

CHARTING A NEW COURSE IN BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS

Challenges for Sheikh Hasina

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THE Indian Foreign Secretary's visit ended positively for a number of reasons. She was upbeat about the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India next month. The fact that Nirupama Rao found time to meet Khaleda Zia and refrained from calling on the Army Chief that her predecessor had done added to the positive tone of her visit.

Clearly the Indian foreign secretary's visit was not intended to be one of substance. The Indian Foreign Secretary held official talks with her Bangladeshi counterpart. She also met Foreign Minister Dipu Moni and paid a courtesy call on the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. She also called on Khaleda Zia, the Chairperson of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. She did not give any reaction to the media except telling them that her visit was "significant" during which issues were discussed ahead of Sheikh Hasina's visit to India that she termed would be a "very important one".

The Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary addressed the media in depth. He said that Sheikh Hasina would start her three-day official trip on 19th December, flying to New Delhi from Copenhagen after attending the UN sponsored Conference on Climate Change. She will hold official talks that day with the Indian Prime Minister. She will also visit Ajmer Sharif and Kolkata. The Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary said that three agreements would be signed during the visit related to legal matters in dealing with criminals and criminal activities. The Foreign Secretary hinted at an agreement on "mutual transit facilities" without giving details and also stated that a draft would be kept ready for agreement on sharing of Teesta waters but did not say for sure whether it would be signed. He also said that India agreed to allow Bangladesh rail transit to Nepal following up on the land connectivity it had agreed to give during the visit of the Bangladesh Foreign Minister. Bangladesh Foreign Secretary also spoke of the need to remove "cobwebs" in Bangladesh-India rela-

tions to understand each other's position in a transparent manner so as to make joint efforts to resolve them.

The Foreign Secretaries, their upbeat stance notwithstanding, side-tracked some of the major issues that have stood in the way of Bangladesh-India relations developing into a mutually beneficial one as geopolitical realities should have dictated. Bangladesh's concerns over sharing of the waters of the common rivers; demarcation of the maritime boundary; trade imbalance and on the Indian side, the issue of land transit (now being called connectivity), security were not addressed in the meeting of the two top diplomats as priority agenda items for the Bangladesh-India summit level talks. This leaves doubt whether any agreement would be reached on such vital issues when Sheikh Hasina goes to New Delhi. A senior Foreign Ministry official also told the media that agreements on reducing the trade gap and on land boundary issues were also unlikely during Sheikh Hasina's visit.

Expectations have been high in Bangladesh following AL's massive election victory and the return of Congress in India with an equally strong mandate that Bangladesh and India would resolve some of their longstanding issues given the historical close relationship between the two ruling political parties. The visit of the Indian Foreign Minister and the Indian Foreign Secretary in February and April this year, however, raised questions instead of raising optimism. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister's visit in October also did not focus on the major issues. The talks between the two foreign secretaries also have not given much cause for hope because the issues they have discussed in preparation for Sheikh Hasina's visit have not focused on those that have held up friendly relations between the two countries for nearly four decades. In fact, the main obstacle that has held up bilateral relations to grow in strength, namely the negative mindset on either side, is coming into play once again for reasons

that are hard to understand as both sides seem inclined towards putting into the back seat the major contentious issues.

Neither side however gains anything by keeping the major issues unresolved. There are in fact no "cobwebs" in Bangladesh-India bilateral relations because the unresolved issues are as transparent as daylight where both sides know that the "cobwebs" are there because of the lack of political will to deal with them. Sheikh Hasina should use her visit to India to appeal to her hosts for a change in the Indian mindset. In Manmohan Singh, India has a leader who has the vision to rise above the negative mindset and is capable of acting with vision that does justice to India's status as a regional leader in world politics. It is to him that Sheikh Hasina must register the issues of water sharing, trade, Tipaimukh, harassment over the issue of illegal migrants, and the maritime boundary.

Sheikh Hasina must also meet Sonia Gandhi for her support because her influence on the incumbent government is unquestioned. While meeting her, she should keep in mind that one of the few Indian leaders who tried to improve Bangladesh-India relations without considering reciprocity was Rajiv Gandhi. He made a historic visit to the cyclone-devastated Orissa to show solidarity with Bangladesh at times of distress. Rahul Gandhi whose importance in the ruling party is second to none should be another politician that Sheikh Hasina should meet. Recently, Rahul Gandhi has stated his opposition to river linking projects in India, an issue with which Indian diplomats and bureaucrats have kept Bangladesh on the tenterhooks. She should thank him for that stand to get a commitment from India against river linking which would help brighten the gloomy background of Bangladesh-India relations.

The signing of the three agreements on the table would hardly make Sheikh Hasina's visit a success. Its success would be determined by what commitment she can get on the Tipaimukh issue that many in Bangladesh believe would



be disastrous for the country; on sharing of the water of the common rivers where abandoning the river linking idea by India would help the cause of the visit; on stopping the Indian campaign about 20 million illegal Bangladeshis; on giving Bangladesh better trade deal; and assurance to negotiate on the maritime boundary fairly. India could accommodate all these without causing its national interests any harm. To Bangladesh, these commitments would mean a

major breakthrough in achieving its national interests. These commitments would also allow Bangladesh to follow up positively on Indian connectivity request, security concerns, and use of Chittagong port.

The question now is will Sheikh Hasina be able to show the political will needed to make her visit a watershed in Bangladesh-India relations if India shows the wisdom to do so? She may not because her great-

est drawback in succeeding with her forthcoming trip to India will be in the nature of the country's domestic politics. The massive majority with which the AL won the last election notwithstanding, India knows too well that without a clear indication of bipartisanship from Bangladesh, any concession that it would choose to make would be opposed by the opposition and any reciprocal gesture that Bangladesh makes would be

impossible to implement. At this stage, the bipartisanship necessary to convince India is an unimaginable proposition. Therefore the "cobwebs" may linger on the canvas of Bangladesh-India relations a little while longer and Sheikh Hasina's visit may be just another one made by a Bangladesh Prime Minister to India.

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7th November 1975: Conflict between 'isms'



SULTAN MOHAMMED ZAKARIA

7 November 1975 is a historic turnaround for 'Bangladesh politics'. I said 'Bangladesh politics' not 'Bangladesh' because if the event was the very positive move to exonerate the country from many bad elements as the proponents of the day claim, the country would have gone much further than where we stand right now. But, yes, it changed Bangladesh politics a lot.

Many who are interested in politics tried to understand the dynamics of the present political division and confrontation in Bangladesh politics. There is a common understanding that the events like 15 August, 3 November, and 7 November 1975 have left some deep regrets among the political groups. I would go even a bit earlier which was the year 1971. There were generally and broadly three typical groups who viewed things (1971 and 1975's events) differently.

The first group belonged to progressive politics (this was a typically mixed group where some belonged to hard-core communism (Marxist-Leninist), some representing the Muslim sentiments but were more progressive (that is what Awami League stands for) who originated from the Muslim League and later denied religion a state role. The second group directly belonged to

the Islamist idealism led by the Muslim League and Jamaat-e-Islami and other small Islamist political parties who strongly favoured a unitary Pakistan and a greater role of religion in society. The third group was quite interesting. They were communists but deeply influenced by Chinese Maoist regime who then was a strong ally of Capitalist America.

Our liberation struggle hovered around the dynamics of these groups' activities. Their roots in other places/countries/ideologies pushed them to act sometimes (and at the critical juncture of history) against their own people. Jamaat and Muslim League were strongly tied to the idea of Pakistan and therefore any action which could endanger the unity of Pakistan faced automatic opposition from them. The Maoist's position was a paradox. Only because of Chinese alliance with America and Pakistan, these people refused to support the liberation war which some of them termed "Dui Kukurer Lorai" (fight of two dogs).

Therefore, the total upsurge was led by the first progressive group supported by the then Soviet Union and India. Although one can sum up by assessing all these things that the emergence of Bangladesh was part of a geopolitical game, they cannot be dismissed totally. Yet, the strong side of the movement for the liberation struggle

was home grown, and the issues which angered people were mostly the infringement of the Bangladeshi economic, social and political rights, and that was clearly ignored by the second and the third group. The progressive political forces very smartly picked up the right issues at the right time and successfully mobilised people in their favour.

Although their ultimate action (liberation war) served the interest of India and Soviet Union (one wanted to see a defeated Pakistan in its regional power equation and the other wanted to see a defeated America in its global hegemonic tussle), the deep sense of deprivation of the Bangladeshi was above all the other issues. The second and third group sadly failed to understand the nerve of their own people and desperately tried to serve the interest of their foreign masters.

In 1971, the first group claimed a huge victory whereas the second and third group received a humiliating defeat. However, it was America which didn't want to let the communist flag conquer any other region other than Eastern Europe. They only receded for a while. Later, when the dust settled, America, Pakistan and other like-minded countries desperately wanted to stem the tide of communism. As a result, until 1974, there were many attempts made to destabilise the Mujib regime. Nonetheless, there was still

hope for America that Mujib couldn't turn hardcore communist given his past endeavour for democratic rights. However, when BAKSAL happened, many saw it as a likely Soviet agenda to transform Bangladesh into a communist model single-party state, which buried the last hope for capitalist America. In this regard, American foreign policy history renders a very bad proposition. They successfully maintained one of their smoothly manoeuvred conspiracy games here in Bangladesh.

It was very sad that the conflict of two ideologies: Communism and Capitalism stretched down to the Bay of Bengal. And although in 1971 the Communist block claimed victory, on 15 August 1975 the latter hit back brutally and sharply which took a formal shape on 7 November, 1971. The November 3 coup was a bit of a resistance by the communist block but the adventurism by JSD leader Colonel Taher was poorly manoeuvred, and thus it failed. Capitalism wanted a brutal revenge but it was not concerned with the subsequent outcome which was that the change could help the Islamists right back to the podium as, by then, Capitalism and Islamism went hand in hand to beat their common foe: Communism. That was best exemplified in Afghanistan where Taliban received indiscriminate US largesse to fight Soviet forces. Ironically, Sheikh Mujib, although knowingly tied with the Communist block, failed to deter the infiltration and the infiltrators due to his misplaced confidence on people's power.

Therefore, whatever one claims about the 7 November, 1975, we can plainly conclude that the state dreamt by the proponents of Bangladesh had been altered by the event of 7 November.

I am sure all these groups or their support bases love Bangladesh now. And after the Soviet demise the global and regional players and power equations have changed dramatically and significantly. But the fact that the days we observe annually: 26 March, 16 December, will exist so long as Bangladesh exists. Therefore, the first group's influence will not erode or be diminished. In this equation, the second group needs to realise and change their propaganda of the 7 November's heroics.

There will be much more critical analyses of the event in the coming years, and those from the insiders with more revealing facts will help us understand many other issues. We are eagerly waiting to see that kind of objective assessment of history.

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Russian pipeline to Germany raises concern in Eastern Europe

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

RUSSIA assumes its new role in world politics through supply of natural gas to energy-deficit states. Recently China and Russia signed a natural gas deal on 13th October for the supply of up to 70 billion cubic metres of gas per year from Siberia.

Russia supplies Europe with 28% per cent of its natural gas. Currently Russian natural gas has to be piped through Eastern Europe to reach Western Europe.

If Russia shuts off gas on countries of Eastern Europe for whatever reasons, the action is felt in the more powerful and wealthier countries to the West where it touches off loud protests to the embarrassment of Russia.

The new proposed gas pipeline, by traveling more than 1200 kilometres or 750 miles along the bed of the Baltic Sea, from Vyborg, Russia to Greifswald, Germany, bypassing former Soviet satellite states, will give Russia a separate supply line to the West.

The pipeline is a joint venture of Gazprom and a trio of German and Dutch companies. Now with the pipeline looking inevitable, France has decided to jump to join the consortium through Gaz de France, otherwise they may have to buy natural gas from a German broker.

The French-German competition for business with Russia on gas seems to illustrate Russia's political pre-eminence in Europe.

The new pipeline planned will not create protests from Western Europe if Russia shuts off gas to Eastern Europe because it will connect Russia directly with Germany and offers clear energy benefits to Western Europe.

Germany's Chancellor Merkel's endorsed the pipeline stating that it would benefit the whole European Union.

Wedge between Western and Eastern Europe:

The proposed line, according to Eastern European states, is driving a political wedge between Western and Eastern European countries and within members of the European Union.

The Eastern European states, which were during the Cold War tied with the Soviet Union, fear that it could lead to Russia's domination of the former Soviet bloc and the proposed pipeline will change the dynamics of Eastern European relations with Russia.

That is not the way Russia views it. Russian gas giant Gazprom takes the view that the \$10.7 billion project of the new pipeline is purely commercial and not strategic.

Poland wants talks with Germany and Russia about Baltic Sea gas pipeline project steered by Russian giant Gazprom. Poland needs to understand why the Russians are holding out for this project under the Baltic, which is three times more expensive than a gas pipeline crossing White Russia and Poland, or Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Matthias Warnig, the Chief of Nord Stream and a former East German, said Eastern Europe's fears were unfounded. Europe needs additional gas to compensate for declining out from the North Sea and Russia is the best option to get it.

It is noted that the European Parliament

and the European Commission approved the pipeline as early as 2000 and both confirmed their commitments in 2006.

Eastern European states are not convinced with such line of arguments. They say that Russia has in the past used "gas diplomacy" with some Eastern European states to demonstrate its power and a research organization affiliated with the Swedish Defence Ministry has identified 55 politically linked disruptions in the energy supply of Eastern Europe since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Last January, Russia shut down a pipeline that crossed Ukraine, ostensibly over a dispute with Ukraine on pricing and tariffs. The ability to shut off one pipeline or the other makes shutoffs to Eastern Europe more likely, said Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US national Security Adviser in the former Carter administration. He called the pipelines a grand Russian initiative to "separate Central Europe from Western Europe insofar as dependence on Russian energy is concerned."

In an open letter to President Obama last spring, 23 former Central European heads of state and intellectuals including a former Czech President Vaclav Havel, and a former Polish President Lech Walsea, pointed out that after the war in Georgia in August 2008, Russia declared a sphere of "privileged interests" that could include their countries.

Eastern European irks Russia: Some analysts, on the other hand, say that some of the Eastern European states seem to anger Russia by bringing the US into Russia's backyard. Some of the states not only wish to join NATO but also to the European Union, even though there are divisions of opinion within the people of the countries.

For example, Georgia and Ukraine have lined up for memberships of NATO and EU. Poland and the Czech Republic readily concluded agreements with the Bush administration for installation of scientifically unproven and costly defence missile shield in their countries and in September President Obama has scrapped the plan to repair relations with Russia.

Summing up: Some analysts believe in the days of free-market capitalism, the considerations of Eastern European take a back seat in the struggle over resources for national interests of Western Europe. Lord Palmerston's dictum that there are no permanent friends or eternal enemies and what are permanent are national interests that need to be vigorously pursued seems to be true.

There should be no illusions about becoming totally free of dependency as gas is a global commodity in a global business environment. Pierre Noel, a professor of Cambridge University and a fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations reported said: "It is an open, competitive, capitalist economy. People build the pipes they want to build."

Eastern Europe should have the courage to realise that Russia is at least as dependent on Europe as vice versa.

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