

Strategic factors in Indo-Bangla relations

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CURRENT Indo-Bangla relations could hardly be classified as anything but warm, depending upon which stratum of India one is talking about.

I find four strata of India. One, political, two, bureaucratic (military inclusive), three, commercial and four is the common peoples' India. One could still make a few more strata, if one wishes to. However, this could be true of any third world country.

Our relation, both commercial and with the people of India, seem to be the warmest but relation with other two strata appears to have not cemented well. It could be for the reason that political and bureaucratic India wishes to base its relation with Bangladesh on strategic plains directly related to India's security. Delhi still finds Bangladesh a strategic hinterland that it sees as a hurdle in its national integration, particularly in relation to her North Eastern State (NES).

The above contention is on the basis of my discussion with one of the prominent Indian intellectual and journalists, close to the policy makers in Delhi, Dr. VP Vaidik, who visited Bangladesh to attend a seminar organised by the BISS on 8-9 December 2004 to commemorate the third decade of SAARC, Dhaka being the birth place of the Association. The seminar was participated by eminent SAARC personalities from five member countries. Maldives and Bhutan did not participate. Dr. Vaidik is the current chairman of Council for Indian Foreign Policy a think tank that assists the Indian foreign office with their counselling. He was also editor of the Hindi daily 'Nababham' and of PTI (Hindi). He brought a new concept of SAARC that he termed as peoples SAARC to foster better cooperation between all South Asian peoples, side by side the governmental effort.

However, my discussion was not on the talk that he delivered on December 10, 2004 at BISS but on his perception of Indo-Bangla relation at an informal gathering at CNA (Council for national Agenda, a private think tank). Though it was not his first visit to Bangladesh yet he termed this visit as special than those he had as part of Indian delegations. His current visit gave him the opportunity to see for himself the so-called 'hard-line Islamic Bangladesh', a perception that most of the elite in Delhi hold.

He was candid and forthright admitting that he neither found Bangladeshi 'hard-liner' nor 'militant' as he himself was attired in a traditional Hindu dress. In his short talk on bilateral relation he admitted that policy makers in Delhi are being fed with motivated and wrong inputs as far as Bangladesh is concerned. He emphatically suggested that Delhi should shun the 'Big Brother attitude' and rather behave as 'Elder Brother' with the smaller neighbours.

In his opinion, 'elder brotherly behaviour' is much opposed to 'Big Brother' attitude. One is

associated with eastern values of love, affection and sacrifice and the other is with 'bossing'. Dr. Vaidik agreed that it is India who needs to take a few more steps to cover the distance that has been created specially with Bangladesh with adverse propaganda made by many eminent Indians. Delhi's continued rhetoric did not prove to be fruitful in closing the gap that was created ever since the BNP and its ally, the Islamic parties, formed the government. Change in Delhi's seat of power did not change the policy towards Bangladesh; rather new avenues of discord opened.

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While going through my paper on Indo-Bangladesh relation that I presented as key note paper at an earlier seminar, Dr. Vaidik agreed that there exists perceptive misunderstanding between security experts of New Delhi and Dhaka in particular reference to NES. Indians have been accusing Bangladesh of sheltering the NE States insurgents within Bangladesh. India claims that 195 camps are within Bangladesh belonging to various Indian insurgency groups who are at war with the central authority. New Delhi blames the Bangladesh government of colluding with Pakistan to create an independent Muslim state out of part of Assam or annex the Muslim majority part of Assam to Bangladesh, a fallacious claim that defies all logic.

Insurgency in that part of India is not a recent phenomenon rather half a century plus old. According to Indian analysts the region is infested with 130 ill organised insurgent groups. Around 5 lakhs security forces are currently deployed in counter insurgency operation given special power with huge border security forces deployed all along Indo-Bangla border. At places borders are barbed wired to prevent illegal crossings. It is difficult to fathom, having such tight border control, why the Indian authority cannot prevent insurgents crossing over at will as claimed by New Delhi. Delhi's rhetoric on the issue strongly suggests that the Delhi's Bangladeshi watchers believe that Dhaka is out to create a Lebensraum to resolve its population to space crises. The suggestion seems to be nothing but indicative of Delhi's fear of Muslim growth within India.

Of the six districts of Assam that Delhi identifies as the fastest growing Muslim majority districts, four are adjacent to Bangladesh. This is

not a new trend as claimed by Delhi. These districts have always been Muslim majority areas specially Karimganj, Dhubri and Goalpara. Interestingly, for the last couple of years many prominent Indian 'think tank' have been identifying Bangladesh as 'cocoon of Islamic terrorism' claiming that its Islamists are part of Osama bin Laden led IIS (International Islamic Front), an anti West Jihadi front. Delhi also claims Government connection with HUI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami), a Bangladeshi chapter of Pakistani Jihadi organisation, and a front organisation charged with training South East Asian

notion on the western flank. Defence analysts close to Indian military, views these relations as Chinese bid to envelop India from the flanks in a given time. A recent article published in SAAG, views Indo-Bangla relation through the prism of Indian national security. The article suggests, "Every Indian government is very sensitive to its national security that takes priority in formulating India's foreign policy. Particularly it is true for the neighbouring countries". The concern increases, as India would like to enter the exclusive club of the Big Powers. However, the article continues suggesting that Indian policy towards Bangladesh would always be factored by China-Bangladesh military collaboration, which, according to Indian analysts, have matured over last thirty years.

However, the above quoted article not only details Indian concern of the Sino-Bangla collusion but cautions USA of the growing China-Bangladesh-Myanmar nexus in the Bay of Bengal which, according to Delhi, may prove to be anti-US interest in the region. Indian warning did not go unheeded as RAND Corporation, one of the think tanks close to US administration, in its annual strategic paper mentioned "given the proximity of this region (Bangladesh and Myanmar) to China, these countries would likely to be reluctant to become too closely aligned with United States, in the event of heightened tension".

Keeping the above in view, one may not be wrong to suggest that US deputy secretary state, South Asia, Mr. Torkel Peterson's visit to Chittagong and his suggestions, were purely based on economic issues. While concluding my discussion with Dr. Vaidik, who admitted that he was ignorant of the fact that Indo-Bangla relation was so much dependent on the strategic factors, which India views as essential for her national security. India's national security perception is to acquire and maintain dominant power status in the region capable of challenging Chinese growth, much akin to US interest in South and South East Asia. Many Indian intellectuals like Dr. Vaidik may not have any trepidation of strategic issues but fact remains that military analysts remain concerned with the growing strategic importance that Bangladesh is acquiring since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and rapid Chinese ascendancy as Asian super power.

However, what we need to underscore is the fact that our relation with India is much influenced by the strategic issues those Delhi views as vital for her march to become at least a dominant Asian power. We have to live with that geo-strategic fact and preserve our national interest.

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The Bangladesh War 1971: Tale of two Generals



MUMTAZ IQBAL

[This article reviews the book, "The Betrayal of East Pakistan", by Pakistani General Niazi; the first part (published on 7 January 2005) reviewed, "Surrender At Dacca", by Indian General Jacob. Edit]

The Betrayal of East Pakistan

Books by Second World War German and Japanese generals are entertaining and educational. That is because while they lost the war, they won many spectacular battles. Some such books are 'Panzer Leader' by Gen. Heinz Guderian, 'Lost Victories' by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein and 'Singapore 1941-42' by Col. Masanori Tsuji.

Tsuji was the father of Germany's Panzers. He commanded one of three Panzer Corps of Rundstedt's Army group Centre that broke through the Ardennes to smash French Army resistance in ten days in May 1940. Using the Ardennes route was the idea (Hitler supported it) of Manstein who took part in the great encirclement battles of Kiev, Kharkov and Kursk.

Tsuji planned Japan's Malaya campaign where Gen. Yamashita in ten weeks crushed the British command, climaxed by Gen. Percival's surrender at Singapore on 15 February 1942.

Tsuji is a colourful character. He disappeared from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in August 1945 on Japan's surrender and advised the Viet Minh forces fighting France in the First Indochina War that culminated in the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Tsuji then resurfaced in Japan to become a member of Diet (Parliament). He disappeared again in the mid-1960s reportedly again to Vietnam, this time to lend his services to Hanoi against the Americans.

Alas! Niazi's book neither entertains nor educates, for as simple self-evident reason. He didn't win any battles, lost the war and is the only Pakistani general to have surrendered to the Indians. A loser's book usually has limited appeal. Besides, Niazi has little if any redeeming quality in terms of cool analysis, clear presentation of facts and sound judgment. The material in the book lacks logical presentation and is often turgid and irritatingly repetitive.

Niazi's explanation for his surrender is bizarre. He was resolved "to fight to the end" but was ordered to surrender as "a deliberate debacle, pre-planned and pre-arranged by Yahya and Bhutto." Niazi did so "in order...to save West Pakistan...our homeland" (xxvi). His Eastern Command "...was an expendable pawn" and he "...the sacrificial lamb" (p.194).

Niazi asserts his Command was "...not defeated (but) was tricked and forced to surrender" (p.278) and "...if the war had continued, they (Indians) would have been badly mauled by us" (p.208). Niazi is confident that computer modeling of the Pakistan Army's operation in both wings of Pakistan in 1971 would show that "I (Niazi) and my generals to be among the most successful of this century" (p.265).

This catalogue of woolly and incoherent statements certainly makes it difficult to have confidence in Niazi's rationality and judgment.

Like Jacob, Niazi is not at all modest about his talents. He has "vast experience in commanding troops" (p.54). He was solely responsible for his Command's "overall strategic planning for operations and tactical decisions" (p.55). He conducted anti-insurgency operations in April/May 1971 with a "...speed (that) may not have a parallel in the history of guerrilla warfare" (p.63). Finally, he was "despite heavy pressure...fighting fit to the end" (p.115).

The authenticity of the last statement is contestable. Niazi refers to Wellington weeping copiously after Waterloo 1815 (p.115). Yet Niazi is conspicuously silent about his nervous breakdown the sahibs are crying inside, as the bearer put it on 7 December 1971 when he briefed Governor Abdul Malik at Government House in Dhaka on the hopeless military situation (see The History of the Pakistan Army by Brian Cloughley, p.217).

Like many a defeated general, Niazi exaggerates enemy resources. Thus, he claims that the strength of the MB totaled 287,500 (p.69) and Aurora had a "...overall superiority of at least ten to one" (p.93). Jacob observes that the Indians "...actual superiority was 1.8:1 (Surrender at Dhaka, p.157). Generals like civilians are not averse to using statistics to bolster their claims or cases. Niazi asserts that he dealt with this military imbalance by "improvisation, deception, trickery and bluff". He fixed the Indians about his strength and deployment by "subtle strategical cunning and tactical skill" (p.83). Niazi created "certain ad-hoc formations for deception" (p.82) by milking existing units.

What this milking really did was to dilute the prevailing weak cohesion and battle worthiness of Niazi's precariously stretched forces unwisely scattered in penny packets all over Bangladesh. This certainly made Aurora's job easier.

Niazi proudly trumpets his military prowess. He boasts that he is a "fighting soldier" and that the Indians he doesn't mention who they are called him a "soldier's general".

Niazi, however, doesn't return the compli-

ment. He states that Aurora's "...so-called blitzkrieg failed miserably due to lack of good generalship. They did not have generals like ours" (p.120). Is this a case of sour grapes, bad manners or both?

Though busy fighting or planning to fight, Niazi surprisingly found time to make suggestions to Pres. Yahya on politics. Thus Niazi states that he "had been recommending amnesty (to Yahya) since May...since a political settlement was the need of the hour" (p.96 and 104).

Around the second week of December 1971, Niazi sent "...another signal advising the President to release Mr. Mujib-ur-Rahman to keep Pakistan intact" (p.192). He doesn't mention when the first signal was sent. Niazi is miffed that Yahya ignored his recommendation.

Some comments and suggestion of Niazi's nickname was Tigerard hilariously priceless. He claims that the Tiger "...

road in Dhaka Cantonment is named" after him which made him feel rather "...at home in East Pakistan as Commander Eastern Command" (p.51). For the record, the road is named after the East Bengal Regiment (EBR) called The Tigers.

To relieve his precarious logistics situation, Niazi makes the absurd suggestion to DCOS Gen. Abdul Hamid to ferry supplies by The Hump route (over Tibet) as was done in WWII (p.98). Niazi's most fantastic claim is the utterly baseless one that the Russians (!) used poison gas against troops in the Mymmensingh sector but doesn't offer any proof.

Niazi's comments about his civilian and military masters are fascinatingly candid and uniformly unflattering. Yahya did not come "...to see his people and troops during the entire nine months of the hostilities" (p.175). About Bhutto, he repeats the standard cliché that "...nobody could beat him in intrigue."

CGS Lt. Gen Gul Hasan "did not take any interest in the 1971 war." Air Marshal M. Rahim Khan "kept himself and his air force hidden during the conflict." Gul Hasan conspired with Rahim Khan "...to bring Bhutto into power, for which our defeat and separation of East Pakistan were essential" (p.174).

Niazi's soul-mate in brutality, Lt. Gen (later Gen and COAS) Tikka Khan, is not spared. Tikka lacked both "...strategic insight and tactical flair" (p.44) and "...conscientious objections when his self-interest was involved" (p.175). The urbane and erudite Lt. Gen. Sahibzada Yaqub Khan, the first GOC of Easter Command, is accused of "...deserting during active service" for resigning his Command in April 1971 (p.43), while Yaqub's promotion to higher ranks in the Army is smooth because he is "polished and well-versed in English" (p.38). Niazi's Public Relations Officer Maj. Siddiq Salekhe died in the Bahawalpur plane crash which killed Pres. Ziaul Huqis "young and inexperienced" (p.172) while Salek's book, "Witness to Surrender," is a "...pack of lies" (p.288).

But Niazi's real venom is reserved for Maj. Gen. Rao Farman Ali, Civil Affairs Advisor to the real power behind Governor Malik. Farman is "...the cleverest behind-the-scene manipulator" who created "panic in Government House and sabotage(d) the war effort very cleverly and successfully" (p.175) and was "...running a parallel set-up dealing with the Indian C-in-C as well as the Russians" (p.179).

Considering Farman's somewhat sleazy reputation in Bangladesh as a cross between Savaranoor and Eichmann, Niazi lets him off rather lightly.

Niazi's most blatant self-deception is to put the whole blame on Tikka for the "stark cruelty" and "scorched-earth policy" of the murderous military action starting 25 March 1971 (p.46). Without batting an eyelid, Niazi exonerates himself of any blame "for the kind of activities the army was sometimes accused of" (p.52). Niazi is careful not to elaborate what these "activities" are.

On the contrary, Niazi condemns Yaqub for inaction despite the latter witnessing "the horrors of holocaust, the genocidal destruction by the Bengalis" (p.42). Niazi's perverse audacity in making this statement is sickening and shocking.

This suggests that Niazi suffered from delusional thinking and, were he alive, would be well counseled to seek treatment to restore his mental equilibrium, Niazi's book raises the intriguing question whether the Islamabad junta, or an influential coterie collaborating with Bhutto, deliberately planned to ditch East Pakistan (the so-called MM Ahmed plan) but this envisaged a "friendly" parting and consciously break-up of Pakistan, if the Bengalis could not be put in their place.

But, assuming that such a plan even if half-baked existed, the junta could not have found a more apt if unwitting instrument than the good and loyal soldier Niazi to implement it unquestioningly. From this standpoint, therefore, Niazi's place in history as a failed commanding general and indifferent author is secure.

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TRANSIT AND BEYOND Economic and strategic significance

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Introduction

Local newspapers reported in the last few days that Bangladesh agreed in principle to the proposed Myanmar-India gas pipeline to pass across her territory. There were also reports that there might be talks on transit corridor between Bangladesh and Nepal and Bhutan through India and also talks on future trans-national power grid. These were icebreaking events in the context of Indo-Bangladesh relations. In the past, whenever such proposals were discussed, certain quarters in the country used to raise the spectre of Indian hegemony or threat to national security. These people had the rug taken from under them when Pakistan agreed to let the Iran-India gas pipeline pass through her territory. Time is now ripe to take the next logical step of dispassionately examining the whole issue of transit or transhipment across Bangladesh - not only of goods and passengers of Indian origin, but of the whole region and beyond.

Bangladesh sits at a crossroad between South and Southeast Asia. If we put this geographical advantage to use, we could turn Bangladesh into a regional centre of investment, trade, commerce and industry. Those, in turn, could speed up the development process. Despite our important geo-strategic location, we cannot effectively influence the regional affairs mainly because of our poor economy and general backwardness. An economically vibrant Bangladesh is destined to play a far more important role in the region. Our experiences in SAARC and BIMSTEC suggest that there is enormous prospect of regional trade that could bolster the economy of the whole region. However, in order to facilitate regional trade, we need to integrate and standardise the transportation system of Bangladesh with those of the region. We need to simplify and modernize cross-border trade and help free flow of goods and services within the region. If Bangladesh could become a regional hub, it could gain economically in the form of increased revenue and investment. It would also have a positive impact in the strategic equation between Bangladesh vis-a-vis India, Myanmar and China. This paper aims to examine the economic viability and strategic issues involved in such a proposal.

Importance of Regional Trade

South Asian economies and especially Bengal's economy suffered major disruption due to partition in 1947. A look at the map will reveal that the Bengal Railways were cut at seven places and the road links at innumerable points. East Bengal was cut off from Kolkata, the capital and industrial centre, so was the port of Chittagong from its hinterland Assam. Whatever little link remained was finally snapped with stoppage of river and rail transit in the aftermath of Indo-Pak War of 1965. Impact of this dislocation can be gauged from the facts that while Assam and Bengal were economically some of the leading provinces of British India, today India's NE region and Bangladesh are some of the poorest.

India's NE states have abundance of raw materials such as tea, timber, coal, gas, oil etc. However, they lack direct access to the rest of India and the outside world. Direct access means transiting through Bangladesh. If Bangladesh provides such access, she could earn substantial transit fees and bargain for greater market access to the NE India, a region of 80 million people. Similarly, economic potentials of Nepal and Bhutan remain untapped due to communication bottleneck and lack of entrepreneurs. These two countries have the world's largest potential for hydropower. Bangladesh could be a major buyer of electricity that could mitigate our perennial shortage. Bangladesh could be the prime mover of trade and transit of

the transit traffic. There would be secondary benefits such as more hotels and restaurants, truck stops, service stations, petrol pumps etc. Increased railway traffic would enhance revenue for the Bangladesh Railways (BR). That in turn would enable BR to provide better services to its customers. Transit traffic would be important for the continued growth and development of the two seaports of Chittagong and Mongla. Until partition Chittagong port handled all traffic of NE India. If we allow the flow of traffic again, the earning of Chittagong port would increase substantially. Mongla would be a major buyer of electricity that could mitigate our perennial shortage. Bangladesh could be the prime mover of trade and transit of

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