

US-Bangladesh relations

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Introduction

The participation of Bangladeshi troops in the 1991 Gulf War was the turning point in the US-Bangladesh relations. The US State Department's attitude towards Bangladesh independence movement and continued support to the Pakistani regime in 1971 had left a negative image about the US in independent Bangladesh. Although the US recognized Bangladesh in April 1972, relations between the two countries remained cool.

The Awami League, a party that used to follow Center-rightist policies prior to independence, went through a transformation during the period of Liberation War and its immediate aftermath. The party started moving towards the Left, it started adopting socialist economic policies. This had an impact on the foreign policy of the country. However, this did not last long. With the change of government in August 1975, there was a marked change in Bangladesh's foreign policy. The US-Bangladesh relations that were cool started improving. Since the Gulf War, the relationship between the two countries has taken a new dimension.

The US-Bangladesh relationship can be divided into four phases. First phase, from independence to the end of 1975, second phase from 1976 to 1991, third phase from 1991 to September 2001 and fourth phase has started from 9/11.

Immediate Post-Independence

The period immediately after the independence was a period of

consolidation. Bangladesh needed recognition from different world bodies as much as she needed huge economic aid to rebuild her war-ravaged economy. As such, Bangladesh charted her course very carefully. Although the US provided with humanitarian assistance, the state level relationship remained cool. Immediately after the US recognition in April 1972, a bilateral agreement was signed under which the US Government made available US \$90 million. Bangladesh's dire need for food was also met through US Food Aid Programme PL-480. By March 1973, the US had become the largest donor to Bangladesh.

But Bangladesh's close relationship with India, the erstwhile Soviet Union and other east European countries coupled with frequent anti-American demonstrations, including the burning of the US Information Service Library at Rajshahi in 1972 had made the US somewhat skeptical about Bangladesh. After the fall of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, Khondoker Mostaque made subtle changes in the foreign policy of the country. Full diplomatic relations with Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia were established.

1990 Period

After Khondoker Mostaque, President Ziaur Rahman made some fundamental changes in the foreign policy by strengthening relations with the western countries, mainly the US and the EU countries. Bangladesh's position on some international issues, including the China-Vietnam border war and Cambodia and Afghanistan, came to resemble those of the United States. In 1978, Bangladesh signed an agreement



with the US, which allowed American voluntary organizations to work in Bangladesh. In 1979 Bangladesh signed the NPT. These actions by Bangladesh increased the cordiality between the two countries.

During the 1980s, a new level of cooperation between the two

countries began. President Ziaur Rahman visited the USA in 1980 and this was followed by another visit by President Ershad. During the mid-1980s a number of high ranking US officials visited Bangladesh. By late 1980s the United States had become one of the closest friends of



Bangladesh, a major donor and a partner in over 130 different accords. Different US agencies operated a wide variety of development projects in Bangladesh. A bilateral investment treaty, signed in 1989, created a momentum for trade between the two countries.

1991-9/11 Period

This was the period of consolidation of the relationship. The 1991 elections marked a fresh beginning in the relationship between the two countries. Bangladesh's participation in "Operation Desert Storm" followed by the US Marines

relief effort in "Operations Sea Angels" further cemented the relations. This also helped the Armed Forces of the two countries come closer to each other. There has also been expansion in the economic cooperation. The US has become one of the most vital trading partners of Bangladesh and currently it constitutes Bangladesh's biggest export market.

Bangladesh's performance in women empowerment, health sector, poverty alleviation coupled with press freedom and liberal democratic environment has created a positive impression in the minds of the US policy planners. Bangladesh has been taken as an example of a liberal Muslim country. This culminated in the visit by President Clinton in 2000.

Post 9/11

The incidents of 9/11 have changed the security perceptions of the entire western world. This incident has completely reoriented the US foreign policy doctrines. To the US, 'radical Islam' is the cause of all troubles for them. To the US, all Muslim countries are potential enemies, unless they prove otherwise. Bangladesh, being a Muslim country, is no exception. The USA re-evaluated her relations with the Muslim countries after 9/11. Bangladesh's attitude towards the global terrorism and her unequivocal support for the UN peacekeeping operations have helped in maintaining the cordiality in the US-Bangladesh relations.

The Future

South Asia is a region that has rapidly grown in importance for the US. The principal force behind the growing interest is the convergence

of strategic and economic interests that have been accelerating since the end of the Cold War. Much of the US attention is devoted to India and Pakistan. As regards Bangladesh, the main thrusts of the US policy according to the former US Under Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin L. Raphael, are: (1) promoting democracy and respect for human rights; and (2) encouraging continued economic growth and development.

The strength and durability of the US-Bangladesh relationship has proven to be responsive to Bangladesh's economic needs and security concerns; the US was forthcoming with aid and support when it mattered. Similarly, Bangladesh, for most of the time, fitted well with the US foreign policy objectives. Bangladesh will continue to seek US friendship and assistance in her economic development that is a prime consideration in fashioning Bangladesh's foreign policy. As regards strategic security concerns, Bangladesh does not figure much in the US policy framework, except that Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim country and she is a partner in the US global anti-terrorism campaign. With the growing improvement in the Indo-US relationship, there is a possibility that the US may not continue with the same level of commitment towards Bangladesh. Bangladesh should endeavor to enlarge the areas of cooperation between the two countries. Its policy makers have to chart a very delicate course so as to make the US retain its interest in Bangladesh.

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Mumbai blasts and the Hindutva lobby

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EVEN though scores of Indian Muslim organizations have forcefully denounced the recent Mumbai train blasts and called for an impartial investigation into the carnage, the Hindutva lobby, ever on the prowl for an excuse to hound Muslims, has launched a massive anti-Muslim tirade. News reports speak of how the Hindutva fascist lobby is capitalizing on the bomb blasts and threatening to possibly launch an anti-Muslim pogrom in Maharashtra, similar to the state-sponsored massacre in Gujarat in 2002, in which some three thousand Muslims are said to have been brutally killed, with thousands more injured and left homeless. Some Muslim leaders claim it itself suggests that, in the absence of firm evidence of precisely who was behind the blasts, they might possibly have been the handiwork of a Hindutva group, just as they might well have been carried out by some radical Islamist outfit. They point to the quick capitalizing of the blasts by the Hindutva lobby to whip up anti-Muslim sentiments and present themselves as self-appointed 'saviours' of the Hindus as possible evidence of this claim. At the same time, they also argue that those behind the blasts, irrespective of religious or community affiliation, deserve to be strictly punished, insisting that such heinous acts have no sanction in Islam or any other religion whatsoever.

For its part, the Hindutva lobby, along with influential sections of the media and intelligence agencies that often echo the Hindutva line, have automatically assumed that a Muslim outfit was behind the blasts, without there being firm proof of this as yet. As Muslim organizations have been insisting, the precise identity of the culprits should be established by an impartial agency before apportioning blame. Further, they rightly insist, an entire community should not be blamed or branded for the acts committed by a few people who claim to belong to it. Some of them also argue that they have no faith in a government-appointed commission, as, going from past precedent, such a commission might well turn out to be a stunt designed to conceal facts, protect the real culprits (Hindutva outfits or top politicians, if these are involved) and persecute innocent Muslims.

The possibility of a Hindutva hand in the affair, which some have suggested, has thus been totally ignored by the media. Meanwhile, scores of Muslims are being arrested and harassed by the police in different parts of the country. Without adding any firm evidence, several Muslim

organizations are being branded as agents of 'terror' and are being accused of involvement in the blasts. This stance can only further contribute to Muslim alienation and disillusionment with the system, widen the communal divide, and thereby strengthen Hindutva forces, who have a vested interest in promoting Hindu-Muslim conflict.

The Hindutva media has, predictably enough, portrayed the Mumbai blasts in such a way as to cast aspersions on almost every Muslim, thus further fanning the flames of Islamophobia. It has also

victims of a system that has pushed them to the margins, being ignored and neglected by the state and routinely demonized by Hindutva forces. The 'Organiser' quotes Ashok Singhal as arguing that, "without local Muslims' shelter and support, no outside jihadi can attack". Hence, he goes on, the government "should immediately clamp down on madrasas". A certain S.R. Ramanujan makes the same point in the same issue of the 'Organiser' in an article. Like Singhal, Ramanujan, appears to suggest, without any proof at all,

hopelessness and disgruntlement, which might possibly attract some desperate Muslim youth to the path of militancy to seek revenge and as a means of protest, is also completely glossed over. The point that Hindutva and Muslim militancy feed on each other, that the one cannot exist without the other, is simply too inconvenient for the likes of Singhal and Ramanujan to admit, for their very political careers, as in the case of the radical Islamists whom they claim to oppose, depends on stoking the flames of communal hatred and



used the attacks to call for the imposition of draconian laws, which, in the past, have been widely misused to persecute innocent Muslims, as well as other marginalized groups such as 'Dalits' and 'Adivasis'. Thus, the 30 July issue of the 'Organiser', the weekly mouthpiece of the RSS, quotes VHP President Ashok Singhal as demanding the introduction of anti-terror laws, which, he says, "should be stricter than POTA". Singhal describes the blasts as a "jihadi attack", without, of course, caring to mention the declaration by all major Muslim organizations and leaders that such attacks, even if perpetrated by Muslims, have no sanction whatsoever in Islam and are certainly not a form of jihad legitimized in Islam.

The Hindutva lobby is using the blasts as an excuse to clamp down on various Muslim organizations, even small madrasas that essentially serve poor Muslims,

that the 3000-odd madrasas in Maharashtra are "potential breeding grounds for SIMI's activities". The striking fact that, despite the immense sufferings, including brutal massacres, widespread discrimination and enforced 'ghettoisation', that Muslims in different parts of the country have suffered at the hands of Hindutva forces for decades, madrasas in the country are not engaged in promoting terrorism, a point made by Home Minister Shivraj Patil at an Ahl-e-Hadith madrasa conference in New Delhi last week, is completely ignored in Ramanujan's blanket denunciation of the madrasas. So, too, are the strident condemnations of the Mumbai blasts by numerous leading 'maulvis' from various madrasas all over the country.

The fact that Hindutva-inspired atrocities on Muslims, of which the recent Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom is only one instance, has caused widespread Muslim despair,

violence.

Hounding Muslims in the name of tracking down the perpetrators of the blasts, branding their institutions as 'dens of terror' without adducing any evidence and threatening a repeat of the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, Hindutva fascists are as guilty of setting India against itself as are their radical Islamist counterparts. Hindutva ideologues speak the same language of conflict and hatred in the name of religion as radical Islamists, being perfect bedfellows while claiming to be the most inveterate opponents. At the time when such forces are issuing what can be construed as nothing less than a summons for civil war, secular, democratic forces must take on the enormous threat of radicalism in the garb of religion with urgency. We can no longer afford to be complacent.

Courtesy CSSS, Mumbai, India.

ASEAN: Clash of interests building up in its premises

SAZZAD REZA BASUNIA

THE Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok by the five founder-member countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Afterwards, ASEAN assumed its present shape by the joining of Brunei, Daru-ssalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. With its ten members, ASEAN has over 500 million people, a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers, a combined gross domestic product of around US\$737 billion which is the third largest in Asia, after China and Japan, and a total trade of around US\$ 720 billion.

Its gamut of cultures, religions and political systems is very interesting, comprising the world's most populous Muslim nation, a most prestigious Buddhist kingdom, a Catholic democracy, an absolute monarchy, two communist-run states and a country led by a government by the army. As a result, it is not entirely free from significant rivalries and outstanding disputes between the members themselves in terms of strategic or security issues. Along with jostling for influence within the grouping, specific disputes regarding territories in the South China Sea still linger between Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei as well as with China and Taiwan.

In addition, the individual security arrangements of ASEAN states themselves rely on the presence of a US-backed security order rather than any common ASEAN security community. Evidently, Singapore and the Philippines are inclined towards a strong US presence and maintaining close military relations with the US. Interestingly, Malaysia's military cooperation with the US proves that its criticism of the US policy is mere eyewash.

This context has made it easy for the US to enter into the region. The US has four basic interests. One is the emergence of Asia-Pacific area as the epicenter of future global economic growth. Two - countervailing Chinese and North Korean power. To do so, the US is already on its way. They are continuing their efforts to strengthen and reshape its bilateral defense relationship with key Asian partners, creating a defensive fence around China. The US has already embarked on an extensive program to accomplish this. For example, the new treaty arrangements and defense cooperation with Japan, the unprecedented bonding with India, the re-establishment of greater military co-operation with Indonesia and the Philippines and the new arrangement for a naval base in Singapore. Number three is maintaining open access to

markets, and four, strengthening influence on open sea communication. But while the US is busy with "War on Terror," China gets the opportunity to make the ASEAN wind to blow in its favour.

However, on August 25, '06 the US and the member countries of ASEAN signed a trade and investment framework agreement (TIFA) in Kuala Lumpur, which is expected to facilitate market access and promote trade in key areas such as agriculture and pharmaceuticals. In a statement, U.S. and ASEAN officials said they would establish a joint council on trade and investment. Washington, it was agreed upon, will support the "ASEAN single window" to create a common customs system to reduce bureaucratic hurdles to the entry of goods. No doubt, Myanmar is a key player in this because President George W. Bush has renewed US sanctions against Myanmar after it refused to make the democratic changes, as recommended by the US. Myanmar also refused to free its political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The Malaysian trade minister, Rafidah Aziz, warned that the agreement must not be used as a tool to pressurize the military-ruled Myanmar toward democracy. But, some members of the bloc are increasingly getting impatient over Myanmar's slow pace of change although the ASEAN countries have a policy of not meddling in each other's affairs. Myanmar has been receptive to various ASEAN overtures and has joined the ARF. Though this affiliation may begin to draw Myanmar away from its dependence on China, but it will make Myanmar vulnerable to US invasion, flavoured with abusive and brutal violations of human rights.

ASEAN states are very apprehensive regarding the rise of China and its emerging influences over the region. It should be remembered that in early 1995, the Chinese built constructions on Mischief Reef within Philippines territory. Manila immediately delivered a protest to China, and sent appeals to the international community, calling for support. This was the first time China confronted a member of ASEAN, and the incident sparked strong reactions among the other member countries. No doubt they wondered about the ambitions behind China's increased military power. And, in 2001, China reiterated the claim that the whole of the South China Sea was China's "historic waters" despite outstanding disputes over various islands and territories. But being an ASEAN member, Malaysia regarded the 'Mischief Reef incident' as a Filipino, not an ASEAN problem. In 1993 Malaysia had already adopted a policy with the Chinese to push an "Asian



values" system, prominently advocated by Mahathir, Lee and a number of intellectuals who were allied with the ruling regimes of Malaysia and Singapore.

Realizing Chinese regional ambitions, ASEAN states looked towards the US to counterbalance the influence. But with US's blessing, Japan would most likely seek to expand its political and military status in the region which is also a headache for ASEAN members because Japan is going to be a huge military and political power to be reckoned with once again. However, Japan's and the US' proximity has made China step up its initiatives to bond with South East Asia so it can have an edge over Japan, itself not being as close to the US as Japan.

It is clear that the major powers within ASEAN expect continued US engagement for security in the region to subdue Chinese influence. Though economic and diplomatic relations with China are healthy, the ASEAN states have collectively resisted Chinese calls for greater security co-operation. While the wind is blowing favorably, the US is strengthening its partnership with ASEAN through structures like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) - the primary forum for enhancing political and security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region to confront current global threats.

It can be expected that ARF will play as a catalyst in building co-operative security in South East Asia, but it cannot give the assurance that China, Japan and the US and those on the periphery like India, Australia will avoid major

conflicts of interests in the years ahead. This clash of interests among China, Japan and the United States could eventually destabilize peace and prosperity throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Obviously, five factors will influence somehow the future of ASEAN. One - evolving Asean+3 (China, Japan and Korea) and the EAS (East Asia Summit) as the ground for the establishment of an East Asia Community without the apparent involvement of the US. Two - overlapping of two political spheres consisting of China and the US at the core and India, Japan, and Australia on the periphery in East Asia. Three - involvement and re-adjustment of relationships of ASEAN's associates like the US, China, Japan, India, Russia along with West Asia and other places. Four - China's attitude towards the US presence in the region and five - success of the US's new strategy of 'divide and rule'.

In this era of globalization, it is true that global diplomacy becomes acceptable when it is competent enough to meet regional requirements. It seems that the US is one step ahead than the Chinese in this regard.

It is true that despite their internal rivalries and differences and external influences, the ASEAN states will be needed to create a unified bloc that can weigh their individual interests and increase their bargaining power on matters of common interests, while being in the shadow of giants trying to expand their political and military power.

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