

# Let wind of change blow in the neighbourhood

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

**T**HE Awami League-led Grand Alliance's landslide victory at the recent Parliamentary elections has given a massive mandate to the new government for a change. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has already demonstrated her desire to break away with the past. Her decision to appoint Dr. Dipu Moni and Dr Hassan Mahmud as the Foreign Minister and State Minister for Foreign Affairs, respectively, is a move in the right direction. Surely they are young, but both are highly educated and ranking members of the party's international affairs Committee, thus well conversant with our foreign policy issues.

Where should the change in our foreign policy begin? I believe it should be in our neighbourhood. During the past seven years, foreign policy issues did not get the attention they deserved. The BNP-led four-party government, during its five-year rule, hardly took any serious step to resolve the outstanding issues with our neighbours. Terrorist activities in Bangladesh were allowed to compound, and the government refused to recognise them. Consequently, Bangladesh's image suffered a major setback and the country was termed as a "breeding ground" for terrorist activities in the international circle. The caretaker government controlled terrorist activities, but in the absence of popular mandate, could hardly make any progress on the substantive areas.

Active foreign policy is the first line of defense to protect any country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. More so for a peace-loving, least developed country like Bangladesh, that has limited military muscle and is constitutionally committed to peaceful resolution of disputes.

"History and geography are the father and the mother of Foreign policy," the adage goes. Neither can we change our history nor can we change our geography or our neighbours. Economy, security, environment and good governance are the other key determinants. Given this perimeter, our first focus should be to develop cooperative ties in our own neighbourhood. We do not have to love our neighbours but we have to live with

them on the basis of mutually beneficial ties.

Our two immediate neighbours are India and Myanmar; thus it is only natural that we have unresolved issues with them. After all, we not only share land and maritime boundaries with them, but also share same rivers, natural disasters and even same diseases. Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides; and though we share a small stretch of land boundary with Myanmar, our maritime boundary with them is extensive. "Non resolution" of outstanding issues with our neighbours does not hurt their interest as much as it hurts ours; therefore, there should be a clear realisation that "no action" is not an option for Bangladesh.

Good borders make good neighbours. Among the six countries with which India shares land boundaries, Bangladesh has the longest border with her. It is a pity that the Indira-Mujib accord of 1974 has not yet been fully implemented. We had made substantial progress on the demarcation issue in the past and there is now only 6.5 KM of territory which has to be demarcated. We also need to exchange "adverse possessions" under each other's control and grant access to each other's enclaves. Secondly, the border management needs more careful and constant attention to avoid recurring skirmishes and killing of our nationals.

In the recent past, India had been accusing Bangladesh of harbouring terrorist groups on its territories, and Bangladesh had been denying it, and making counter allegations, notwithstanding the fact that these allegations and counter allegations would take us nowhere. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's proposal for joint task force is both appropriate and relevant and has to be pursued seriously.

With Myanmar, our main attention should be to arrange the early repatriation of Rohingya refugees. Our existing expert groups connected with different aspects of the border issue should meet more regularly, and should be given necessary flexibility and mandate to break the logjam.

The issue of demarcation of our maritime boundary with India and Myanmar should start being addressed as soon as possible. The last

time we seriously discussed the issue with India was in 1974. In the meantime, India and Myanmar have already reached a maritime accord and if implemented, it will seriously jeopardise our claims on the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones. Here we have a bigger problem with Myanmar as their claim drastically curtails our claims. A geographically disadvantaged and resource constrained country like Bangladesh looks to the Bay of Bengal as a reservoir of hydrocarbon and marine resources. Furthermore, we have to meet certain international datelines under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Transit is viewed as a major economic opportunity, and all countries seek to derive maximum benefit out of it. One can look at Europe and see how small countries like Belgium, Austria and Switzerland have been taking maximum advantage on this issue from their larger neighbours. However, this largely economic issue gets bogged down in our region due to lack of trust and confidence among the countries.

One of Bangladesh's biggest comparative advantages is its location and we should strive to emerge as the regional and inter-regional hub. Bangladesh seeks access to her enclaves, and transit facilities to neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan, which India refuses. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has been granting transit facilities, by river and also offered transit, by train, to India but has refused to accede to latter's request for transit facilities, by road, for transportation of Indian goods to northeast India. Our primary consideration should be to ensure maximum benefit for our country after careful consideration of detailed cost-benefit equation and security considerations. We should explore all possible viable options, and opt for a comprehensive discussion and win-win solution for all.

Bangladesh-India trade relations are marked by huge imbalance in favour of India. India's exports to Bangladesh were US \$ 1,932.6 million whereas Bangladesh's exports to India were only US\$ 223.8 million from April 2007 - January 2008 period.

Interestingly, India's exports to us grew by 47.27 percent whereas our exports

to her increased by only 15.66 percent as compared to the earlier corresponding period. How do we bridge this widening trade gap with our very short export list? Surely, India has to remove non-tariff and para-tariff barriers and grant preferential access to our exports to their market. Nevertheless, let us be honest: we can not offset the huge deficit on the basis of our existing limited export list.

According to a number of studies, 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 as a regional port also needs to be looked at closely. The government may ask our economic think-tanks to undertake detailed studies on these subjects as well as on the proposed bilateral FTA proposal which India has been proposing, and come up with a definitive set of recommendations.

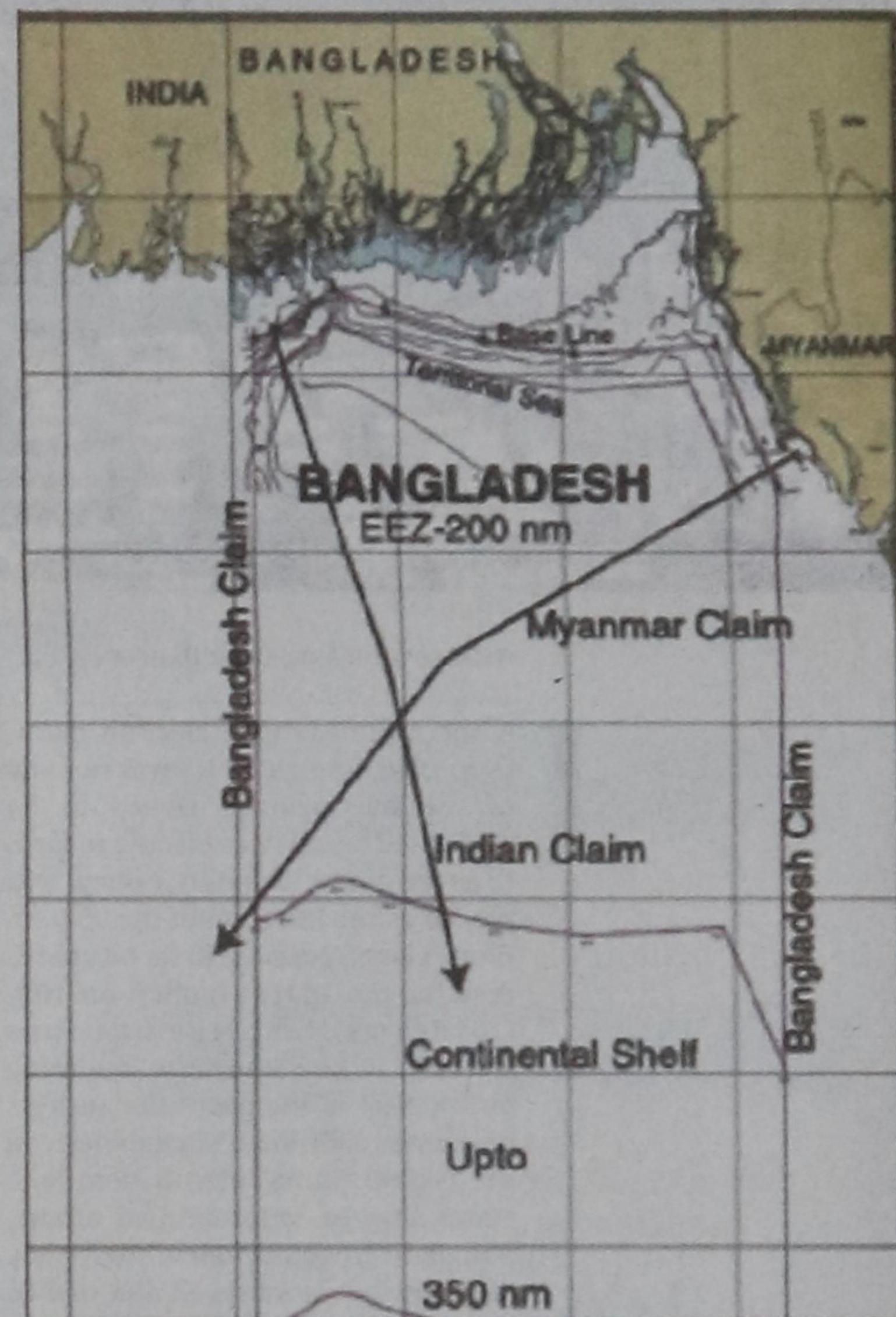
Bangladesh and India share 54 common rivers, but so far, they have been able to sign water sharing agreement only on the Ganges. Efforts were made to negotiate water sharing on nine other rivers, including Teesta, but nothing concrete has so far emerged. Every year we suffer from droughts and floods; yet we have not been able to harness our enormous water resources for our common benefit.

At this time of global recession, it may not be possible to get international assistance to undertake mega projects like Mangla or Tarbela, which were built in the 1960s under the Indus water agreement between India and Pakistan, but it should be feasible to build a series of small-scale dams and barrage projects in an integrated way. This would give us less expensive hydroelectric power, and augment our agricultural production. These projects would also create new job opportunities for millions of our workers and also pave the way for radical transformation of our energy, road network, port facilities, and the entire communication infrastructure.

Our ties with our neighbors should be based on the clear understanding of the ground realities -- whether we like it or not -- that our fates are inextricably linked. India has surely emerged as a global economic power. It should be

in her interest to associate other countries of the neighbourhood so that they may also take advantage of this opportunity to develop themselves. Otherwise, India will gallop, while others will limp and continue to be vulnerable and unstable, and possibly be breeding grounds for extremism. It should be self-evident by now that bad governance and instabilities of her neighbours are bigger threats to India's security than the challenges posed by the nuclear arsenal of her arch rival. In this globalising era, there is no alternative to dialogue and cooperation and the sooner we come out of "the box", the better for us.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh



Political will and painstaking negotiations will be needed to resolve the conflicting maritime claims of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar

