

Significance of Hasina's PRC visit

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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's official visit to China is scheduled to start from March 17th. During her last term, she had undertaken an official visit to China within two months of taking office which was also her first official overseas visit. Whether this delay reflects any displeasure the Chinese have with Bangladesh can only be a subject of speculation. Nevertheless, under the BNP's last term of office and in the one year and a little more of the AL tenure, the Chinese have not seen much from the Bangladesh side to warm their hearts or to reflect their strategic value to Bangladesh.

The BNP led government's decision to allow Taiwan to open a trade office in Dhaka in 2005 without taking China into confidence caused a deep scar in Bangladesh-China relations. It also offended the Chinese earlier by cancelling the Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP 1) fertilizer project soon after coming to office. The agreement for DAP 1 fertilizer plant was signed with the Chinese and DAP 11 with the Japanese by the AL Government just before its term of office ended in 2002. Although the DAP projects were later activated by the BNP government after both the governments had made their displeasure known in no uncertain terms, to the Chinese it left a question mark about Bangladesh's dependability. This Government's unilateral decision to change the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre that was built with Chinese grant to hold the aborted NAM Summit in Dhaka has also not pleased the Chinese. During the Bangladesh-China Joint Commission held in Beijing in July last year, the Bangladesh delegation placed before the Chinese projects worth US\$ 5.14 billion. The Chinese showed interest in 5 out of 28 projects amounting to US\$ 1 billion. In the Beijing meeting, the Chinese expressed unhappiness over slow project implementation by Bangladesh. The outcome of the Beijing Joint Commission did not leave any doubt that the Chinese are not exactly happy with Bangladesh, an unhappiness that has developed over

some time now.

China is one of those few countries that did not support Bangladesh's war of liberation. In fact, China had then backed Pakistan that was acting as the conduit in the Ping-Pong diplomacy that led to the historical thawing of relations between USA and China. After change of government in Bangladesh in August, 1975, Bangladesh and China established diplomatic relations that was built in the backdrop of cold war politics. By establishing diplomatic relations with China, Bangladesh moved into the USA-China axis and away from the Indo-Soviet axis. China was at that time not the China it is today.

In contemporary international politics, China is close to establishing itself in the position that Soviet Union lost. Between 1975 and the end of Awami League's first term, Bangladesh had extremely friendly relations with China; excellence to which the military rulers, the BNP and the AL contributed equally. One reason among many that influenced China to treat Bangladesh as a special friend was Bangladesh's access to the Bay of Bengal. Another was a feeling in Beijing that Bangladesh, following the change in August, 1975, moved away from India with which China then and still has very deep rooted bilateral problems. They are also vying with each other for regional dominance. Unfortunately just around the period China emerged as the giant in international politics and our friendship with China had withstood the test of time, the BNP for reasons that only they can explain, chose to get on its wrong side.

The AL led government has also not stemmed that tide; not yet at least. In fact, inadvertently or otherwise, this government may have given China more cause for concern. It has not really appreciated the complexity of Indo-China relations. Sino-India relations have not been progressing well; in fact over Arunachal Pradesh, Aksai Chin, and other disputed border areas, relations are tense. Sheikh Hasina's decision to choose China ahead of other countries, including India, to undertake an official visit during her last term in office was appreciated in China.



In that term, Bangladesh-China relations were warm and grew overall. China offered and built the conference centre that Bangladesh needed badly to hold the NAM Summit on grant. Although Bangladesh-India relations also progressed, it was not to the extent to worry China.

Sheikh Hasina's recently concluded state visit to India has seen a paradigm shift in Bangladesh's posture towards India. The 56 paragraph Joint Declaration includes many issues that have brought

to the surface Bangladesh's willingness to help India on issues whose resolution are not developments that China would be too happy to see. Although China have no reason to complain on these issues, it can nevertheless see in the Declaration elements to conclude that in the context of Sino-India relations, China could not count on Bangladesh as it had been accustomed to count in the past. The commitment in the JS to support India unequivocally for a permanent seat in an expanded UN Security Council was the

crucial paragraph that gave Bangladesh's hand away to the Chinese. The Foreign Ministry said that in doing so, the AL led government followed the BNP that had supported Japan for a seat in the expanded UN Security Council during then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Tokyo in 2005 in the Joint Statement issued at that time. The two cases are not similar. Japan contributes US\$ 300 million a year in grants and aids to Bangladesh and the Chinese do not see the Japanese candidature the way they

see the Indian one. Further, in 2005, the issue of an expanded Security Council was a major issue in international politics and Bangladesh was under pressure from Japan for support. An expanded Security Council is not an issue now and Bangladesh was therefore under no pressure to explicitly support India. It should have been well advised to support India without reflecting it so pointedly in the JS. Meanwhile, Myanmar today offers China a better geo-political advantages such as access to the Bay of Bengal that was in the past a major card in Bangladesh's hand to attract China.

The forthcoming visit of the Prime Minister will therefore be one where she would need to show considerable diplomatic skills to re-kindle the warmth on Bangladesh-China relations. She would be visiting China at a time when Bangladesh has not done much to make Beijing await her visit eagerly except perhaps her role in the Copenhagen Climate Summit where she took up China's cause together with those of the USA and China and played a key role in helping adopt US/India/China document as the non-binding Copenhagen Declaration. It is to be seen how much value the Chinese give to that role. According to reliable sources, Bangladesh would seek from China primarily economic support worth US\$ 3 billion and Chinese investment in Bangladesh to offset the trade imbalance between the two countries which is worse than Bangladesh's trade imbalance with India. There is good chance that some of the projects not considered at the Joint Commission meeting could find favour during the visit. It is, however, unlikely that the visit would lead to any significant rise in Chinese investment in Bangladesh. In fact, whether the Prime Minister has a successful visit to China would depend on how much she would be able to convince China that Bangladesh remains as good a friend of China as it had been in the past. That would be a very hard task no doubt.

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Security détente before political détente

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IN spite of media hype and outside pressures, the recent Indo-Pak dialogue has once again been inconclusive. In fact, it ended without even a commitment for a future meeting. Only promises to stay in-touch have been made. The main thrust has been on a blame-game usually prompted by the respective security establishments, amply demonstrating the huge trust deficit. All meetings end only with photo ops and the real issues remain unresolved. During the last decade these two countries came close to sorting out issues like the Siachin Glacier and Sir Creek but the general mistrust did not allow for clinching these.

During last 64 years the two neighbours have been alternating between war and peace. They have already fought three major wars and a fourth limited one on the Line of Control in Ladakh (LoC) could have almost triggered a nuclear Armageddon, if not for American intervention. The main reason for this is the irreconcilable mistrust between these two neighbouring countries from their very creation. One would have thought that like the Europeans, who after two world wars learnt the lessons of conflict, these two states would also learn from their conflicts. Unfortunately, that has not happened and nor does there seem any chance of it in the near future. This is because the already existing mistrust is compounded by external players and stakeholders. These talks facilitated by outsiders have remained more or less cosmetic, just for diplomatic consumption. Such instances of "facilitation" have been made a number of times in the past

but no tangible solutions have emerged. One can judge the sincerity of these outsiders from the fact that they offer "facilitation" and not "mediation". The former does not involve them in the process itself but the later does. Perhaps they feel the Indo-Pak conflict is a strategic asset.

The recent meeting gave a feeling that the countries were being forced into the dialogue process. Of course, it is very well known that the Americans along with their NATO allies are facing the music in Afghanistan and would like to get out of the quagmire at the earliest. This can only happen when they are able to get total cooperation and focused attention of the Pakistani Army and security agencies on the western front. That scenario requires peace on the eastern front which can come only by reducing especially in Kashmir. In addition, they too do not want to lose their strategic assets if things do not work out with India. The same is the case with the Indian side. It does not want to give Pakistan strategic depth and is trying to achieve that by keeping Afghanistan in their economic fold. Thus the tussle goes on.

How to end the mistrust? The real trust or mistrust builders on the two sides are the security bosses. Everything is subservient to what is perceived as "national security" by each side. The final say in everything is with the security establishments. On the Pakistani side nothing can move unless Army and ISI give the green signal. Similarly, on the Indian side the security establishment has an edge over the politicians. The most sensible thing for moving ahead on the peace process would be to first arrange a dialogue between the two security establishments.

There should be a free and fair interaction with no-holds barred between the heads of the Army and security agencies of two countries. If they are able to freely understand and sort out the strategic apprehensions of two sides, politicians will have very little work to do to move ahead. To be successful in building mutual trust, the two sides will also have to forego the intervention of external players or stakeholders. They have to work out a solution on their own without external prompting.

In the real sense, it is the Kashmiris who have become hostages to the Indo-Pak mistrust. Their taking sides with one or the other will only increase the mistrust. The Kashmiris have to be absolutely neutral and project their case strongly, but not violently, to both the sides for their ultimate emancipation. Instead of waiting for western players to bail them out, they have to create their constituency within civil society on both sides. There are indications that the Kashmiris are succeeding in this. This is evident from the fact that even a person like Chandan Mitra is prepared to offer virtual independence to Kashmiris. There is only one solution to the problems of the sub-continent, including the festering sore of Kashmir, and that is the building of mutual trust - between the two countries and between Kashmiris of all regions. To achieve this, the next round of talks should be between General Kayani and General Kapoor and the respective intelligence heads of the two countries. If we are able to arrange that, the dialogue will move ahead and peace will prevail. Till such a thing happens, we will continue to remain hostage to the mistrust.

IPCS, New Delhi

US, Pakistan air forces conduct air refuelling information exchange

PILOTS and aircrews from the US and Pakistan air forces participated in a joint aerial refuelling information exchange as part of an ongoing effort to enhance cooperation and

develop the air refuelling capabilities of both nations in early March at Pakistan air force base Chaklala.

Pilots and aircrews from the 22nd Expeditionary Air Refuelling Squadron

arrived at PAFB Chaklala March 3 to conduct the information exchange with their Pakistan air force hosts.

Upon arrival, the Airmen invited PAF pilots and aircrews aboard their KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft to familiarize them with Air Force air refuelling equipment and procedures.

US Navy Vice Admiral Michael LeFever, the senior US Defence Representative to Pakistan, hosted Pakistan Air Commodore Tahir Ranjha, the PAF air transportation director and Air Commodore Khalil Ahmed, the PAF Chaklala commander, aboard the KC-135 aircraft.

"Events like these promote understanding and enhance our military-to-military relationships while also boosting capability and expertise," Admiral LeFever said. "In addition, with the planned arrival of more F-16s to Pakistan later this year, developing PAF air refuelling expertise is critical to increasing their airborne endurance and enhancing their ability to counter the violent extremist threat in their country."

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THAILAND'S POLITICAL WOES No end in sight

A skilful user of social media, Thaksin said on Twitter that his wealth was not the fruit of corruption, but of "hard work, brains and sweat". He faces two years in jail on corruption charges if he returns to Thailand.

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THAILAND'S government is prepared to confront mass protests as the Supreme Court on 26th found fugitive ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra guilty of abusing his authority to benefit his family telecom company Shin Corp and seized a \$1.5 billion chunk of his fortune.

In a judgment expected to influence Thai politics for years to come, the highest Court said the former leader had hidden his assets and abused his power to benefit his companies and had, there-

from Thaksin's red-shirt wearing grassroots supporters, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva ordered tens of thousands of troops to keep the peace across Thailand.

The depth of dissatisfaction can be judged when a businessman in a red-shirt, Sit Kitanon said: "We will not do anything today. Today is not our day. But our day will come. If the court destroys Thaksin, the court is destroying democracy. I am not here for Thaksin, but I care about justice."

As spoof rumours were denied, 6000 soldiers were on duty spread out in

political machine, the Puea Thai Party.

The UDD said it did not want to be held responsible for any violence after the ruling and was calling on a million supporters from around Thailand to descend on Bangkok on March 12.

The Red Shirts' movement was now an "organic" force spread across the country with strong grass-roots rural support that went beyond even the popularity of Thaksin.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the director of the Institute for Security and International Studies at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, reportedly said the Red shirts would stage large demonstrations, even if the initial reaction to the verdict was relatively muted. He said: "This is a long drawn-out process. Today was a big step but it is not the final step. The Red Shirts will protest. We have to look at the example of last April. They have had some coalition problems but they have a lot of foot soldiers espe-



fore, damaged the public interest.

The Court ruled on whether Thaksin's \$2.4 billion in assets were during the 2006 military coup were corruptly gained by the tycoon.

The Court said that Thaksin a hero to the country's rural poor now living in Dubai had concealed ownerships of telecom shares, in the dispute over whether he had become "unusually rich" during his tenure.

The nine judges agreed unanimously that the ousted prime minister and his ex-wife Pojaman Pombeyra held more than a billion Shin Corp shares during Thaksin's period in office. This contradicted the Thaksin couple's claims that they had sold the shares in the then-family owned company to their children and Mrs Thaksin's brother. However, the Court questioned the substance of the prosecution's case saying it was unclear. Fearing an angry reaction and riot

Bangkok.

The government, which depends on the fragile support of the military for its future, said it wanted at all costs to avoid a repetition of the street fighting between Red Shirts and security forces last April.

The capital was on high alert with schools, offices and some businesses around the Supreme Court and across the city closed ahead of the verdict.

A skilful user of social media, Thaksin said on Twitter that his wealth was not the fruit of corruption, but of "hard work, brains and sweat". He faces two years in jail on corruption charges if he returns to Thailand.

Backers of the Red Shirts, known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) were urged by their own leadership to keep official "judgment day" demonstrations to a minimum along with the vehicle of Thaksin's

cially outside Bangkok."

Atiya Achakulwisut, editorial pages editor at the Bangkok Post, said that for many people, the issue has gone beyond Thaksin and his wealth. "It is now about how the national wealth has been unevenly distributed, how power has been used unjustly and how a system of privileges has been established and allowed to go on... the fight will continue long into the future, long after the last word on the verdict is read."

Some analysts say that the ruling class has pitted the poor against the ruling class. The paradox of Thaksin's political movement has inspired large swaths of poor and disaffected voters. It seems that Thailand's acrimonious divide will not be resolved easily or perhaps even peacefully because compromise between the two sides seems to be difficult.

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