

Bangladesh-India relations with change of guard in New Delhi



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**B**ANGLADESH Foreign Minister Morshed Khan's recent telephone talks with India's new Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his visit to New Delhi, as a special envoy of Bangladesh Prime Minister, demonstrate that Bangladesh not only attaches immense importance to its relations with India, its largest neighbour but also is keen to strengthen its ties with the new Singh government.

Before I briefly examine the issues impacting on relations between the two nations, it is appropriate to mention four matters that will have some influence on them under the Congress-led government.

First, although Sonia Gandhi declined to become the Prime Minister, she retains the positions of the President of the Congress Party and the chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary body. As a result, her office is likely to become increasingly powerful and may likely to sway in some way the decisions of the Singh government both in domestic and external policies.

Second, the Communist Party-Marxist (CPI-M) is a major partner (although from outside) of the new coalition government. The party has been very strong and popular in both West Bengal and Tripura. Some of the major bilateral issues involve the territory of West Bengal

and the undemarcated border relating to Mohuri Char affects Tripura state. It is likely that the CPI-M will have inputs on policies pursued with Bangladesh. It may be recalled that the delay in the ratification of the Indo-Bangladesh Land Border Treaty of 1974 originated in West Bengal because some individual lodged a legal to the Treaty in the Kolkata High Court.

Third, the new Indian National Security Adviser J.N. Dixit is an "old hand" of Bangladesh. He was closely involved from Indian Foreign Office in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 and in that capacity he knew almost all Bangladesh political leaders and senior officials during that period. He served as the Acting Head of the India's Diplomatic Mission in Dhaka soon after independence in 1972 and continued as the Deputy High Commissioner in Bangladesh for some years.

Dixit's book "*Liberation & Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*", released in 1999, provides an illuminating glimpse of his thoughts on Indo-Bangladesh relations, although many Bangladesh diplomats do not agree with some of his views contained in the book. In his new role, it is believed that Dixit's views will have considerable influence on all issues relating to Bangladesh-India relations under the Congress-led government.

Finally, both India's Foreign Minister and the National Security Adviser had been career diplomats with considerable experience as Ambassadors. While Natwar Singh served in Pakistan, Dixit was in Bangladesh. It is believed that Dixit, as National Security Adviser, was intimately connected with bilateral issues both in the capacity of a senior diplomat in Bangladesh and also as a Foreign Secretary. Furthermore Dixit is known to be a "go-getter" person, dynamic and forceful in his views. Some foreign policy analysts tend to compare

Dixit's role under the Congress-led government to that of Henry Kissinger who as the National Security Adviser influenced US foreign policy far more than the then Secretary of State.

In the context of the above factors, Bangladesh is required not only to deal with the Foreign Office but also with the Congress party office, CPI-M leaders and the office of the National Security Adviser in respect of the resolution of the pending bilateral issues that are

developed an intricate maze of relations in economic, political, cultural and educational fields. The ties of history are so pervasive that relations between the peoples of the two nations exist independently of governments and policies.

The existing bilateral relations between the two nations may be termed as correct and responsive to needs of each other as far as practicable. Often perception of a situation from different angles may divide policy options for both

resolved

With the coming of the Congress-led government, I think it is appropriate to revisit some of the important pending issues between the two nations that need resolution.

*First*, the proposed mega water resources-development project, under the BJP-led government, linking the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers has been a deep concern for Bangladesh. Its ramifications will be devastating for a lower riparian country, like Ban-

India's Border Security Force. The Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 is a comprehensive arrangement on land border of about 4025 km. Skirmishes should not occur if the border demarcation is completed and relevant border regulations are strictly followed. Furthermore while Bangladesh ratified the Agreement soon after it was concluded, India needs to ratify it as 6.5 km border has yet to be demarcated. The 1974 Agreement can only come into effect in terms of

Vajpayee government, an impression was created in India and overseas by some Indian media that Bangladesh is either sheltering some terrorist elements or is considered a "safe haven" for Islamic militants. The allegation is counter-productive in bilateral relations.

The ethos of Bangalis is not embedded in extremism because their culture and traditions are rooted in ancient secular heritage of the land. It is noted that Jamaat-e-Islami party's primary vote has fallen in the country. For instance, in the 1996 election, while it had secured 8.61 percent of the electorate, in the 2001 election, its share dwindled to 4.28 percent. This means that Bangladeshi electorate overwhelmingly rejected religion-based politics. The US, among other Western countries, recognises that Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim state and the communal harmony in the country is undisturbed. It is desirable that New Delhi may not allow Bangladesh to be portrayed wrongly as was done under the previous regime.

Conclusion

The above are some of the pressing bilateral issues that need to be looked into with all the goodwill and seriousness. I would argue that the Singh government has to take first the initiative in resolution of the issues so that bilateral relations between the two nations will grow constructively from strength to strength to the mutual benefit of the peoples of both countries.

Given the spirit and desire to live together in harmony, there is no adequate reason why the issues cannot be resolved. After all, the common goal of both countries is to eradicate poverty and meet the basic necessities of people. Nature has made Bangladesh and India to live next to each other and nothing can change this reality. Some say that the power and strength of a big neighbour is like beauty. If you have it, you don't need to go around saying or flaunting it.

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described below.

State of the relations

In general, the relations with neighbours are complex and emotive in their contents. Neighbouring countries ordinarily are not free from bilateral disputes or occasional irritants. For instance, a cursory look at the state of relations with neighbouring countries across the world will illustrate the reality. The most ideal relations between neighbours appear to exist between the US and Canada or between France and Switzerland. Although disputes occasionally arise between them, they do not mar their friendly and co-operative relations.

As long as nation-states exist, their interests will differ and often asserted in bilateral or multilateral forums. There is nothing unfriendly about it. It is the recognition of divergence of each other's interests that underpin the maturity of bilateral relations. The bedrock of good bilateral relation depends on trust, friendship and respect for each other. Friendship and trust cannot be maintained, if all irritants are not resolved with mutual satisfaction.

Both Bangladesh and India have

nations. South Asia is a tension-filled region for many reasons that I shall not deal with here. They are well known.

There is one aspect that needs to be underscored in Indo-Bangladesh relations. Disputes are perceived in a different light when a neighbour is bigger and endowed with more resources than the other. Canada's Prime Minister late Pierre Trudeau once said that living next to the US " is like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt". Similar sentiment could also apply to Bangladesh-India relations.

The perception of the people of both countries towards each other is important. Democratic governments must carry the support of the people for the end product of an issue or dispute. Otherwise, settlement on any issue may not last long. Both countries require the same political, bureaucratic, intellectual, educational, cultural and media efforts towards resolution of bilateral disputes or irritants in good faith.

Issues that need to be

gladesh. (The former Vajpayee government did not respond adequately to the concerns of Bangladesh. ) It is heartening to note that the new Indian water resources minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi (of West Bengal) reportedly said that his government would like to review the mega water-linking project so that it might not harm Bangladesh.

In the light of the assurances of the Indian Water Resources Minister, it is expected that the new Indian government will be seriously engaged in talks with Bangladesh to arrive at a mutual agreement in accordance with Article 9 of the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty. Article 9 stipulates that the two governments agreed to conclude water sharing treaties/ agreements with regard to all common rivers and they include the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna (about 56 rivers are common to both countries and all flow from India to Bangladesh).

*Second*, the land border issue attracts attention of the people of Bangladesh. Hardly a week elapses without any untoward incident at the border, including pointless death of nationals at the hands of the security forces, mostly of

Article 5 of the Agreement when both parties exchange the instruments of ratification.

Furthermore, India's allegation during the BJP government that Bangladesh harbours training camps for India's insurgents from the North Eastern states ( the so-called seven sisters) is not helping the state of bilateral relations. Either India provides documentary evidence to this allegation to Bangladesh or it should not make such allegation. Such allegation became a routine under the BJP-led government.

*Third*, trade-deficit with India appears to become a major concern for Bangladesh. While India's exports to Bangladesh during 2002-03 were nearly US\$ 1.26 billion dollars, Bangladesh was able only to export its goods worth merely US\$ 84 million. If informal trade is taken to account, India's exports now amounts to about US\$ 3 billion dollars.

It is acknowledged that India is a large manufacturing country and it is likely to export more capital and consumer goods to Bangladesh than Bangladesh is able to export to India. However, the grotesque trade imbalance suggests that something appears to be structurally wrong in the trade relationship and is not a temporary phenomenon. It needs to be addressed with practical steps. A concerted drive for the new Singh government is to find ways of reducing the wide deficit.

The trade-deficit is not an economic matter. It has a corollary impact on political area as well as it may fan the perception that Bangladesh is being "dominated" by India and the negative image of people toward India does not help in consolidating bilateral relations.

*Fourth*, the issue of sea boundary in the Bay of Bengal and resolution of ownership of South Talpatty Island need to be resolved. The uninhabited island, South Talpatty, (India calls it New Moore Island) is located about 4 km, south of the confluence of Raimangal and Hariabhanga rivers at the estuary in the western border (approximate latitude is 21 degrees, 36.0 " North and Longitude 89 degrees 09.10" East). The island is believed to be approximately one square mile (640 acres) with general elevation of about 0.6 metre from the highest flood level. The resolution of ownership of the island is important.

Furthermore, delineation of sea boundary in the Bay of Bengal remains inconclusive although it began in 1974. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea has provided guidelines in Articles 15, 74 and 83 and bilateral negotiations may be initiated to resolve the long-standing issue. It is believed that since 1982 no serious discussion took place in this matter. Hopefully the new government will initiate talks with Bangladesh

*Fifth*, during the tenure of the