

PRANAB MUKHERJEE'S VISIT

New impetus to Bangladesh-India ties: Challenges ahead

The challenges ahead are complex and formidable but with the necessary political will and pragmatism, we can surely face them and usher in a new phase in Bangladesh-India ties. Our policy makers have to broaden their vision and rise above their short-term narrow national interests in favor of longer-term regional interests. There are bilateral problems in all other regions of the world, but that has not precluded them from resolving them for their common benefit. In this globalizing era, the sooner we come out of "the box," the better we will do.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee paid a day trip to Bangladesh last week, primarily to invite the Bangladeshi leadership to attend the forthcoming Saarc Summit in New Delhi on April 3-4. He, however, took advantage of the visit to give new impetus to Bangladesh -- India ties. The veteran Indian leader, during his seven-hour stay in Dhaka, met President Iajuddin Ahmed, Chief Adviser Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, had a substantive meeting with Foreign Affairs Adviser Dr. Iftikhar Ahmed Chowdhury, and also met Awami League Chief Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia.

Talking to newsmen prior to his return to New Delhi, Mukherjee said that both sides agreed to take steps to place bilateral relations on an "irreversible higher trajectory," and that both sides discussed all outstanding issues of mutual interest, including water sharing, trade imbalance and security concerns, with a view to strengthening the foundation of bilateral relations between the two countries so that future governments could build on that. Surely, it is a good beginning, but much needs to be done with vision and open mind to boost our bilateral ties.

Mukherjee announced that India had agreed to grant "duty free access" to two million pieces of Bangladeshi readymade garments to her market, and that both sides had agreed to "jointly combat terrorism" which had posed grave challenges to their security and economic development.

Replying to a question about Bangladesh's concern about the Indian Tipaimukh Dam, he said that the issue was raised at the bilateral talks and that he had assured his Bangladeshi counterpart that India had no intention of unilaterally diverting water at Tipaimukh. He also indicated that during the talks both sides "discussed expanding economic cooperation and cooperation in various areas including energy."

The visiting Indian minister also called for greater connectivity among the Saarc countries with a view to linking South Asia with the adjoining regions. He elaborated that one of the objectives of the Saarc Summit would be to establish transit facilities among the member countries so that the region could be connected with East and South East Asia through Bangladesh and West and Central Asia through Afghanistan.

Bangladesh, he said, offered at the just concluded talks to make the Sealdah-Joydevpur passenger train service operational early and to build a bridge over Ragnachheria river.

Well, so far, so good. But the devil is details. Both sides have to demonstrate greater political will and flexibility to radically transform Bangladesh-India ties. There has to be a clear sharing of the perception that our fates are inextricably linked. Making wild allegations against each other does not help. It only creates further acrimony.

Bangladesh should view India's recent phenomenal GDP growth as a great opportunity and challenge to derive maximum benefit out of it, while India has to show greater sensitivity to Bangladesh's economic vulnerabilities.

The current regional scene is quite perplexing. While India is galloping ahead and fast emerging as a major global power, her neighborhood, unfortunately, is going through a difficult patch.

Most of the neighboring countries are facing serious economic and political difficulties, which have, in turn, affected their state institutions. Incidentally, most of these countries were placed high on the "failed state index" computed by the prestigious Washington-based Carnegie Foundation recently. The vulnerabilities of her neighbors will surely have an adverse impact on India's security and development.

Good borders make good neighbors. Among all of India's neighbors, Bangladesh has the longest land boundary with her. It is a pity that the Indira-Mujib agreement, signed over three decades ago, has

not been fully implemented and, consequently, we have border skirmishes every now and then. In the recent past, the border demarcation issue did not get the serious attention it deserved. Earlier, we had made substantial progress and currently, we have a small patch of territory, which needs to be demarcated. We also have to rationally exchange "adverse possessions" and grant access to each other's enclaves.

When serious border clashes erupted in the "adverse possessions" of Padua and Roumari in April 2001 I had, as the foreign secretary, in cooperation with my Indian counterpart, succeeded in diffusing the heightened tensions between the two countries within a record time.

Two rounds of border talks were held in May and June 2001 at high official levels. Unfortunately, this momentum has not been maintained, and during the last six years there has been only one round of Bangladesh-India border talks at that level.

It is necessary to resume the border dialogue, and attempts should be made to bridge the gap as far as possible so that future political governments could finalize the issue on the basis of "give and take."

The issues of demarcation of our maritime boundary with India and Myanmar have not been addressed at all. India, however, has reached a bilateral maritime accord with Myanmar, and if that accord is implemented it will adversely affect our claim on the continental shelf and exclusive economic zone.

The bilateral maritime negotiations will be long and arduous, but we need to start the process before it gets out of hand.

The issue of transit is viewed as a major economic opportunity all over the world, and countries seek

to derive maximum benefit out of it. But this largely economic issue gets bogged down into protracted bilateral negotiations in South Asia due to lack of trust and confidence among the countries of the region.

Pakistan refuses to grant transit facilities to India for the latter's transportation of goods to Central and West Asia, though it is quite keen about the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India, as well as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, gas pipelines.

Bangladesh seeks access to her enclaves, and transit facilities to neighboring Nepal and Bhutan, which India refuses. Bangladesh, on its part, has all along granted transit facilities, by river, to India, and now she has also offered transit facilities by train.

Dhaka, however, has so far refused to grant transit facilities by road to India for transportation of her goods to North East India.

On the energy question, Bangladesh has not been able to reach any accord with India on the proposed Myanmar-India gas pipeline via Bangladesh. Likewise, there was no agreement on the mega Tata project that sought to utilize Bangladeshi gas resources for export to India. These issues should be addressed afresh.

There are strong indications that India is reviewing its earlier position on the transit issue, and that it might come up with a new package deal soon. Bangladesh will be well advised to consider transit, transshipment and other options to derive maximum advantages. India is also considering an alternative strategy to bypass Bangladesh, in case bilateral talks fail to yield fruitful results.

Bangladesh-India trade relations are marked by huge imbalance in favor of India. India's exports to Bangladesh were \$ 1.633 billion, whereas

Bangladesh's exports to India were only \$118.76 million in 2005-06.

How do we bridge this huge trade gap with our very short export list? India has reportedly agreed to remove non-tariff and para-tariff barriers that had hitherto blocked access of our exports to their market.

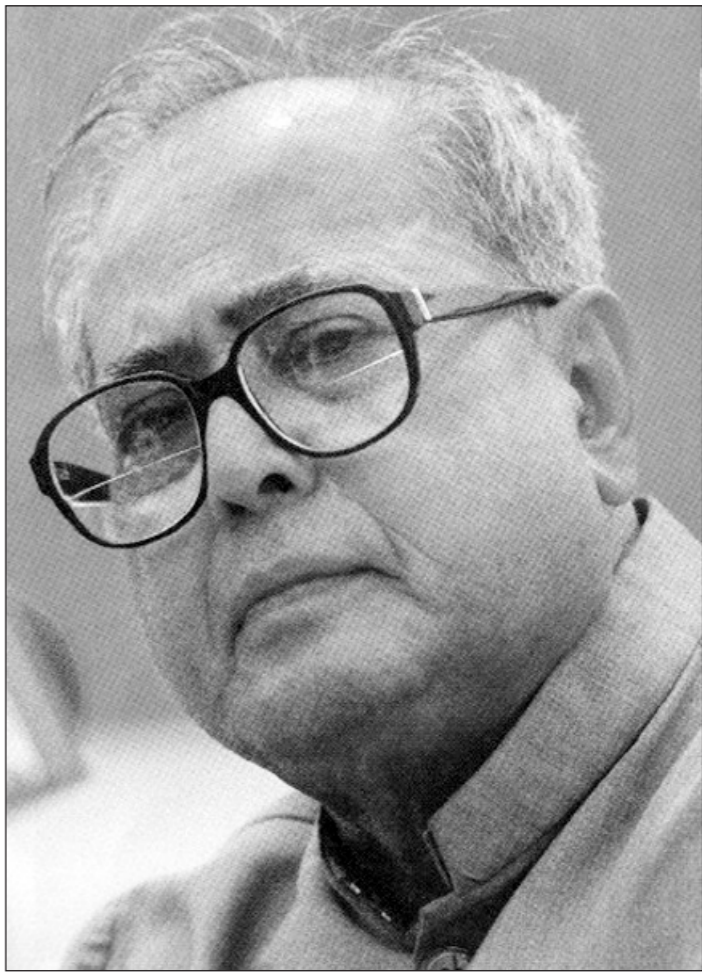
But let us be quite honest, we can not offset the deficit of billions of dollars just by exporting some limited quantities of garments, or on the basis of our existing list of exports. Even if Safta is fully implemented, it would give limited advantages to Bangladesh to boost her exports to India.

India had earlier offered bilateral FTA to Bangladesh to expand her exports to India. Sri Lanka has, reportedly, gained substantially by signing such an FTA with India. Our export situation may not be identical with that of Sri Lanka; nevertheless, the bilateral FTA proposal should be studied in depth by our experts.

As per a study, Bangladesh can earn between Tk. 500 to Tk. 5000 crores per year as annual transit fees. This could go a long way to offset our rising trade imbalances with India. How much we can gain by transforming our Chittagong port to a regional port also needs to be looked at closely.

The government may ask our economic think-tanks e.g. Bids or CPD to undertake detailed studies on these subjects, as well as on the proposed bilateral FTA proposal with India, and come up with a definitive set of recommendations.

Bangladesh and India share 54 common rivers but, so far, they have been able to sign water-sharing agreement only on Ganges. Efforts were made to negotiate water sharing on nine other rivers, including Teesta, but nothing concrete has so far emerged.



Every year we suffer from droughts and floods, yet we have not been able to harness our common water resources, which could also substantially solve our irrigation and acute power problems.

The challenges ahead are complex and formidable but with the necessary political will and pragmatism, we can surely face them and usher in a new phase in Bangladesh-India ties. Our policy makers have to broaden their vision and rise above their short-term narrow national interests in favor of longer-term regional interests.

There are bilateral problems in all other regions of the world, but that has not precluded them from resolving them for their common benefit. In this globalizing era, the sooner we come out of "the box," the better we will do.

Syed Muzzem Ali is a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh.

Clearing old debris

MAHMUDUR RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

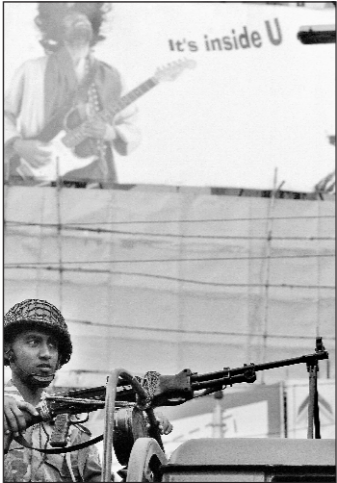
THE precisely calibrated brains of professional soldiers are not suitable for the subtleties of politics. The military's human resource development doesn't typically produce officers with a long-term vision for peace and development.

What an irony of fate that politics today is apparently being run in considerable part by ex-battlefield soldiers. They seem to be the new broom clearing away the old debris. But they cannot answer the questions: What is next? How will the old debris be recycled?

Bangladesh is in a fix of regional politics of open market economy. The very strategic geographical location of Bangladesh is very important to international power politics, especially to US and India, for business and other emerging interests in the region. They consider Bangladesh's geographical location as one of the most important geo-political hubs in the region.

To have effective influence in South Asia, US always tries to strike a balance between two emerging economic and military powers of the world i.e. India and China. For obvious reasons, therefore, the US has had to start to focus on Chittagong port, natural gas, oil, and other business interests in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has a lot of economic achievements to its credit. Business is booming and it is trying to change its LDC status. It has shown significant improvement in increasing GDP. Bangladesh can



be proud of its increase in education rate, self-sufficiency in producing food grain, reducing birth rate, improvement of basic health care facilities, expansion of business (specially garments and textile industry), management of its gas and other natural resources, micro-credit, etc.

It is very unfortunate that the nation has had to sit back and watch a silent take-over by interested third parties with the support of the army. Incidentally, please note that the Bangladesh army is at the top of the list for UN peace-keeping missions (due to its human resource potential) and is not at the mercy of anyone else, as is widely believed.

The background and necessity of the installation of the Fakhruddin administration on January 12 will remain a subject of research for a long time. The people of Bangladesh welcomed the move that was backed by the

army. People in the streets have shown confidence and trust in the CTG, and the actions taken so far have been appreciated by the people.

But why should we expect that army soldiers would clean up the mess left by elected democratic governments time and again? In how many countries of the world, the army has to work to bring the political train back on its rails?

What is the problem in the country? Why democratic practices are not being allowed to be developed in the parties? Why black money holders and extremists are chosen as party leaders, sidelining the politicians?

This is not because that we lack intellectuals and patriots in our political parties. I like to believe whatever achievements we have made including liberation is due to the hardcore contribution of our politicians.

Yes, maybe time and again they learned the hard lessons only after becoming scapegoats. But now, they shall no longer come back to power without respecting the will and wish of the general mass. They shall create space for opposition in our democratic culture. They shall not make our people suffer for their own self-interest. They will not allow corruption, Islamic terrorism, and bad governance. They will accept whatever the election result is and respect the will and verdict of the voters.

Now, what should be our expectation? CTG should start the election process immediately. Election Commission should start the work of voter list. Voter list with photo-

graph seems to be the solution within a workable time-frame. The army may be involved in collecting data and in the process of preparing the voter list.

CTG should aim with another five months time frame to complete the following works:

- Reform of election laws especially concerning the tribunal, eligibility of candidates.
- Empowering EC to disqualify the candidates before election.
- Reform and selection of election officials at grass root level. Army may be employed in scrutinizing the officials.
- Arresting identified military and civil bureaucrats who have fired the gun, keeping on the shoulder of politicians and helped the politicians to become corrupted.
- Reform and framing laws for PSC, ACC.
- Registration of political parties.
- Simultaneous speedy trial of the arrested personnel.

Let's move with the plan of clearing the old debris, of course with a plan of recycling them. The army top brass all of a sudden has started making public statements as a spokesman of present CTG and trying to clarify the army's position. Would it be wrong to desire to see him and his organization as a non-controversial figure in the present turmoil situation? I hope we will prove that intervention is not always a failure in developing democratic countries.

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KAZI S M KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

YES, politics is a different ball game. Many have, thus, expressed caution while responding to Professor Yunus' initiative to form a political party. The civil society people have opted to observe. In fact, politics has become so complicated that many are opting to observe, rather than participate in the thick of things.

But, someone will have to bell the cat. It is explicit that Professor Yunus has decided to undertake that difficult task and that, too, at the risk of being debated about.

Admittedly, there is no disagreement as to the fact that Bangladesh needs an alternative political force. However, such a force is required not necessarily to put the existing political parties in jeopardy, but to send the rotten political culture into oblivion.

Who will deny the fact that politics in Bangladesh has been turned into a bad man's business for many years now? Many were heard saying that no election is now contested by good and honest people. Yes, neither in the parliament nor in the local level elections.

Our political culture has deteriorated so much that a sense of clear dependency on the crooked people has developed. Even in local elections, candidates of dubious background have been chosen instead of good ones for the sake of security of the electorate.

Yes, the dangerous belief grew that only the criminalized ones would be able to provide security in the criminalized society. I believe



that nothing can be more painful for a nation than when good and honest people are treated as weaklings as compared to the anti-social elements.

Hopefully, however, things are beginning to improve. During the nearly one and half months of the Fakhruddin interregnum, the nation has been witnessing purging initiatives undertaken by the government.

Even a few days back, the leadership of major political parties used to side with the corrupt and the godfathers if there was a complaint against them. Now, however, they are thinking of self-correction. They are also publicly applauding the anti-crime drive. Painfully, though, indecency in criticizing others has not yet been reduced.

Even a party chief criticized Professor Yunus rather indecently the other day, which was highly unwarranted and unexpected from a leader of her stature. Professor Yunus's response to that was,

however, pretty discreet, and one that can really enrich our political culture.

Yes, there is criticism about Grameen Bank's rather high interest rate, but modification can be effected to that end. But, to single out Professor Yunus as one linked with interests is, I think, self-defeating because, in our banking system, most of the people receive interest in some way or the other.

Meanwhile, institutions are being overhauled and streamlined. However, it is not at all easy to change the mindset of the incumbents by dint of structural changes alone. Though the country experienced rationality in many matters during the current government, all the functionaries are, perhaps, not ready to play ball.

Whereas almost all the functionaries of the state have shown a sense of purpose during the Fakhruddin period so far, the highest judiciary sent rather a painful signal the other day.

The objective is not to calumnify the highest judiciary but to register our frustration that we -- the general citizens -- have been really dumfounded and shocked at the recent response of the judiciary to a public interest issue.

Notably, our judiciary played a very positive role in many human rights cases, and came to the rescue of many in protecting them against state tyranny. The High Court directive on May 2005, for making it mandatory for the parliamentary elections candidate to disclose information, is one prime example.

But, the stay of that directive by a one member bench in December, 2006, and rescinding of the directive on February 20 -- though, the verdict was withdrawn following emotional appeals by senior lawyers -- points to the fact the specter of corrupt politics is still in play.

Though many have already started to think that the days of the corrupt and the godfathers are gone, the expectation is, I think, still premature. The criminalization, which has taken roots for so many years, is unlikely to fade away so easily and quietly. Such a scenario warrants a new political power.

Yes, the decriminalization process that is now taking place needs to be sustained in the regimes of future political governments as well, where such a political power will be a bare necessity to work as a constant pressure point.

Against this background, I find rationality in Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus's establishing a political party. It is too early to comment whether Professor Yunus will be successful in forming a sustainable political party.

It can, however, be said with confidence that good and honest people will feel encouraged to enter politics, which is a bare necessity for creating and sustaining a fair political culture in Bangladesh.

It is easy to write about, and pray for, a fair political culture. But, to create and sustain one is a different affair, and spontaneous participation of all strata of people is key to that. Let us all pull our weights.

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Untreated wounds

BABAK DEGHANPISHEH

PRIVATE Atiya was driving a heavy truck on the outskirts of Baghdad when he saw the flash. Then, a deafening boom and darkness. When Atiya came to, he was lying on the side of the road and the truck, still carrying 11 of his colleagues from the Iraqi National Guard, was rolling on without a driver. He looked down. "I saw my leg was gone," he says, squeezing his eyes shut at the memory. "It was the worst pain." One

of his arms was broken, the other severely burned.

Atiya (who asked that only his first name be used for safety reasons) is one of thousands of members of the Iraqi security forces who have been wounded on the job. That attack, near the town of Abu Ghraib last Wednesday, was the third time Atiya, 32, has been hit by an IED since he joined the Guard last year.

He was quickly taken to the American-run Combat Support Hospital, known as the Cash, in the Green Zone, often the first

stop for critically wounded soldiers. "These guys are in harm's way more than any other slice of the Iraqi population," says an American doctor at the Cash who asked not to be quoted by name.

During a speech last year, the then secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted that Iraqi security forces take casualties at "roughly twice the rate of all Coalition forces." That's approximately 40,000 wounded and more than 6,000 dead, grim numbers by any measure. (Both the Iraqi Ministry of

Defense and the US military refuse to divulge data on Iraqi wounded for "security reasons.")

"I've lost many friends," says Atiya, a soft-spoken man with a thick black mustache and receding hairline. At the Cash, Iraqi and American soldiers receive the same state-of-the-art care until they're stabilized. But for the Iraqis, it's downhill from there. "The problem is what happens afterward," says the US doctor. "The safety net is very low."

Most of the Iraqi sol-

diers are first transferred to a hospital in central Baghdad that, by local standards, has decent equipment and well-trained doctors. Some Sunni troops are terrified of being absorbed into the public-healthcare system, which is run by officials with ties to the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. All the Baghdad hospitals that receive Iraqi wounded have heavy security to guard against insurgents.

Under Saddam Hussein, an extensive infrastructure was put in place to deal with the

casualties of the dictator's wars. Military hospitals were set up for long-term care and an Association of Veterans' Affairs helped the disabled and paid out pensions.

Now one of the largest former military hospitals is used by squatters and the veterans' office doesn't deal with soldiers who signed up after 2003. A spokesman for the Ministry of Defense says that wounded soldiers are looked after well and continue to receive their salaries even if they can't return

to the job.

But anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. Shakir Mohammed, a fair-haired 27-year-old soldier from Baghdad, received severe burns on the right side of his body from an IED attack in 2004. After treatment at the Cash, he says the Iraqi Army forgot about him. "When we left the hospital, no one asked about us anymore," he says. "All aid stopped at that time."

Mohammed still has nasty purplish scars on the right side of his body and says he's often in

pain. He's also back on the job: with unemployment as high as 50 percent, the roughly \$550 he receives each month is tough to beat.

"There are no other jobs," says Mohammed. Swathed in bandages, Private Atiya looks down at his missing left leg and says he hopes the Guard can find him a posting in Najaf, his hometown. "I have no regrets," he says. "I want to serve."

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