

# Bangladesh and India's Northeast: A security perspective

ASHISH BANIK

THE importance of geo-strategic and geo-economic considerations between northeastern states of India and Bangladesh has played a significant role in determining the relationship between the two countries. Bangladesh shares 1879 km border with the Northeastern States (NES) of India- Tripura 856 km; Meghalaya 443 km, Mizoram 318 km, and Assam 262 km. Internal developments and upsurges on either side of the border have a tendency to spill over into Bangladesh and India, especially in the bordering states of West Bengal and NES. This geographical location and proximity not only open up opportunities for mutual development, it also creates many stumbling blocks in the bilateral relationship. The porous nature of the border between Bangladesh and NES of India has proved to be conducive for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal trade, and migration, which negatively impact on bilateral relations. These security concerns have prevented bilateral relations from realizing their full potentials.

Terrorism is one of the pressing issues affecting the relationship between Bangladesh and India, given the long drawn insurgency movements in various states in the Northeastern parts of India. Indian concern, about using Bangladesh territory as a base by the insurgent groups of north east, was largely mitigated by the stern actions taken by present government in Bangladesh. These commendable actions against the terrorists, taken by Bangladesh, have contributed to opening up a new era of cooperation between the two countries. But the Indian side is yet to take any effective measures to reciprocate these commendable initiatives taken by Bangladesh on countering terrorism. It was reported that Bangladesh stressed on the issue of handing over the notorious criminals now hiding in India and sent India specific information of around 50 criminals and their hideouts there.

The spread of small arms and drugs has become a major problem particularly in the border regions of Bangladesh. A recent study on "Community Security in North Bengal: A Youth Perception Survey" conducted by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) in association with Saferworld, UK, found that small arms and drugs, particularly phensydyl were available in the



North Bengal districts, which has a direct effect on the country's social, economic and political problems. It was also found that transnational criminal groups, in connection with local criminals, were engaged in smuggling arms and drugs in Bangladesh. Media reports revealed in Bangladesh that the present government has already strengthened oversight mechanisms in border areas to arrest any kinds of smuggling of illegal consignments for the insurgents operated in the north eastern states of India.

At a two-day talks held in Dhaka in March 2011, between drug control nodal agencies of Bangladesh and India at the Director General level, sources close to the meeting revealed that the Bangladesh side handed over to the Indian team a list of 51 factories operating inside their country including some close to the border of northeastern states of India which produced phensydyl only targeting Bangladesh as its market. The phensydyl produced in those factories, set up by the Indian businessmen, are being smuggled into Bangladesh by organized cross border syndicates.

Killing of Bangladeshi citizens by the Border Security Force (BSF) of India in the border zones is another issue of tension in the relationship between Bangladesh and India. Between January 1, 2000 and March 31, 2011 BSF

killed 907 unarmed Bangladeshis, said Odhikar, a human rights body in Bangladesh. Though Indian authorities have already undertaken substantive steps to put pressure on BSF; which reduced death toll down to Zero in March 2011, killing of Bangladeshi nationals has not yet been stopped. Odhikar recently claimed that BSF had killed 21 Bangladeshi citizens, injured 51 and kidnapped 12 others during the January-September period of this year.

The barbed wire fencing, constructed by India on Indo-Bangladesh border, is considered by many security experts in Bangladesh as an unfriendly act which might become a psychological barrier in the way of promoting mutual trust and confidence between the two countries. The rational of Indian authorities for constructing this fence is for control of illegal migration, movement of terrorists and arresting smuggling in the northeastern part of India. It is also being noted that India's concern of illegal migration into the northeastern states of India is blatantly denied by Bangladesh.

Given the present state of harmonious relationship, it is now high time to address each other's core demands with a pragmatic approach and prudent vision and take actions to find out viable solutions of long standing unresolved issues in order to make this relationship irreversible. Therefore, the divergent views of India and Bangladesh to understand security issues need to be synchronized for the mutual benefit.

Both the countries have their own look east policy, but the success of their policies is strongly dependent on solid bilateral relations based on multifaceted economic and political cooperation. Only active engagement and connectivity of the two countries would help in transforming relations from the present state of mutual suspicious to one of mutual benefit and mutual trust. Bangladesh and India, therefore, should consider the issues from a pragmatic view to reach consensus on contentious bilateral issues as well as to further strengthen this relationship to a new horizon of development. A long standing durable relationship between the two countries is necessary to promote connectivity between Bangladesh and Northeastern states of India.

The writer is a Research Officer, BEI.

## The India-Bangladesh border: A new beginning

PUSHPITA DAS

The year 2011 marks a new beginning for India and Bangladesh, which signed a series of agreements to manage their common border. The March 2011 Agreement on the non-use of lethal weapons by the Border Security Force (BSF), the Coordinated Border Management Plan signed in July 2011, and the Protocol to the Agreement concerning the Demarcation of Land Boundary signed in September 2011 are some such accords that are expected to transform the India-Bangladesh border from a border management nightmare to a zone of peace and prosperity.

One of the most important initiatives undertaken as part of this framework was the setting up of bilateral institutional interactions to address and resolve various challenges along the borders. These interactions take place at the national, regional and local levels between ministers/officials of the concerned ministries as well as between officers of the border guarding forces at regular intervals. As far as the India-Bangladesh border is concerned, these interactions have been quite effective not only in sensitizing each country about the other's perceived threats and challenges but also in providing a platform to discuss various measures for improving management practices.

One recurrent issue had been the BSF personnel's firing upon, and the resultant deaths of, Bangladeshi citizens transgressing the border. While the Bangladeshi side used to argue that BSF personnel were killing innocent people, the BSF would assert that its personnel were firing at smugglers and hostile illegal migrants. After much discussion and deliberation, a common ground was found in the form of the



BSF agreeing to use non-lethal weapons to warn potential illegal migrants or smugglers twice before resorting to the use of firearms. To be at first implemented on an experimental basis, an agreement to this effect was signed between the border guarding forces of India and Bangladesh in March 2011.

Another significant outcome of the cooperative framework was the signing of the Coordinated Border Management Plan on July 30, 2011. The aim of this plan is to "enhance quality of border management as well as ensure cross-border security" by addressing challenges to the peace and sanctity of the border posed by human and drug trafficking, gun running and cross border crimes. Under the Plan, India and Bangladesh have agreed to conduct joint coordinated patrols in areas susceptible to trafficking and other crimes based on shared intelligence inputs.

Rampant smuggling along the border is yet another border management challenge which both countries are seeking to curb by agreeing to reopen border haats (marketplaces). Before 1972, border haats used to help people residing on either side of the border to trade their surplus produce in return for essential items. But these haats were shut down during Bangladesh's war of liberation, which not only led to economic hardship for the people but also fuelled widespread smuggling across the border. Realising the need for border haats, India and Bangladesh decided to re-open two such haats as part of a pilot project. The first of these opened at Kalaichar-Baliamari (West Garo Hills-Kurigram) on July 23, 2011. It will be held once a week every Wednesday from 10 am to 4 pm. It is expected that trade in this haat alone will total US\$ 20 million a year. A second border haat will be opened at Ballat-Lauwagar. If the project proves successful, more such haats will be opened.

The most significant of the challenges, namely, the border dispute comprising 6.1 km of an undemarcated stretch, enclaves and adverse possessions, has also been resolved through consultations. India and Bangladesh had established two Joint Boundary Working Groups I & II in 2001 in order to discuss the issue of undemarcated areas and enclaves and adverse possessions, respectively. These Groups met four times over ten years and came up with a mechanism to resolve the dispute, culminating in the Protocol to the Agreement concerning the Demarcation of Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh on September 6, 2011.

The new initiatives taken by India and Bangladesh have ushered a new beginning in the bilateral relationship as well as in the management of their common border. Yet, these are only baby steps and a lot still needs to be done. The success of the initiatives and projects undertaken so far will depend entirely on the manner in which they are implemented on the ground because it is here that the real test of any project or plan lies. For instance, the initiative to use only non-lethal weapons will reduce killings but only if it is implemented strictly and at the same time the BSF personnel are trained to judge an adverse move and react professionally. Similarly, the border haat project must be implemented properly and their numbers and scope widened so that corruption in issuing licenses to traders could be minimized and as large a number of people as possible benefit from these haats.

The writer is an Associate Fellow, IDSA. By arrangement: Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA).

# Indo - Afghan strategic partnership: Background factors

ABU SYED MUHAMMAD BELAL

IN the international system no change is possible without its agents. Matsya Nyaya or law of fishes is the defining feature of this system which means in this anarchic world 'big fishes eat up the small fishes'. It is in the power game of big and powerful states; small states seek alliance with other states to survive. Likewise, the war-torn Afghanistan is not exception in that case. It now becomes the epicenter of global powers conflict. As the United States and China located at the core of the game, India and Pakistan are playing the semi-peripheral role making Afghanistan a chessboard in the periphery. It is much like the 'great game' the geopolitical struggle fought between the British and the Russian.

Historically, Pakistan's geographic constraints, conventional and nuclear vis-a-vis India and most importantly its historic obsession to offset the latter's pre-dominance in the region determines the patterns of its involvement in Afghanistan.

Strategically, Pakistan imagined Afghanistan as the strategic depth to secure its land in its war against India and to launch a counter-offensive. Tactically, it means setting up 'client regimes' in Kabul to stabilize Pakistan's western frontiers, inhabited by Pashtuns and Balochis who have a hidden agenda of independent states of their own and, supporting Islamist militias among the Pashtun to neutralize the seeds of nationalism within its borders. On the other hand, Afghanistan is a land-locked country and shares a border with Pakistan. It needs access to Arabian Sea through Pakistan. This dependence works as the moderating factor in Afghan policy with its eastern neighbor.

In recent years, a sentiment within the Afghan population in general and those who are in the government has grown that, Pakistan is scapegoating its neighbor for its own interests. It is playing a double game of fighting against terrorists and sheltering the Islamist militias to ensure its presence inside Afghanistan. After the Laden's incidence the United States and Afghan government have been suspicious of Islamabad's intentions from its involvement in the war against Taliban. The United States, after having released that sitting with Taliban is the best way to get rid of the problem in Afghanistan, invested a lot in bringing Taliban to the negotiation table. Former president Burhanuddin Rabbani was appointed as peace envoy to Taliban for backdoor negotiation. But, on 20th September, 2011, he was killed in a suicide bombing. Both the Afghan government and the US finger-pointed to ISI for plotting the killing of the peace envoy. The relations between these three countries worsened when

Pakistan furiously reacted to this accusation.

The relevance of strategic partnership deal with India comes from the idea that the Afghan government should diminish the dependence on Pakistan, and make a balance in its relations with neighbors. From the US perspective, without peace between the India and Pakistan, peace in Afghanistan is not possible. USA thinks that, the legitimate presence of India in Kabul will be disempowering Pakistan in dealing with its neighbor. A disempowered and back-footed Pakistan would find negotiation with India best way to continue its presence in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai, while in India, condemned Pakistan for using terror as an instrument of policy against his people. It is the same allegation India has been making in recent years against Pakistan. Both leaders in a friendly atmosphere in Delhi on 4th October signed a wide-ranging strategic partnership agreement. It includes agreement to expand trade relations, affirmation of Kabul's

Chinese economic and political rise across the world in general and in Asia in particular. The United States opted for an 'offshore balancing strategy' vis-a-vis China in South Asia. It underlies the idea that, as the United States is geographically distant from China; it has the option of staying out of South Asian security rivalries and encouraging Beijing's neighbor to assume the risks and cost of stopping China from attaining regional hegemony. Therefore it wants India to play a larger role in Afghanistan by building a security cooperation following the withdrawal of US forces in 2014. A dominant India will check rise of China as well as stop the Pakistani disguised game of rendering permanent wounds for USA in Afghanistan. China already has put its foothold in Afghanistan. Very recently, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC), the largest state-owned Chinese company, has got the rights to explore and develop oil fields in Afghanistan's Amu Darya basin. Writing in Foreign

Policy, Alexander Benard and Eli Sugarman informed that Amu Darya contains five known fields with 80 million barrels of crude oil, which amounts to 11,000 barrels per day for 20 years. Analysts say that, Pakistan wants China to enter Afghanistan. It would prevent India's hegemony in the region giving Pakistan more leverage in Kabul. A dominant China would limit the control of United States over Pakistan. The entire world has seen a power play by China a flurry of diplomatic activity immediately after United States threatened Pakistan of strong punishment. China's Public Security Minister Meng Jianzhu went in Islamabad and reaffirmed China's continuing support for Pakistan in its fight against militancy and the promotion of regional peace and stability. It was a clear message from Pakistan to USA that, it would no longer rely on USA for its security. China let the USA and India know that, China is beside Pakistan in the event of Indo-US strategic partnership.

Whatever the nature of support for Pakistan from China, it is a big question how longer China would back up a country which uses terror as its foreign policy tools. China's goal is to enhance its economic development. It would not tolerate Pakistan's policy of assisting Islamist militias in Afghanistan that could affect Chinese investment there. It is a great irony that, it focused on terrorism and undermined people centered approach to its neighbor. Today Pakistan understands that, the game it played in Afghanistan was a zero sum and it would be more isolated in the years to come.

The writer is a Research Analyst, BIPSS.



support for India's permanent seat in the UN Security Council and most significantly, agreement from India to assist in training, equipping and building capacity of Afghan National Security Forces. The two countries are looking for institutionalizing the relationship so that India can help in the areas of education, development, cultural communication which India says 'civilisation ties with Afghanistan'.

From the perspective of power politics, though tensions are trilateral, the US-China and Sino-Indian factors are playing in the background. The United States needs to check the rise of China as a solely dominant regional power in this region. China's rise affects US because of what international relations scholars say "power transition". The ascending powers have always challenged the position of dominant power in the international system. The stunning growth of Chinese economy and its growing military muscle prompt the declining US to anticipate that, a powerful India is required to contain rapidly growing

WWW.MILITARYPHOTOS.COM

GLOBALSECURITY.ORG