyanendra of Nepal's palace coup, 2005. These serve as pointers to what is not sustainable. A Bangladesh ruled under Jamaat philosophy or diktats would not be a democratic country. But the possibility of this is remote. Judging by the past, even if there have been some aberrations, democracy is deeply rooted in the psyche of Bangladesh, and cannot be suppressed for any length of time.

At the same time, fundamentalist Islamist forces have always been a part of East Bengal/Pakistan/Bangladesh for at least two hundred years. If they have not succeeded in overwhelming society even under state patronage at times (including the BNP–Jamaat coalition from 2001–2006), it is not likely that they will do so in the future. It is important to remember that Islam in Bangladesh has a syncretic character due to its sufi antecedents, and the assertiveness of the committed cadres of Islamist parties does not represent Bangladesh.

This is not to dismiss the potential for mischief by those like the Jamaat who use religion as a tool towards achieving political objectives. At any given point of time, the cry of 'Islam in danger' could indeed invoke a response from large numbers of people, a glimpse of which was seen recently when the secular/liberal young protestors at Shahbag square were described and dismissed as virtual apostates. The spectre of an Islamised polity haunts saner elements in Bangladesh for whom it is an existential threat. But, even if fundamentalist forces have no natural constituency in Bangladesh, it is difficult to say what could happen under 'benign' state patronage, as happened in Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq.

As a smaller neighbour, even if only relatively so, Bangladesh has concerns about its much larger neighbour. Bangladesh is not resentful of India. It is, however, true that sections in Bangladesh, still imbued with the "spirit of 1947", continue to have ingrained suspicions of Hindu India. They remain impervious to the logic of the advantages that could accrue to Bangladesh through a co-operative relationship with India. The number of such people appears to be diminishing.

As to creating greater trust and understanding, it is incumbent on India to ensure that commitments made by us are scrupulously kept in a time bound manner. There have been delays in providing promised cyclone relief and supply of food grains. There are, of course, good reasons—as always—why this has happened. But our image as a partner who is not always reliable needs to change. The more recent blockages on Teesta and the Land Boundary

Agreement are the most glaring examples of Indian 'unreliability'.

India needs to appreciate that, in dealing with Bangladesh, it is addressing two constituencies: the government and the people. While negotiations and agreements are with the former, the people also have to be able to see the benefits of co-operation with India which would, in turn, facilitate the task of the government.

Projecting 'commonalities' is not necessarily a good idea. All our neighbours wish to assert their individualities, distinct from India. Until their respective nationalisms take firmer root, their concern about being submerged in the economy and culture of the 'mother' country will remain. What is important is not only to identify but demonstrate the mutuality of benefit in co-operation and integration. We need to always bear in mind that none of our neighbours wish to be drawn into our embrace.

Lately, the regional factor has been playing an increasingly obstructive role in the formulation and pursuit of foreign policy goals. On the one hand, the primary responsibility of any central government must be to sustain the interests of the people of the states of the Union of India. Foreign policy is one of the tools available. At the same time, a distinction has to be made between the interests and positions adopted by individual states simply for garnering local political benefit. If, as in the case of West Bengal, there is obstruction without reason or justification, then the central government must override such impediments as provided for in the Constitution. (This would also apply to the emotional approach of Tamil Nadu vis-à-vis Sri Lanka.) The situation has been complicated by the breakdown of consensus among major political parties with regard to foreign policy, and pervasive political cynicism without due regard for the nation's long term interests. The central government possibly carries a share of the responsibility for not communicating adequately with the state governments concerned. No doubt there are no easy solutions. But, the recent trend of state governments holding foreign policy to ransom, needs to be checked. Even if this is difficult in an era of coalition politics, the centre must assert itself in the discharge of its responsibilities.

An integrated roadmap for the development of the states bordering Bangladesh which would include taking into account possibilities of co-operation with the latter, is an idea long overdue. There would be complementarities which would be mutually beneficial. The recent effort to have trilateral co-operation between India, Bangladesh and Bhutan must be carried forward, drawing in Nepal when possible. One may consider interaction between the respective planning bodies to ensure focus on areas of common interest and development.

The roadmap laid down during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in September 2011, carries all the necessary ingredients for a relationship of partnership between India and Bangladesh. While there is understandable focus on areas where India has not delivered, we must not lose sight of the fact that a great deal of positive movement has taken place. Bangladesh has permitted limited, but critically important, movement of heavy equipment to Tripura to facilitate the setting up of a gas fired plant for generating electricity. A billion dollar loan from India, with terms softened, is under utilization by Bangladesh. Electricity from India is finally reaching energy deficient Bangladesh. Duty free access to a range of Bangladeshi products has reduced the adverse balance of trade, an issue of traditional concern in Dhaka. There has been visible cooperation in the railway sector. Besides occupying a large segment of the heavy vehicles market in Bangladesh, Indian companies are also doing well in medical institutions and IT.

Where there has been insufficient movement is with regard to Indian investments. This can happen significantly only if there is confidence in the stability of relationships and policies. It is unfortunate but true that there has been a see-saw in these relationships, and India has far too often been dragged into the internal politics of Bangladesh and has, at times, faced actions of governments which have been clearly inimical. Fortunately, the India factor in Bangladesh politics, even in these charged times, seems to be played in a low key. But the creation of investor friendly confidence is likely to be a slow process. Incremental steps and the creation of confidence, as envisaged by the UPA and Awami League governments, would need to be pursued and persevered with.

The illegal migration of Bangladeshi citizens to India goes back a long way. Before 1971, particularly in the early 1950s and 1960s, there were waves of Hindu migration who came as refugees. Their migration was not a one time affair, as in the case of West Pakistan after 1947, but was the result of the breakdown of the Nehru–Liaquat agreement of 1950 on the treatment of minorities. Post 1971, migration has included both Hindus and Muslims, the latter larger in number, but the Hindus larger in proportional terms, their share of the population having come down to below 9 per cent from about 13 per cent in 1971. Economic imperatives drive both migrations; but, for the latter, threats to life and property is also often a compelling factor, as was seen after the well documented anti-Hindu pogroms carried out after the 2001 elections.

The state of India cannot politically refuse admission to those believed to be fleeing for their lives. The question, therefore, revolves around the migration of Muslims for economic reasons. This has caused demonstrable demographic

changes in the border districts of Paschim Banga as also in Assam. In considering the issue, it needs to be recognized that some of the migration is seasonal in nature, and people do go back to Bangladesh during sowing and harvesting.

Seen from economic parameters, the migrants obviously fulfil a felt need of the Indian economy, be it in the orchards of Meghalaya, the paddy fields of Assam, the wheat fields of Punjab, or factories in the south. The problem arises when the migrants become permanent residents, with the status of citizens. The occasional publicized effort to deport alleged migrants has had no effect whatsoever. The barbed wire fencing is a disincentive. On its part, the governments at Dhaka have been in a state of denial. While it is true that elements in Bangladesh have looked on the north-east as their legitimate *lebensraum*, there is no reason to believe that the government actually encourages migration. The answer to the problem could lie in two directions. With increasing economic development in Bangladesh, the urge to migrate may diminish. What would be useful—and what has been suggested over many decades—is a system of work permits which legitimizes temporary migration, but does not confer citizenship. To achieve this, however, both governments have to agree on the basics.

Except for Costa Rica and a few other small countries or principalities, all countries have armed forces. It is an attribute of sovereignty. Further, while India may feel that it poses no security threat to Bangladesh, this would in no way diminish the felt national need for a strong army in Bangladesh. There is also Myanmar to consider, with whom Dhaka's relations have sometimes been less than cordial. There have been periods when the interaction between the armed forces of India and Bangladesh has been low key. However, in recent years, this appears to have picked up, and the trend should be encouraged.

To revert, in conclusion, to the theme of the debate—namely what lies in store for Indo-Bangladesh relations—the present assessment would be that they are currently on an even keel with positive movement in several areas. However, not all expectations have been fulfilled, for which the major responsibility, unfortunately, lies with India. The Awami League government has shown courage and farsightedness in fostering relations with India, and addressing our core concerns on security. Should it return to power, the trend would hopefully continue. Should the mantle of governance be assumed by the BNP, India would have to closely observe and monitor its actions, overt and covert and, unlike the inaction of the past, be prepared to react appropriately if our national interests are affected. Statements by the BNP

with regard to India have been qua-positive, and there have been assurances that our core concerns would be addressed. However, despite similar assurances in the past, its record vis-à-vis India has been dismal.

One must hope that, with the development of multiple areas of mutual advantage to the countries, the BNP, should it come to power, would adopt a more positive approach to India. As far as India is concerned, as stated in the concept paper, Bangladesh will always remain an area of the greatest interest, and it must explore all avenues to promote bilateral relations in all spheres, not least in people to people contacts.

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Political Sagacity of the Leadership to Determine the Future

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As the Awami League (AL) rule comes to an end, and elections are now due in Bangladesh, the question that has been predominant among the strategic community in India is: what lies in store for India–Bangladesh bilateral relations if there is a change of government in Dhaka? Is the current phase reversible? These questions are not new, and have been asked several times in the past whenever there is a discussion on the future of India–Bangladesh relations. These questions also arise from some degree of apprehension about whether the BNP regime will rewind India–Bangladesh relations thus affecting numerous long term Indian projects that are being implemented, or change the security situation in the volatile North Eastern region of India.

The prospect of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) returning to power is real. This has nothing to do with India's report card with regard to delivering on promises made to Dhaka. It can largely be attributed to the poor governance record of the (AL—a party) that won a massive mandate on the promise to change. This is also a part of Bangladesh's political dynamics where the two political parties and their alliance partners are, in fact, gaining power by rotation. Yet, each time when one party assumes power, it does not want to give it up, and puts in place mechanisms to perpetuate its rule with disastrous consequences for the country. In this context, the role of the international community to persuade the two principal political parties to come to a compromise, and have a consensus on how to hold election that will see democratic transitions reflects the political deadlock that has come to exist; and how the zero sum game has put democracy at stake. Both the holding of elections as scheduled through a framework that is acceptable to all the political parties, and the prospect of a change in government in Dhaka, would be important to India and its relations with Bangladesh.

India–Bangladesh relations cannot be divorced from the developing political situation in Bangladesh. The current political impasse has introduced a sense of uncertainty; and, in all likelihood, political violence would be used to pressurize the incumbent government. Similarly, the same method is likely to be used to suppress the opposition. Such a situation might give rise to extra

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constitutional intervention that will not bode well for the future of democracy in Bangladesh. Moreover, in last year's political violence, the minority communities were targeted by the Islamists which put pressure on India–Bangladesh relations. Some people belonging to the opposition camp feel that India should put pressure on the Awami League. This puts India in an unenviable situation. Its perceived closeness to the Awami League is seen as India's failure to make the AL leadership see the futility of their approach. At the same time, even a public expression of concern has the potential to backfire, and suck India into a political quagmire, though it remains apprehensive about the future outcome of this political deadlock. The same political forces which want India to use its good offices will immediately charge it with interference.

The Possibility of Bipartisan Relations

In the past five years, India has tried to do a tough balancing act. While continuing close cooperation with the AL government as a part of several agreements that the two governments have signed, it opened its door to the BNP to signal that it is not averse to working with it. The BNP has also reciprocated, and explored the opportunity to work with India. This was evident when Begum Khaleda Zia accepted the Government of India's invitation to visit India in October last year. The Ministry of External Affairs described her visit as "ongoing engagement with a democratic and multi-party polity in Bangladesh."

Earlier, in August, General Ershad also undertook a visit to India. India's engagement with multi-party polity, however, does not include the Jamaat-i-Islami - BNP's alliance partner. It is here that India has a bit of problem with the BNP. It is not comfortable with its alliance with the Jamaat. The Jamaat's anti-India stances are well known. However, some within the BNP feel that it is just an electoral alliance, and that the BNP does not share Jamaat's ideology. However, the growing fundamentalism, and the emergence of groups like the Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB), the Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh (JMJB), and country wide bomb blasts followed by suicide bombings still cast doubts on whether the BNP can have control over its electoral partner and its attempt to spread a particular ideology which is inconsistent with democracy and pluralism.

Begum Zia also faced opposition within the BNP when she decided to take a trip to India. Some leaders within the party felt that, by getting close to India, the party will be compromising on its ideological support base which is anti-India. However, the decision of BNP leader to accept the invitation reflects

new thinking within the party. Allying the fear of India, she emphasized that the both the BNP and New Delhi must not look at each other through 'rear view' mirror. In one of her articles published in *Strategic Analyses* (Begum Khaleda Zia, "Bangladesh–India Relations, Challenges and Prospects", *Strategic Analyses*, Volume 36, Issue 5, September, 2012, pp 720–722), she argued that, "There are forces in both of our societies who have played, and continue to play, on this fear psychosis to perpetuate mutual suspicion and thereby keep us apart; the need of the time is a changed mindset." However, those in India who witnessed the BNP's lack of empathetic attitude to India's security and its attempt at dismissing India's apprehensions as propaganda, continue to be sceptical about the BNP's assurance about the change in 'mindset' to take the relations further. The larger question is: can both India and the BNP start their relations on a clean slate? And, how do India's relations with the BNP affect its equations with the Awami League, given the zero sum approach the two have towards each other.

During my interaction with party functionaries belonging to different political parties in Dhaka, many from Awami League expressed the opinion that India should not have any truck with the BNP. Some felt that bipartisan approach towards both the political parties would not help. They emphasized that AL is the only party that will not harm India's security interests, and pointed out that it was the four-party alliance led by the BNP which sheltered the Indian insurgent groups in Bangladesh.

While many in the BNP said that they were not even aware of the Indian insurgents present in Bangladesh, they also said that this should not have happened. Many were also defensive, and pointed to various perceived unfriendly actions of India, and cited the killings by the BSF and some criminals who took refuge in West Bengal. However, the general feeling within the BNP was to move forward. Members of the Jamaat tried to argue that it was they who were instrumental in the Tata business deal which was opposed by the AL. The Jamaat leaders argued that there is reluctance on the part of India to engage with them, though they denied that they have no hand in any anti-India and fundamentalist activities, arguing that it was the BNP Ministers who were involved with the JMJB. The Jatiyo Party headed by Ershad does not have any fundamental problem with regard to its relations and approach to India.

India's Approach

India is supportive of multiparty party democracy in its neighbourhood. While many in India feel at ease, and are ideologically comfortable with the Awami

league, it is equally pertinent to take into account the political reality in Bangladesh. It is true that the AL has delivered on the security front, and there certain apprehensions do exist regarding the posture of the BNP in the future. However, India has to build bridges with the BNP. There are similar apprehensions in the BNP as it looks at India as biased in favour of the AL. Therefore, there is a need to build trust between the two. Democracy will bring a change in regimes, and India has long term interests in Bangladesh that must go beyond regime preference.

Both, the NDA government led by Prime Minister Vajpayee, and later the UPA II, have extended the hand of friendship towards the BNP. It would be in the interest of India to work with both political parties. This approach should not come from a mindset that ‘the situation cannot be helped’. Already India has signed a number of long term agreements with the government of Bangladesh. It is likely that these projects need to be pursued, irrespective of who is in power in Dhaka.

It needs to be mentioned that the BNP is closely watching India’s inability to deliver on the land boundary agreement and the Teesta deal. This would also make BNP apprehensive if it wants to conclude any agreements with India in the future. To Bangladesh it appears that, in spite of close cooperation on security matters with India, New Delhi could not deliver on its promises to Bangladesh. This inability would be part of the discourse and the narratives that add to the list of broken promises and a trust deficit between the two countries. It also becomes difficult to convince Bangladesh that, in spite of not signing the Teesta Agreement, the previous arrangement with regard to the sharing of the Teesta waters continues.

The local politics within the States of India has emerged as an important factor in its neighbourhood policy since coalition governments are now norms rather than the exception, and will continue to be so in the near future. To engage border States in promoting closer ties with Dhaka, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took with him an entourage of four Chief Ministers, with the Chief Minister of West Bengal refusing to accompany him. India cannot ignore the relevance of these States while formulating policies towards Dhaka in spite of the fact that foreign policy is exclusive domain of the Union government.

It is also interesting to see how India’s various border States look at Bangladesh. In spite of linguistic and cultural ties, West Bengal feels that any deal on water sharing will affect its interests, and that it needs to be consulted. It believes that the pursuit of bilateral relations cannot be at the cost of the state. Assam, which saw the anti-immigration agitation in the early 1980s, is

against any policy that will result in the exchange of enclave as a part of the Indira–Mujib treaty that is pending before the Parliament for ratification. Though, India exercises notional control over these enclaves which are deep inside Bangladesh, and vice versa, the matter has become a part of the local dynamics with the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and the Assam Ganasangram Parishad. Moreover, the state units of the BJP in these two states are opposed to the ratification of this long pending treaty—which involves the exchange of territory—as it would mar their prospects in the forthcoming general elections. To the disappointment of many, the prospects of the ratification of this treaty appear bleak.

Tripura, shares rather warm relations with Bangladesh. During the liberation war, it had hosted refugees from Bangladesh. It is the only state which has balance of trade in favour of Bangladesh. It has established border *haats* and demands the establishment of few more such *haats*. Many Bangladeshis come and work in the coal mine area due to the reluctance of the local labour force. Due to the lack of any formal arrangement regarding the import of labour from Bangladesh, most Bangladeshis work illegally, and are arrested. Illegal immigration from Bangladesh is a fact of life in most of these States. Often, it leads to pushing back these immigrants even as Bangladesh refuses to accept them as its own citizen. There is lack of documentation to identify these people, and due to corruption, many procure Indian identity cards. This is a matter of concern.

Exploring hydro-electricity in the North East is also a major problem. Bangladesh is opposed to the two dams in Meghalaya: the Mawphu dam across the river Umiew in the East Khasi Hills, and the Myntdu dam across the river Myntdu in the West Jaintia Hills districts in Meghalaya. Some in Meghalaya feel that Bangladesh's demand to 'deprive' power-starved Meghalaya by getting into long drawn out negotiations despite the fact that a feasibility study of the dam does not suggest that there will be any adverse impact on Bangladesh. The Meghalaya government is also exploring the possibility of reviving waterways for trade with Bangladesh. India is upgrading railway lines in its bid to develop transport linkage with Bangladesh by extending a US\$ 1b credit line. The government of Bangladesh has also honoured many people from this region for their contribution to the liberation war.

Instability in Bangladesh would affect these border States, and vice versa. Most of these land-locked states are looking forward to Bangladesh's cooperation for the transit of the goods produced in the North East. Most of these States are physically closer to Bangladesh, and so find it useful for greater trade and transit. It is apparent that India cannot ignore the interests

and concerns of these States, and has to keep them in mind while formulating a long term strategy towards Bangladesh. These areas are also home to some of the major insurgent groups, and cross border cooperation is a necessity for peace in this region.

The developments in past few years suggest that one cannot be pessimistic about the future of India–Bangladesh relations. The political atmosphere is changing. India’s contribution to the liberation war—which was not publicly acknowledged earlier—is now a publicly celebrated affair on victory day. The country is also going through a political metamorphosis, with the trial of those who were engaged in crime against humanity during the liberation war. Though the judicial process to try those accused in war crimes has been controversial, a significant section of the Bangladesh population supports the trial against the alleged war criminals. There are significant civil society movements against extremism and communalism. There is also growing pressure on the two main protagonists of Bangladesh politics for a peaceful democratic transition by finding out a mutually acceptable mechanism. It is in India’s interest to be supportive of these initiatives that aims at nurturing democracy. Internal political developments within Bangladesh need to be factored in shaping India’s approach towards Bangladesh.

It is apparent that both countries could have achieved more, given the potential of bilateral relations. Nevertheless, a new beginning has been made. Trade has seen an upward swing after India provided duty free access to the textile sector in Bangladesh, both bilaterally and under SAFTA. It has also tried to engage major political players in Bangladesh. In spite of disappointments regarding the relationship not galloping as expected, the need for keeping the tempo of the relationship alive is essential. It certainly cannot be reversed, as trade and investments have created multiple vested interests which have major stakes in better bilateral relations. India–Bangladesh relations are multi-layered, and percolate from the elite to the people; they are also multifaceted in that they include linguistic-cultural affinity along with economic and political ties.

Regime change is part of democracy, and India cannot, and should not, have party-centric relationships. It is true that India–Bangladesh relations saw a down turn during the BNP regimes; but it is important to be seen engaging with BNP as a political party to bridge the gap in perception. The more the Indian strategic community rues the possibility of Awami League being voted out of power, it makes it increasingly difficult for the BNP to even contemplate a new beginning. This will feed into the campaign by vested interests, which famously use ‘save sovereignty’ in their campaign against the Awami League.

As the last election in Bangladesh indicated, the approach towards India is not a determining factor affecting the electoral prospects of a party. It is the geographical reality and the cultural proximity, coupled with the political sagacity of the leadership in the two countries in an increasingly globalized world that would determine the future of India–Bangladesh relations. Connectivity, in its multiple meanings, is the political keyword.

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Political Linkages Essential for Pursuit of Long-term Gains

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India and Bangladesh are two friendly neighbours. Despite a common historical past, bilateral relations have not always been evenly poised over the past four decades. There have been several outstanding issues that have preoccupied the two states, and prevented them from realising fully the bilateral potential. As is well known, Indian concerns vis-à-vis Bangladesh have revolved around security issues, especially over the latter's covert support to Indian north eastern insurgents and militant groups. On the other hand, Bangladesh has longstanding grievances over the gaping trade deficit, unresolved water-sharing disputes, and border related issues.

All these concerns notwithstanding, Bangladesh and India have continued to maintain contact and engagement at various levels. Common ties between the two countries have included special social and cultural linkages leading to considerable people-to-people contact that is un-paralleled in the South Asian neighbourhood. Except for a short period of five years (2001–06), instances of open hostility have been few and far between in the span of forty years (1972–2013). While the immediate memories of this phase tend to colour the present perception of bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh, a longer term view clearly reveals the existence of sustained growth in the quantum of bilateral trade and commerce, including a clear upswing in socio-cultural engagements. Irrespective of periods of limited state-to-state relations during certain phases, interdependence at the borders and bilateral activities—especially in the informal sectors—have substantially increased. The lack of official and governmental ties has not been able to influence, or adversely affect, the multi-layered relationship that the people of India and Bangladesh have shared, and continue to enjoy.

Before examining what lies in store for India and Bangladesh, we need to make an assessment of present state of bilateral ties. Post the deep schism suffered during the last BNP coalition government in Dhaka, bilateral relations between the two countries witnessed an upswing (since 2007), and significantly improved once the Awami League based coalition government assumed office in 2009. The last five years have not only been friendly but also extremely fruitful, covering grounds hitherto unexplored. However, whether the

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neighbours have been able to leverage their unique positions, and maximise the opportunities that were created, remains unclear.

With the Awami League coalition assuming power in January 2009, New Delhi and Dhaka worked quickly to maximise on convergences and work out their differences. The visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 opened up a panorama of cooperation. The two states took a leap of faith with the joint communiqué that was signed during the visit. The promise of shared prosperity became the cornerstone of Indo–Bangladesh bilateral ties from then on. Bangladesh’s willingness to address India’s security concerns immediately signalled a friendly government in Dhaka. New Delhi also reciprocated by finding ways to address some of Bangladesh’s long standing demands: it showed readiness to re-examine trade barriers, willingness to consider Bangladesh’s fears on Tipaimukh dam and border conflicts, and also agreed to Bangladesh’s demand for transit to Nepal and Bhutan. All these were reflective of an attitudinal shift.

Quite clearly, there has been a break from the past in the way India and Bangladesh now view each other. With Indian security concerns being addressed in full measure, India has been willing to meet squarely all other outstanding issues, including trade, water sharing, and border issues that Bangladesh has constantly raised. The two sides have decided to chart out a new path. The agreements of the joint communiqué of January 2010 reflect new areas of bilateral cooperation, and the Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development signed by the two Prime Ministers on September 6, 2011, have laid the foundation of the new trajectory India and Bangladesh would embark upon.

Addressing the security issues was a priority for India. Thus, apart from the several security agreements signed, both sides also operationalized the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, signed in September 2012, to facilitate the handing over of wanted persons in each other’s territories. Moreover, in the context of the Agreement on Combating Organised Crime and Illegal Drug Trafficking, Bangladesh ratified the extradition treaty on 6 October 2013 (signed on 28 January 2013). The regular meeting of the Home Secretaries of India and Bangladesh has ensured continued cooperation on security. In the spirit of mutual cooperation, India has dismantled several of the 79 illegal Phensedyl manufacturing factories across the border.

Security concerns having been fairly dealt with, the two states are now simultaneously focusing on trade and investment. Unlike in the past, the joint communiqué reflected cooperation in areas that either side had for long refused to concede: transit and trade. The breakthrough here was also exceptional.

Within days of assuming power in 2009, the Bangladesh government approved the renewal of the bilateral trade agreement between Bangladesh and India. The billion dollar line of credit that Bangladesh received from India was unprecedented. Except for 25 sensitive tariff lines, India has also opened its market to all Bangladeshi products. Bangladeshi goods now enjoy zero duty access to the Indian market. This significant initiative has the potential of changing the economic scope of Bangladesh.

The Bilateral Trade Agreement and Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (signed on 9 February 2009) set a template for a substantial leap in the quantum of bilateral trade that has increased from US\$ 1 billion in the FY 2001 to around US\$ 4.4 billion in the FY 2012. The target of increasing Bangladesh's exports to India to US\$ 1 billion in the next 2–3 years, alongside increasing Indian investments in Bangladesh, has never seemed more feasible. The agreements to upgrade border land custom stations, introduce more trading points, and open up border *haats* are some other areas of joint cooperation agreed upon.

Energy trade has been the most tangible cooperation between the two states. India and Bangladesh have begun this with the inauguration of two collaborative power projects. The transmission line for exporting 500 MW from West Bengal, and a 1,320-MW thermal power project in Bangladesh were inaugurated on 5 October 2013. Power trade between Indian NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam Limited and Bangladesh Power Development Board has been kick started with the supply of 175 MW to Bangladesh's National Grid. Bangladesh will import 250 MW from the Indian government's "unallocated quota", and another 250 MW will be supplied through this grid which has the capacity of 1000 MW. The two sides have plans to further the energy trade. The Indian National Thermal Power Corporation plans to set up two imported coal-based power projects totalling 3,960 MW in the country—at Khulna and Chittagong. India has also proposed to set up of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal as a joint venture in Bangladesh to create a power generation capacity of around 1,000 MW. Given Bangladesh's demand and supply gap, Indian presence in this sector will be extremely critical to the consolidation of bilateral relations.

Besides projects being introduced at the bilateral level, several infrastructural related plans have also been initiated within India to supplement them. These include the 10 km Akhaura–Agartala rail link (between the Indian state of Tripura and Gangasagar in Bangladesh), the construction of bridges on the river Feni in Ramgarh (in Khagrachhari district) and Sabroom (in South Tripura district), and another at a cost of Rs. 12 crore aiming to connect South Tripura with the Chittagong Port.

It is quite evident that India and Bangladesh have covered unprecedented grounds in recent months. The number of bilateral agreements signed, and the flurry of high level visits have been extraordinary. However, while Bangladesh is poised to go into the tenth *Jatiya Sangsad* elections, there are two issues that remain unresolved: the lack of agreement on the land boundary demarcation, and the sharing of Teesta waters. These have often been cited as the Awami League's inability to deliver on its promises. Certainly, the agreement on the swap of 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves—measuring a total 24,268 acres and inhabited by approximately 51,000 people—would have strengthened the two neighbours. But, unfortunately, India has not been able to ratify the bill pertaining to this swap yet. It has met with opposition on the grounds of the national loss of 10,000 acres of land, and threats of secessionist tendencies. Similarly, the lack of consensus between West Bengal and the national UPA led government over the Teesta water sharing formula is also being flagged as a bilateral failure.

Indeed, experts have argued that the Teesta—originating in Sikkim and passing through West Bengal before it crosses into Bangladesh and merges with the Brahmaputra—has only 60 BCM. Given the need to protect its environmental flow—measured at 20 per cent, or 12 BCM, which must be guaranteed—the margin for negotiation is only about 10 BCM. This is less than one per cent of the total trans-boundary water resources between the two countries. The current rhetoric makes it appear as if there is a huge dispute. Also, despite the lack of any agreement, the flows of the Teesta have not been restricted. The quantum of flow data will have to give way to another round of negotiations. As has been evident in the changing political environment, regional stakes are increasingly becoming a factor of consideration. New Delhi also needs to involve those regional states that have a direct bearing on some of its foreign policy formulations and decision making processes.

Clearly, several of the projects that were decided are yet to be completed, or even implemented. However, this should not take away from the merit of those that have been successful: the energy trade being a case in point. India's willingness to examine trade and transit issues through a regional prism as opposed to its previous bilateral perspective has been a very welcome change. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan are also discussing sub-regional cooperation for generating electricity from trans-boundary river waters. For over two years, Bangladesh has been using Banglabandh in Bangladesh, and Phulbari border points in India, to trade with Nepal and Bhutan.

Undoubtedly, the lack of implementation of some of the mutual projects has not sent right signals to Bangladesh. Unlike in India, this has been a source of much debate in the Bangladesh media, and elsewhere. Likewise, the lack of any consensus over the transit issue, due to the lack of agreement on water sharing, has been a concern to India; but that India has not drummed up these, exemplify bilateral failure. The Bangladesh government's flagging of bilateral issues as a cause of its unpopular rankings can be read as a desperate attempt to cover up its own inadequacies and shortfalls during its present term.

On the other hand, the issues of illegal migration into India, and the state of the minorities in Bangladesh have been a bone of bilateral contention for a long time. Illegal migration from Bangladesh has been a continuous issue of grave concern for Indian policy-makers. This migration has been taking place due to push factors within Bangladesh, along with the pull of economic opportunities that India offers. The issue of illegal migration is highly emotional and sensitive in Bangladesh, and elected governments have periodically denied the existence of the phenomenon. Although this has often been flagged in meetings between border officials, Bangladesh finds it difficult to accept that its citizens are illegally crossing over into India in search of livelihood. The academic community in both countries have viewed the problem through common sociological and historical factors; but Bangladeshi politicians have been very guarded, and been unwilling to examine the issue through a rational prism. Rather ironically, while Bangladesh is raising the issue of legalising its undocumented population in different parts of the world (in Malaysia and Brunei), this subject remains taboo so far as India is concerned.

To argue that India's inability to deliver will be a cause for the Awami League government's inability to muster enough support in the forthcoming national elections is to be ignorant of the ground realities in present day Bangladesh. This line of argument also discounts the maturity of the voters in the region, and more specifically in Bangladesh. The discerning voters that ushered in the Awami League coalition with a two thirds majority were focused on the issues of democracy, governance, political violence, corruption, and problems that affect them on a daily basis. Irrespective of the significance of bilateral issues, the predominance of domestic issues to a Bangladeshi voter can never be underestimated. To recall briefly, the BNP coalition government, especially towards the end of its term, was increasingly associated with high levels of corruption, Islamic extremism, and the lack of accountability and transparency. Thus, in Bangladesh, India—or any other foreign policy issue, however critical it may appear to be—has long ceased to be an electoral campaign issue of any real consequence.

As has been argued earlier, while political linkages may witness a downslide or an upswing depending upon the government in Dhaka, issues of trade and commerce continue to enjoy a momentum irrespective of political relations. While BNP leader Khaleda Zia's visit to India last year was hailed as successful, India has not as yet been able to overcome its baggage of being tagged as a close Awami ally. As yet, the political contacts between the two states remain limited to certain sections. Indian political leaders, representing varied ideologies, need to reach out to a broader political spectrum. The continued perception of India's proximity with certain sections of Bangladeshi political leaders has far reaching ramifications. At the same time, to expect that the BNP will move away from its traditional hostility towards India and start afresh and begin to closely work together with India is a simplistic argument that does not correctly reflect the complex nature of Bangladeshi domestic political compulsions. India surely needs to reach out far more, and project ways that it plans for its bilateral course.

The bilateral road map that has been laid out in 2010 can only be sustained through further planning and collaboration. Irrespective of the nature of governments in Dhaka or New Delhi, tangible improvement and developments in peoples' lives will override all other consideration. Going by the recent past, a non-Awami government will perhaps not be cognisant of Indian security concerns as was Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. But, areas of bilateral convergence for future cooperation may not vary too much. Having seen the benefits of closely engaging with India, it is highly unlikely that Bangladesh will want to roll back all bilateral achievements of the recent past. The criticality of continuing with long term projects that have been introduced cannot be over emphasised. Thus, there is no doubt that political linkages are essential for the pursuit of long term gains, and both sides need to work out a sustainable strategy towards the same.

Strong Foundation for Future Relations

Anand Kumar*

A new phase in India-Bangladesh relations began in January 2009 with the coming to power of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government. This government not only arrested the decline in bilateral relations that had taken place during the previous four-party alliance government but also took certain steps which indicated that it wanted to revamp its relationship with its largest neighbour, India. India warmly responded to this friendly gesture, though one can argue that the progress never reached the desired level. However, one thing became clear: both sides seriously desire to improve the bilateral relationship by sorting out outstanding issues, and taking steps that can strengthen the relationship. Now, with the approach of elections in Bangladesh, and given the history of Bangladesh *not* returning the same government to power, apprehensions are being expressed that the change of dispensation in Bangladesh might turn the clock back.

Sheikh Hasina's visit of January 2010 created a framework for cooperation. During this visit, both sides signed a 51 point Joint Communiqué which covered a range of issues. This Joint Communiqué is a document with far-reaching consequences for the bilateral relationship since it attempts to deal with the critical concerns of both countries. As far as India is concerned, the document talks about its security interests, the transit of goods through Bangladesh to the Northeast, and access to the Bangladeshi ports Chittagong and Mongla by India's Northeastern states. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it also mentions issues of its particular interest, like the sharing of river waters, un-demarcated land and maritime boundaries, and cross border firing between the border guards of the two countries, as well as economic issues like the large trade gap, and non-tariff barriers.

To consolidate the security cooperation between the two countries, the Sheikh Hasina government decided to sign three other agreements. These were the Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, the Agreement on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and the Agreement on Combating International Terrorism, Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. Subsequently, both countries have also signed the extradition treaty, and India has agreed to give Bangladesh a credit line of one billion dollars.

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Unfortunately, the follow-up action to implement this framework for cooperation has been tardy. Both sides are to be blamed for this. Though there was political will at the level of political leadership, this was not immediately reflected in the bureaucracy. After going through a hostile political environment during the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) led four-party regime, the bureaucracy of both countries are still trying to come to terms with the changed reality. The distrust prevailing from the earlier regime showed in the formulation of projects. Though India promised Bangladesh a one billion dollar credit line, a lot of time was lost in finalising projects so that they could be mutually acceptable. Even when projects were finalised, there was a delay in release of funds. Subsequently, to overcome this problem, India decided to create Development Partnership Administration (DPA). This might help the execution of bilateral projects in the future. However, as far as Bangladesh is concerned, the lack of coordination has resulted in slow progress in the execution of projects.

It was hoped that the lost momentum in India–Bangladesh relations would return with the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. This visit took place in November 2011; however, the outcome can be described as mixed bag at best. During the visit, the Indian Prime Minister made major economic concessions. India has removed 46 items of vital importance for Bangladesh’s vibrant garments industry from its negative list under SAFTA. It has removed all restrictions from almost all items that Bangladesh would like to export to India. In effect, this means a one-sided FTA in favour of Bangladesh. This was a long-pending demand by Bangladesh. It has helped Bangladesh to increase its exports to India. However, there has been no dramatic change in the balance of trade because Bangladeshi readymade garment (RMG) exporters do not opt for India in a big way as long as they have lucrative western market open to them. And that makes economic sense too.

India also signed a protocol on the Land Boundary Agreement. The protocol was to sort out disputes over the land border, and the exchange of enclaves as part of a package deal. But the most important Teesta water sharing agreement could not be signed due to the last minute refusal of the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, to accompany Prime Minister. This was done ostensibly to protect the interests of her state; but it seems her falling out with the central government over other issues was also responsible for the scuttling of the agreement. The protocol to the Land Boundary agreement was signed, but it has not been ratified by the Indian parliament so far. The opposition parties do not support this agreement, and the central government requires two thirds majority to pass it. Given the political reality, the central government should have been more careful, and should have taken the consent of the opposition parties before going ahead with the agreement. Though one may argue that foreign policy making

is the domain of the central government, it should have adopted a more consensual approach, given its strength in parliament.

Thus, India and Bangladesh have not been able to make progress on two big ticket issues: the Teesta water sharing agreement and the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). However, progress has been made on other issues which are worth noting. Cross border trade has received a boost with the opening of new land ports, and the building of a new immigration building as well as a truck terminal at India's Petrapole port bordering West Bengal. Besides this, India and Bangladesh have gone for border *haats* to help poor people, who otherwise face great difficulty in procuring items of daily use. They often resort to illegal means in the absence of such facilities, leading to avoidable border incidents. These border *haats* appear to be getting popular as there is demand for opening more of them.

India has tried to address a very important grievance of Bangladesh over border issues. India shares its longest border with Bangladesh. This border is very active and porous since, along with common people, many anti-social elements also try to cross over, often resulting in the loss of human life. To check this problem, India has asked its border guarding force, the BSF, to avoid using lethal weapons as far as possible. As a result, border incidents have come down drastically; but India is not satisfied, and efforts are on to bring them down to zero level. A coordinated border management plan is now in operation which will help to reduce incidents on the border, including illegal and criminal activities.

India has facilitated 24-hour unfettered access to Bangladesh nationals at Dahagram and Angorpota through the Tin Bigha corridor. For the first time since 1947, the two countries, signed the boundary strip maps to settle disputes along the border. Though the Land Boundary Agreement and the protocol signed during the Manmohan Singh visit to Dhaka has not yet been ratified by the Indian parliament (due to the lack of proper homework being done by the government before signing the agreement), the issue has already come on the front-burner. The same can also be said about the Teesta water-sharing agreement.

India has converted \$200m of \$1billion credit line as grant. The Bangladesh government plans to use it for the construction of the Padma bridge. Both countries have now decided how to use the remaining amount in a productive way.

India has now started to export electricity to Bangladesh. This export of power is taking place from the West Bengal side; but, in future, it will also take place from the Tripura side. Some people in Bangladesh have been critical of the Awami League government's decision to let pass the oversized Paltana power project equipment through Bangladesh territory; but it is this very project which will be supplying electricity to Bangladesh. Clearly, it is important

to see the win-win aspects of the bilateral relationship.

The failure of the central government to sign the Teesta agreement and get LBA approved has given some ammunition to the opposition BNP and the Jamaat to target the Sheikh Hasina government. Though it may not have hurt her political fortunes in a significant way, it definitely did embarrass her before the elections. However, this does not mean that the India-Bangladesh relationship can not make progress from here. The issues involved between the two countries are solvable, and whenever the attempt is made to sort them out, progress can be made. It is possible that the issues may require time before solutions acceptable to both sides are found.

The reasons for the delay in solving outstanding issues could also be because the BNP and Jamaat have a hostile attitude towards India. They see a sell off for Bangladesh even in those agreements where their country stands to benefit. The inability of the Indian government to pull through important agreements in parliament only provides strength to such elements in Bangladesh who cite such failures as justification for their arguments.

At this stage, however, what is most important for the bilateral relationship is the upcoming elections in both countries. In Bangladesh, the parliamentary elections are scheduled for January. Because of this, no major progress is expected in the next few months. However, the worst fear is that, if a change in dispensation takes place, then the new government may not adopt the same approach towards outstanding issues. It is also possible that it might actually do things which would worsen the bilateral relationship.

In the past, Khaleda Zia has been calling Northeast insurgents 'freedom fighters'. It is possible that she might try to revive insurgency in the Northeast under the influence of the ISI. Bangladesh might once again become a safe haven for Northeast insurgent leaders. The insurgent camps which were uprooted earlier could start functioning once again.

The Islamists, who have ideological convergence with Jamaat, might also become active. The Sheikh Hasina government checked their activity by taking action against them. She gave clear instructions to law enforcement agencies that permitted them to go after such elements. As a result, several modules of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (also known as Jama'at-ud-Da'awa), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) were busted. Modules of local terror organizations, like Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), were also busted. The action against Islamists not only improved the law and order situation in Bangladesh but it also stopped Bangladesh from being used as a transit route. Earlier, terrorists of LeT and JeM variety were using

Bangladesh as a springboard for terrorist action against India.

It is possible that, under the influence of Jamaat, the BNP government might once again adopt an ambiguous posture towards these elements, and not give clear instructions to law enforcement agencies to take action against them. This environment of confusion would allow insurgents and terrorists to once again operate with impunity. This would definitely be a setback for the bilateral relations.

In 2014, American forces are also withdrawing from Afghanistan. This could further worsen the insurgency and terrorism situation in South Asia. Moreover, if a change of dispensation takes place in Bangladesh, and brings to power those forces which are soft towards these elements, then Bangladesh might once again become the hotbed of terrorism. This will have a major influence on the bilateral relationship.

However, even if they come to power, it may be little difficult for the BNP and Jamaat to support insurgents and terrorists with equal impunity as they did last time, because in today's world, opinion has been created against such forces, and the tolerance level of international community against such forces has gone down. Still, it may not be wise to underestimate the nuisance creating ability of the BNP and Jamaat.

Clearly, a change of dispensation in Bangladesh may not prove positive for India–Bangladesh relations. It is also possible that, under a new government, bilateral relation might actually suffer. But it is also true that, in the last five years, Sheikh Hasina's government has seriously tried to improve relations with India, with a whole gamut of issues being identified. An unfavourable political dispensation would only stall progress for some time, and perhaps take a few steps backwards. But India–Bangladesh relations will make positive moves in the years to come, whenever they find themselves in a friendly ambience.

India and Bangladesh may not have been able to sort out all issues during the tenure of Shaikh Hasina's government; but it would be unfair to judge progress made in the bilateral relationship on the basis of just one or two issues. Actually, a strong foundation for the bilateral relationship has been laid during the present Awami League government, and if the new governments in both countries stay on this course after the elections, India–Bangladesh relations are really headed for a bright future, and could become a model in the Sub-continent.
