

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Lessons from Dhaka summit

It's the process that comes under question

THE long-term and short-term fallout from the less than expected success of the Hasina-Manmohan summit will take some time to be gauged. But there is no hiding from the fact that failure to agree on the most important item of the agenda has dealt a severe blow to the prospect of growth of our bilateral relations.

While we will continue to investigate as to why the summit failed, we would like to comment on the obvious flaws in preparations on the Bangladesh side.

We have to point out that our process of preparation depended far too much on a few individuals keeping out the whole machinery of the government that could have been put to use for this vital summit. Most of the time, ministries like water resources, commerce and trade, land, finance, etc. were kept out. The draft treaties were never placed before the cabinet either, at the draft stage, and more importantly, before finalisation.

The parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs was totally kept in the dark about the whole process.

We strongly believe that it was not the proper way of preparing for this all-important bilateral summit. No attempt was made to take the public into confidence at any stage of the preparation process, knowing full well that a strong public support would be essential for any deal with India to be durable. As for media briefing, the less said the better. Except for some last-minute discussion, media was ever given any information so that the public could be kept apprised of the evolving development.

The lessons we draw from the visit is that unless the process is transparent and inclusive, the outcome can only be a greater embarrassment for the government than it otherwise would have been and the outcome truncated and disappointing as it has been.

Visit by neighbouring Indian CMs

We need to strengthen our relations with them

A special feature of the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's just-concluded visit to Bangladesh was the presence of chief ministers from four northeastern states of India in Dhaka. It is for the first time that such a good number of influential Indian politicians at the state level travelled to Bangladesh. Indeed, as far as we can recall, visits by politicians from India's north-east have been conspicuous by their non-happening. That only doubles our appreciation of the goodwill gesture the four chief ministers made to us.

It is rather curious that in all the dealings that we in Bangladesh have had with India we have somehow bypassed, if not exactly ignored, those Indian states, save for Paschimbanga, that are geographically so close to us as neighbours. Indeed, our focus over the years has consistently been on the ties which have bound Bangladesh and Paschimbanga in terms of culture and political history. Of course there have been the very proper reasons for such a condition, but now comes the time when Bangladesh's government and people need to expand their priorities, this time to developing and fostering closer links with north-eastern India. Needless to say, the potential economic benefits accruing for northeast India and for Bangladesh from such contacts can hardly be denied.

The visit by the chief ministers should be an opportunity for their states and for Bangladesh to facilitate people-to-people links in terms of cultural and economic exchange. Leading figures in the literary and artistic fields can play a definitive role in enhancing such cooperation. There are also security issues common to them as part of India and to Bangladesh. Measures to deal with such issues can be better handled through closer ties. The chief ministers' presence in Dhaka should, properly speaking, have acted as a spur to us in our understanding of India's north-east and the other way round. We hope the chief ministers have gone back home with happy memories of

Bigness doesn't necessarily accord greatness



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

I had said in a recent article on the eve of the Indian PM's trip that the visit was eagerly awaited in Bangladesh... by the optimists for what it might achieve and by the pessimists for what it fails to deliver for Bangladesh. No doubt the pessimists are having the last laugh with a big "did-we-not-tell-you-so" grin from ear to ear.

There was a great deal of anticipation about the visit and if it was taken to a level of hype by the media in Bangladesh it was because of what we had expected from it. And there was a concurrence of view on both sides of the border that the ball was in India's court to move the bilateral relationship to a higher notch. Sadly, that didn't come to pass.

Even the inveterate optimist in Bangladesh would not hesitate to say that the visit has failed to deliver, if not a total failure, and much as Sheikh Hasina's advisors may go to any length to couch their disappointment in diplomatic jargons, the letdown, for them, will not be easy to hide. And to put a brave face and come out with garbled explanations only adds to our utter sense of frustration.

India's failure to deliver on its commitment only reinforces the perception in the minds of many in Bangladesh about its attitude of taking its smaller neighbours for granted and more damagingly, that India cannot be trusted to deliver on its

commitment. It has not only given an opportunity to its critics in Bangladesh, the outcome of the trip may have also added to their ranks.

Are we to believe that our bilateral relations have been held hostage to the purely Indian center-state politics and that the Teesta water has been used to cook the political pie for the chief minister of Paschim Banga (PB). It beggars belief that Delhi did not keep her posted on the developments regarding Teesta; it is our understanding that the PM's advisors had met her on more than one occasion to brief her on the issue. We wonder whether Mamata Banerjee is the only factor or are there other equities that we neither know of as yet nor have bothered to explore.

One wonders whether Ms. Banerjee is aware of the potential consequences of her position; that it could well have scuttled the visit, and might yet have a negative bearing on the nature of the future relationship between PB and Bangladesh.

No wonder that the transit sank in the Teesta waters. There could have been no other position for the government of Bangladesh to take on

this particular issue. However, it is our hope that it is not permanent and that the matter would be retrieved and resolved to our mutual advantage.

While legal tangles regarding handing over of Teen Bigha had been a very handy and convenient tool for India to defer action on it as well as to placate those opposed to the idea, it seems that we are in for a period of uncertainty with the Teesta, and Mamata may well be a good excuse for deferring action on sharing of Teesta waters.

The visit stumbled from the very beginning. First Ms. Banerjee sprung a surprise followed by the official announcement in New Delhi that the Teesta deal was a non-starter. And regrettably, our diplomats had no wind of the things to come.

Of the three Ts that Bangladesh was interested in, Teesta issue was perhaps the most important alongside Trade and Transit. What has Bangladesh got from the visit? That is only but natural for any Bangladeshi to ask. This visit had the potential to open a new vista of relationship, given

the foundation that the leap of faith that Sheikh Hasina ventured in January 2010 helped lay.

Basically, the protocol on land issue is in effect putting the provisions of the 1974 Mujib-Indira Agreement into operation. If these can be called developments, something that should have happened long ago, so be it. Perhaps we should also feel grateful that we have been assured of 24 hour use of the Teen Bigha, at last!

Sheikh Hasina and her government and indeed the people of Bangladesh have every right and every reason to feel disappointed. The newspaper headlines in Bangladesh say all about the feelings here. We were led up the garden path only to be discarded. And that too when Bangladesh had gone more than the proverbial extra mile to address the immediate concerns of India since the signing of the January 2010 MOU between the two countries, a fact that the Indian PM has himself acknowledged. Those who talk about rising above narrow national interest for better bilateral and regional cooperation need only to look at the short shrift given by Mamata to Bangladesh.

There is a thin line between being a big country and being a great one. And that line is often inflated into a chasm by the petty minded and the upholders of so-called enlightened self interest. India missed a chance of achieving greatness.

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Slipping on the slippery slopes of the Teesta

NASIM FIRDAUS

DR. Manmohan Singh is an astute politician, or so we knew him to be. His visit to Bangladesh as the Indian prime minister was thus to be a lightning event under which India-Bangladesh relations was to glow. Alas, there are no lights glowing anywhere. The much touted visit of the Indian prime minister has in fact turned relations between the two neighbours a step back into darkness.

This visit was expected to be historic, with hopes that the countries would finally be able to fast-forward to the twenty-first century rather than remain stuck in the same place for decades. Times have changed and expectations amongst the citizenry in both countries were of having a meaningful exchange of give and take in an atmosphere of amity and goodwill. There was no dearth of either friendship or goodwill on the part of Bangladesh. But India failed the test of the century.

India and Bangladesh relations has been pretty much in cold storage over decades as Indian politicians have found ample reason on some pretext or the other to delay implementation of promises made and agreements signed during the heydays of friendship between the two countries. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January began the process of thawing of that ice cube.

Dr. Singh's challenge was to bring the treasure out by letting the water flow without slipping on it. Unfortunately, he spilled so much water that our relations seem to have slipped on it and fell on its head with a thump. No doubt it will take some time to heal. The government and the

people of Bangladesh are disappointed. The opposition has no reason to rejoice either.

The Teesta and Feni rivers are just two amongst the scores of rivers flowing between the two countries where water sharing has to be negotiated. Water is a basic right and under international law upper riparian countries have to give lower riparian countries their share of the flow. How much to give and when to give that water is a matter of negotiations. The shuttle diplomacy that took place between the two countries following Sheikh Hasina's visit to India and preceding Dr. Manmohan Singh's

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visit to Bangladesh was all about negotiations. The result was a hyped expectation of a historic agreement on water sharing. Other issues would be resolved parallel to the water negotiations -- that was the hope.

In hindsight, there is always a clearer vision. In the face of India's internal dispute over the sharing of Teesta and Feni river waters and signing of the treaty the polite thing would have been to postpone the visit. After all, it would not be the first time in the history of diplomacy that state visits had been called off or postponed for any number of reasons. The then prime minister of India did not have

any qualms about cancelling his trip to Dhaka on the eve of the Seventh Saarc Summit disregarding the fallout for the six other heads of state and government, some of whom were already in town. At the time Dhaka had to cancel all arrangements -- a massive undertaking -- and reschedule.

Setting new dates would have allowed the Chief Minister of Paschimbongo Momota Banerjee to get over with the remaining elections in her state and then finalise a deal according to the needs of the time. As reports would have it she was consulted many times as the negotiations

progressed. Yet, she felt it necessary to scuttle the deal for her own considerations at the very last minute. Those considerations should have been taken into account by both the central government of India and the government of Bangladesh. After all it is all about diplomacy.

While we cannot negotiate deals with individual states in India we can surely read between the lines and feel the pulse of different stakeholders. India does well by deferring to its political system when it suits its purpose. We have never done so in the history of Bangladesh. No government in this country has followed the

Constitution and placed any agreement signed with a foreign country or entity to the parliament for discussion. It has always wanted to claim total credit for its achievement, if signing agreements can be seen as achievements. Achievement is in the implementation of the deal signed. India has faltered many times in this where Bangladesh was concerned, as it fell back on the question of ratification of agreements.

Alas, we have not developed the diplomatic finesse to be able to decipher fallouts from significant failures in conducting relations with the international community, particularly with India. Thus, we could not fathom the fallout that the much-touted water sharing agreement's non-agreement would cause.

Bangladesh had nearly twenty four hours notice on this issue. Indian politicians, other than the prime minister, and the Indian media had given us ample warning and time to reconsider the timing of the visit that was to take place without a concrete commitment. Diplomats should have scurried to find out the truth and seek clarifications from the prime minister's office in India instead of hedging questions from the media.

India's failure to take full advantage of this visit did not belittle Bangladesh or its people. Once again, unfortunately, Bangladesh and its people have come to realise that no matter how vast India is in size and shape or how large its economy, its heart is still not big enough towards its smaller neighbours. Magnanimity and grace are words that are not to be found in the Indian political dictionary.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 8

1380 Battle of Kulikovo Russian forces defeat a mixed army of Tatars and Mongols, stopping their advance.

1449 Battle of Tumu Fortress Mongolians capture the Chinese emperor.

1565 The Knights of Malta lift the Turkish siege of Malta that began on May 18.

1926 Germany is admitted to the League of Nations.

1941 World War II: Siege of Leningrad begins.

1954 The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is established.