

Recalibrating Bangladesh-Myanmar relation

BRIG GEN MD ABDUL HAKIM AZIZ psc

THE relation between Bangladesh and Myanmar officially began on January 13, 1972, the date on which Myanmar recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign state. However, the relation between these two close neighbours has never been smooth and has undergone frequent ups and downs over the last 40 years on a few issues. Both countries have not been able to build a pragmatic relationship with each other despite having a lot of potentials. Myanmar being closed to the outside world for more than 50 years shows few distinct patterns of behaviour in developing effective bilateral relations with Bangladesh. These are: Myanmar capitalised Bangladesh's geographical vulnerability, being remained under the umbrella of China was reluctant to count her small neighbour, being always stubborn in their attitude and behavior to solve the disputes and more inclined towards India and China. As such Bangladesh was discouraged and lost interest to charter a course to bring Myanmar into a negotiation table for developing meaningful relation with her. On the contrary, India and China have taken the full advantage of Myanmar's isolation and developed a deep relationship with her.

The issues that dominated their relations are the influx of Rohingya refugees, demarcation of land and maritime boundary, illegal drug trafficking and alleged cross border movement of insurgents. The relation deteriorated severely in 1991 when Myanmar armed forces launched a surprised attack and ransacked the then Bangladesh Rifle's border outpost at Rejupara in Cox's Bazar district. Myanmar forces killed three members of Bangladesh Rifles and looted their arms and ammunition. However, a major regional conflict was averted because of exercising restraints by Bangladesh.

Before the border incident, Bangladesh had been burdened with the Rohingya refugee problems since 1978. Over 200,000 Rohingyas were forced to cross the border and came to Bangladesh, following Operation 'Nagamin' ('Dragon King') launched by the Myanmar army.

During 1991-92, the second wave of over 250,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh to escape persecution. Bangladesh with the help of the international community tried to resolve that issue through diplomatic channel but due to Myanmar's stubborn attitude the refugee

problem could not be fully resolved.

The demarcation of maritime boundary was another issue that created a conflict of interest between these two states. The second round of tension erupted when Myanmar hired South Korea's Daewoo International Corporation to carry out the exploration in the Bay of Bengal, 90 KM South West of Bangladesh in November 2008.

Diplomatic initiative to solve the problem ended without any result. Being upset with the attitude of Myanmar, Bangladesh submitted the case to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in 2009. After a series of hearing in September 2011 the court planned to convey a ruling in March 2012.

In this backdrop, our prime minister has visited Myanmar in an effort to build a relationship that will be beneficial for the people of both the countries. She has visited Myanmar immediately after the visit of US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and at a moment when there are talks within the international community about Myanmar looking for a change. The changes were evident when the former General Thein Sein, after coming to power in March this year, halted the Chinese-funded \$ 3.6 billion Myitsone dam project in the state of Kachin respecting the demand of the people of that region. Myanmar government has released more than 6,000 political prisoners and enacted laws allowing for protests and rallies; indicating commitment for democratic reforms.

During the visit, the prime minister of Bangladesh raised the issue of Myanmar refugees living in Nayapara and Kutupalong camp and the huge number of undocumented Myanmar nationals living in Bangladesh and stated that early resolution of these issues will help



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strengthen the bilateral relations to a great extent. The president of Myanmar expressed his desire to cooperate with Bangladesh in resolving the issue.

The prime minister expressed Bangladesh's willingness to import energy from Myanmar and requested the president to import readymade garments, pharmaceutical products, knitwears, jute and jute goods, ceramics etc. from Bangladesh at competitive price and mentioned that Bangladesh was keen to organize a "Single Country Trade Fair" in Yangon early next year.

The two heads of governments stressed upon the establishment of direct banking arrangement under ACU (Asian Clearing Union) so that LCs can be opened directly between the two countries. They wished to launch direct air flight between Dhaka/Chittagong and Yangon and non-conventional vessels between the designated commercial routes of the two countries. The two leaders also emphasised on the increase of border trade.

Finally, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed the following Agreement/Memorandum of Understanding:

a. Agreement on the establishment of a Joint Commission for bilateral cooperation between the government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

b. Memorandum of Understanding on establishment of Joint Business Council (JBC) between the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI).

A foundation for a potential beginning has been laid by both the leaders; it is the bureaucracy to do its job to take the relationship to a new height.

Let me point out a misperception that is prevailing among some of the Myanmar nationals about Bangladesh. Many in Myanmar are misinformed and have a feeling that nothing can be gained from Bangladesh, which is evident to a comment posted by Maug Kyaw Nu, a former political prisoner. He wrote, "There are refugees along the Burma's bordering countries like Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. These Refugees are neglected there. Every neighbour is engaged to hunt or loot Burma's natural resources and wealth. They do not hesitate to hug the military generals for their benefit, which is a big shame for our neighbour leaders. Now the Bangladesh prime minister lands in Naypyitaw to hug Thien Sein to gain some resources and economic benefits. Instead of solving the refugees' long lasting problem, she is very busy to gain more wealth from Burma."

Whereas Bangladesh prime minister has indeed raised the Rohingya refugee issue and there are reports that in 2010-11 Bangladesh's exports to Myanmar stood at \$9.65 million and imports from Myanmar at \$175.7 million.

The people of Myanmar must be informed that they have the potential to win more from Bangladesh as we have a big market and an increasing middle-class society. Moreover, Bangladesh planned deep-sea port at Sonadia will be a regional hub and will be of tremendous importance to Myanmar and other Asian nations. Myanmar having natural resources like abundance of farm lands, woods, gas and hydro power has the potential to be a candid economic friend. A newly elected Chairman of Asean should be well aware that the solution to Rohingya refugee problem will give an additional mileage to enhance its human rights image to international community, which the General Thein Sein government is urgently seeking. It is a matter to be seen how Bangladesh bureaucracy and diplomats capitalise such urgent needs of Myanmar.

Both Bangladesh and Myanmar should emphasise not only on connectivity through land, sea and air but should also increase people to people contact through various cultural exchanges, sports, educations, trade fairs, and other mutually beneficial activities. Therefore, both countries should recalibrate their relation for the common good of the people of this region.

The writer is a retired Brigadier General.

Indo-Gulf cooperation: An option or a must?

MONA EL HAMDANI

IT is a fact: India's booming economy and population will result in a substantial increase in its needs in terms of energy resources and global partners. Many countries around the globe are recognising India's rising power and are working to strengthen their economic, political and social ties with her. Partnering with India has been increasingly getting presence in the agendas of many Arab states especially the Gulf countries, but not as a priority. In spite of this increasing awareness of the importance of India as a strong future ally and partner, Arab states are still not fully engaging India through building strong and reliable relations especially on the front of public diplomacy. The current efforts mainly revolve around trying to agree on and sign bilateral trade and energy agreements. Diplomacy between the Gulf countries and India has remained at the government to government level, not really reaching the public.

A few cooperation agreements have been signed between Arab states and India, while many others are still undergoing slow negotiations. The GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council) signed in 2004 an initial framework agreement with India in order to advance multilateral relations. This framework led the two parties to enter negotiations around signing a FTA (Free Trade

increased" supply of crude oil; the second agreement was on improving cooperation between the two nations to combat terrorism. Both parties described the visit as "a new era in India-Saudi Arabia relations and a landmark in the development of increased understanding and cooperation between the two." This visit has in fact benefited the economy of both countries and increased their export and import rates. However, it did not mean very much to the average citizen in India or Saudi Arabia. It remained just one of many official visits they hear about in the media, without feeling its real impact on their daily lives.

The follow up to the Saudi King visit came a bit late. It was not until 2010 that the Indian Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia. The three-day visit was described as historic since it was the first of this magnitude since the visit of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1982. The main goal of this tour was to boost India-Saudi cooperation efforts to a higher level, especially in the field of energy. Eight agreements were signed during this visit in the fields of energy, science and technology and extradition. Manmohan Singh stated that "I am conscious of the fact that this will be only the third visit by an Indian prime minister to Saudi Arabia. My visit reflects the strong mutual desire of both countries to reinvigorate our relations, as manifested in King Abdullah's historic visit to India in 2006 as the chief guest at the Indian Republic Day (...) India and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have enjoyed special relations based on several millennia of civilizational and cultural linkages and people-to-people exchanges." Religion has been one of the major connections between India and Saudi Arabia; for instance, every year around 140 000 Indians visit Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage.

Developing strong and sustainable relations with India should not be considered by Arab states as an option, but as a must. India's regional and global role is changing and growing very rapidly and its say in global matters is becoming more significant. For instance, India is one of the major nuclear powers in the world and in the region, and it has the third largest



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armed forces in the world. It is the ninth largest world economy and it is a member of the G20 and the BRICS. Therefore, Arab states should seize the opportunity and engage India more aggressively to boost and build relations based on cooperation, mutual respect and friendship. There are many fields that can be explored by both Arab states and India to improve their current relations. In addition to trade agreements, the two parties should consider other public diplomacy venues to develop substantial social and cultural exchanges and boost larger people-to-people relations. Cultural public diplomacy is one of the promising venues through which the Arab states and India can develop more relations. Activities can be organised around religious dialogue, student exchanges and other cultural and educational issues that would bring both states and people closer together.

The writer is a Fulbright scholar, Masters of Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California.

MEDHA CHATURVEDI

A section within the international community believes there has been a series of positive changes in every plausible field in Myanmar. Is the government in Myanmar finally having a change of heart? What are these changes and how far will they succeed in repairing Myanmar's reputation internationally? Will they bring any positive changes to the economy of the country? Are these changes just perception due to a freer media in Myanmar? Most importantly, will the people of Myanmar gain from these changes?

President Thein Sein, with his efforts to make Myanmar more liberal and bring much needed political and social reforms to the country, is now being seen as a catalyst for a brighter future. The new liberal policies are aimed at not only drawing out the country politically and socially, but also improving its situation economically. What are the economic developments?

An interesting development has been the acceptance of Myanmar's candidature for the Chair of ASEAN in 2014 by all member countries. This brings the hope for a new surge of liberal reforms in rejuvenating Myanmar's economy which is presently hanging on tenterhooks. A leadership role in a regional grouping which includes the two regional giants, India and China, can be a big plus for Myanmar's foreign policy as well.

Myanmar's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is almost US\$ 43 billion, and is growing at the rate of 2.9 per cent. This is the lowest growth rate in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region and in sharp contrast to its post independence prospects when Myanmar was the largest rice exporter in the world and produced 75 per cent of the world's total teak production. Myanmar's economy started dwindling after the military takeover by Gen Ne Win in 1962 and his subsequent policy of 'Burmanization' which led to a near-closed economy.

However, in recent months, there has been an upward swing in Myanmar's overall economic situation with its currency, the Kyat, becoming 25 per cent stronger due to capital inflows since the beginning of 2010. It is likely to become even stronger with the relaxation of economic restrictions on the country in the coming few months. Foreign investments to the country have also increased substantially since 2009, and with more trading partners and less trade restrictions to and from Myanmar, commerce is expected to improve.

Moreover, President Sein's government has been taking steps to reach a compromise on the decades-long ethnic conflict in the most mineral and natural resource-rich areas of the country. This signals the coming of a better security environment for protection of vital investment establishments.

A sign of better economic conditions and banking reforms can also be judged by the installation of modern ATMs in the cities of the country at a rapid pace. Also, under the incumbent government, Myanmar's factory workers can now form unions. This is the first time that



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such an allowance has been made to them since 1962 and has been widely welcomed. This would give them a chance to liaise with the senior management of the industries and put forward their demands, thereby assisting in the improvement of their wage structure and standard of living.

Freedom of speech and expression?

On the freedom of speech and expression, there are indications of a freer media. In fact, Ko Ko Hlaing, chief political adviser to President Thein Sein, was quoted in a Reuters article saying that a new media law is in the making which will replace the indiscriminate censoring of every "song, book, cartoon and planned piece of art." He further added that the new law will "reflect guaranteed freedom of expression, so, no censorship", but, there will be a more open monitoring system in place for censoring objectionable cultural and religious matter.

Restrictions on some important news websites and channels have also been lifted, which were banned in 2007 at the time of the Buddhist monks' protests in Yangon. Even parliamentary proceedings are now being recorded and some portions are being aired on the national network.

Aung San Suu Kyi herself hosted a film festival in Yangon, titled 'Films of Freedom' and was interviewed by a leading business magazine which was carried as a two-page special. It was not censored much and was widely circulated. The government has also set up a Human Rights Commission, and the parliament has approved a law giving people the right to protest in a controlled environment.

The positive attitude of the civilian government in Myanmar appears to be the harbinger of political, social and economic uplift, and there is sufficient optimism to see these developments as credible because they are being initiated from within the country. Myanmar's media is opening up, giving way to more detailed reports emerging from even the frontier regions. As a result, the international community is able to see and analyze the developing situation in Myanmar more accurately. With the economy also looking up, the country's prospects may be improving. The isolation that Myanmar has faced for decades may be on its way out, giving way to the hope for a stable, democratic system.

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