

Bangladesh: New cynosure of the US

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IN 1971, when Bangladesh achieved its independence, the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dubbed Bangladesh 'basket case.' But only after four decades the current US secretary of state is considering Bangladesh its 'strategic partner.' Small actors of global politics are enjoying greater attention in post cold war international system. Fareed Zakaria presumed rightly in his book 'The Post American World' about the 'rise of the rest.' The US is truly feeling the hit of new emerging nations like Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has become a 'new' cynosure of the US in South Asia. This has to be defined as 'new' because of rapid changing approaches that are taking place in the strategic landscape of South Asia. These approaches include- significant changes that have come to pass in the US global strategy particularly shifting focus from Middle East to the Asia Pacific along with the issues of Myanmar and Pakistan. A 'new Myanmar' is igniting the new possibilities of democratic renaissance and revisiting its existing relationships with global powers e.g. the US and China. Pak-US relations are in a state of see-saw. And this is almost a daunting task for the US to maintain a steady bonhomie relationship with Pakistan taking into accounts it's never decreasing home grown terrorists and anti American sentiments existing among Pakistanis. So the recent strategic partnership between Bangladesh and the US cannot merely be viewed from narrow perspective of the US's strategic interest in the region but beyond.

On April 19, this year Bangladesh and the US for the first time exchanged their views in the areas of counter-terrorism, disaster management, maritime security and UN peacekeeping operations. The US delegation was led by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Andrew J. Shapiro while Bangladesh delegation was led by the additional foreign secretary. On May 5, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu



Moni and the US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton signed a Joint Declaration on "Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue," Partnership dialogue is based on a long-term shared vision, based on convergence of strategic interests, mutual trust, confidence in each other and respect for each other's strategic sensitivities.

Why the US is so much enthusiastic about Bangladesh? Bangladesh was never a trivial matter to the US since its independence. The importance has been sustaining because of several relevant matters- the geo-strategic location of Bangladesh, a constant point, and Bangladesh, a role model for many Muslim countries as a moderate-Muslim-democratic country. But the global scenario has changed those traditional variables of Bangladesh. Now Bangladesh is one of the best 'Muslim friends' for the US among a few ones. Arab spring has weakened the strongholds of the US in Arab world. It had a disaster in Iraq and in a conundrum in Afghanistan. The US desperately needs to uplift its image among the Muslim nations. It is looking for strengthening

relationship with the Muslim world. Now there is an inter-governmental forum to exchange views between the US in one side and the Muslim world on the other. In the last meeting of the 'US-Islamic World Forum' which was held in Doha, Bangladesh's Premier Sheikh Hasina was an important speaker. As a part of strengthening relationship with Muslim majority countries the US wants to see Bangladesh a friendly one who will speak out against terrorism, fundamentalism and for democracy.

Changes in Myanmar is the another important issue which have brought Bangladesh in the American good book. Energy rich Myanmar is important for both the US and India. The decision to return to democracy by the autocratic rulers of Myanmar has impressed Obama administration. To ensure a stable transition towards democracy it is important that Myanmar is getting steady support from its neighboring countries like India and Bangladesh. The US would like to see both India and Bangladesh are assisting Myanmar to make its way through. As a gesture of friendship Bangladesh's PM also paid

her visit to Myanmar just a few days later Mrs. Hillary Clinton had had it. During that visit it was reported that the agreements were signed on the following areas: banking, road, air and shipping, cooperation in fisheries, cooperation in agriculture and cooperation in gas and hydro-power.

The US is also considering Bangladesh as a potential destination for selling outmoded arms and instruments. In a recent bid to modernise the tactical transport aircraft fleet of the Air Force, Bangladesh has decided to purchase four Lockheed MC-130Es from the United States at an estimated cost of \$180 million. In the official documents of this contract the US government said that the proposed sale will contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the United States by enabling the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) to respond more capably to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief needs and support operations to counter violent extremist organizations.

In the concluding remarks I want to say that the strategic interest of the US in Bangladesh is multifaceted. It shouldn't be limited within the typical framework of 'China-fear.' Especially it is difficult to say about Bangladesh that it will join India-US axis against China in a game of balance of power in Asia. Sino-Bangla relationship has a deep rooted base. There are significant economic, military and cultural level relationship between Bangladesh and China. Anti-US and Anti-India sentiment prevails overwhelmingly in public perception in Bangladesh. So the strategic partnership requires many basic works to be done to achieve success. Success in public diplomacy is one of the basic components in this endeavor. From Bangladesh point of view there are opportunities while at the same time there are adversaries. The leverage it has must be utilized properly. There nothing to be lured but maximization of national interests.

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New direction in US-India defence relations

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ON 6 May 2012, the US Defense Secretary Mr. Leon E. Panetta addressed at IDSA in New Delhi. According to him, the defence relationship has done much for ensuring security and stability in the Asian region; various aspects of cooperation such as joint exercises and the defence dialogue have resulted in closer co-operation and co-ordination in areas ranging from fighting piracy and terrorism, to increased inter-operability between the two forces which would be crucial during natural disasters. With non-conventional threats becoming more the norm than the exception, the US Defense Secretary listed out what he described as "new and ever more complex threats" that the two countries were faced with, in particular, cyber security and space security.

Cooperation in these areas, which revolve around cutting edge technologies, would require a paradigmatic shift in the outlook of both countries which, at present, still suffer from the occasional pangs of mutual suspicion and distrust. A look at past collaboration in these areas will only bear this out.

Since the mid-1970s, because of India's nuclear policies, the US has always been cautious in undertaking any technology collaborations or transfers with India. Consequently, collaboration in space technology, which inherently is dual-use in nature, has remained restricted to civilian aspects. Similarly, even though the India-US Cyber Security Forum established in 2002 had a defence component to it, with a Working Group on Defence Cooperation co-chaired by the US Department of Defense and the Indian Ministry of Defence being one of its five Working Groups, it was the least proactive of the Groups, probably because the Armed Forces on both sides took up cybersecurity as a priority only much later.

Satellite navigation is one area where both the Indian and US militaries could collaborate. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has an ongoing GPS-Aided Geo Augmented Navigation (GAGAN) project, which is expected to yield major benefits for the civil aviation sector. Since the currently used GPS does not guarantee the availability of precision services during conflict situations, it is important for India to invest in space assets. India is actually engaged in developing a seven satellite Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS), which is expected to be ready in two to three years time. India and the United States could work on compatibility and interoperability aspects of both these systems.

Also, as Mr. Panetta pointed out, joint military exercises between the Indian Navy, Army, Air Force and Special Forces and their US counterparts have been a highlight of Indo-US defence cooperation. Presently, the US Defence Services have a Space Command to cater for requirements in space. Even if India does not have a space command, it would be useful for the Indian military wings handling space and cyber issues to gain exposure to the military space and cyber architecture of the US forces as well as participate in tabletop exercises, etc. Missile defence is another arena where the military establishments of the two countries could develop joint programmes.

The success achieved by US drones in the Afghanistan theatre is noteworthy. In addition to drones, the US has developed or is developing various other robotic technologies that could play a role in intelligence gathering, NBC defence, perimeter defence, management of mining and anti-mining operations, etc. India's overall threat perceptions and the geographical region where it is likely to engage in future conflicts underscores that such robotic technologies could be useful as force multipliers particularly under high-risk situations.

With cyberwarfare set to become a reality insofar as cyber commands are being set up by many countries, and the surreptitious use of cyberweapons coming to light with alarming regularity, the creation of international standards and norms is essential to prevent the coming collapse of the cyberspace from such onslaughts. As in the case of the other technologies, collaborative efforts could accelerate the resolution of vexatious issues on the technological side such as attribution. While deterrence has proved to be effective in the nuclear realm, the nature of cyberspace has rendered it an ineffective doctrine in this new domain. However, the march of technology could turn these circumstances around, and both India and the US should work together to ensure that cyberspace, like the other global commons, remains open, secure and free.

Given the past experience of what were considered minor irritants, like for instance piracy, mutating into major threats to global security, these new arenas of potential conflict should be addressed with the urgency they deserve. While legacy issues and bureaucratic intransigence have played havoc with defence cooperation in other arenas, the lessons learnt could be used to prevent cooperation in these new arenas from falling prey to those same infirmities. The bottom line is that there is a severe ongoing global competition to gain dominance in these new arenas, and while going it alone might be the best policy, collaboration with clearly laid out guidelines and end-goals is not without its benefits, in both monetary and strategic terms.

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Standoff in the South China Sea

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THE term "rocky relations" took on new meaning after Chinese civilian maritime enforcement ships confronted a Philippines Navy frigate in a standoff over a disputed shoal in the South China Sea. The Scarborough Shoal is marked by five rocks, the tallest of which projects 3 meters above water at high tide. The surrounding fishing grounds and, more importantly, the legal principles determining ownership and right of exploitation are at issue.

How the dispute is resolved holds broader implications for the region wary of a rising China.

South China Sea islands and reefs have been a bone of contention between China and its neighbors for decades. Scarborough Shoal a triangular-shaped chain of reefs and rocks, enclosing an area of 150 square kilometers emerged as a new flashpoint in April. The shoal, approximately 200 kilometers west of Subic Bay, is north of the Spratly Islands, contested between China and Vietnam.

The standoff began 8 April when a Philippine reconnaissance aircraft spotted five Chinese fishing vessels in the lagoon. The Philippine Navy dispatched a frigate to investigate the Chinese vessels and two days later discovered giant clams, coral and sharks, species protected under Philippines law and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna.

Two China Marine Surveillance ships soon arrived, interposing themselves between the frigate and the fishing vessels. China and the Philippines formally protested the other's actions.

In an effort to lower tensions, the Philippines withdrew the navy frigate, replacing it with a Coast Guard cutter. The cutter was joined by a Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessel. China reinforced its presence by dispatching its newest Fishery Law Enforcement Command ship, Yuzheng 310. The standoff continues today.

Both China and the Philippines claim that Scarborough Shoal is an integral part of their national territory. China refers to Scarborough Shoal as Huangyan Island, claiming "indisputable sovereignty" over the island and adjacent waters on the basis of historical discovery.

Under the UN Convention on Law of the Sea, UNCLOS, an island is defined as a naturally formed feature that can support human habitation or has an economic function, and entitled to a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone,

or EEZ. If a feature does not meet these criteria, it's classified as a rock, entitled to 12 nautical-miles of territorial waters, but not an exclusive economic zone. China's claim relates to sovereignty over territory and sovereign rights in waters generated from this territory. If Scarborough Shoal met the legal requirement for an island, it would generate the 200-nautical-mile zone. Failing to meet this requirement, each of the five rocks would be entitled to 12 nautical-miles of territorial waters.

The Philippines refers to Scarborough Shoal as Panatag Shoal, arguing that it falls within its 200-nautical-mile EEZ. The claim rests on sovereign rights to the resources within the EEZ and continental shelf.

UNCLOS lacks authority to decide on sovereignty disputes over land features



such as islands and rocks. The law applies only in cases of disputes arising from maritime jurisdiction.

China and the Philippines could resolve the dispute through bilateral negotiations or could agree to arbitration by an international tribunal such as the International Court of Justice. China argues that the dispute should be settled bilaterally; the Philippines wants the dispute to go before the International Tribunal on Law of the Sea, established by UNCLOS.

Both sides use political posturing to accompany bilateral diplomacy to advance their claims. The Philippines has adopted a three-pronged strategy legal, political and diplomatic threatening to take the dispute unilaterally to the international tribunal; seeking support from fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the international community; and continuing negotiations with China.

China resorts to a variety of measures

to pressure the Philippines: Responding to minor anti-China protests in Manila and elsewhere around the world, China issued a travel advisory leading to cancellation of 80 scheduled Chinese tour groups and charter flights to the Philippines; temporarily halted imports of Filipino bananas on a pretext of infestation; and orchestrated a hostile press campaign. In 2011 the Philippines exported \$60 million worth of bananas to China, its third largest banana export market. Losses of banana exports in May were estimated at around \$34 million. China is the source of the fourth largest number of tourists to the Philippines. The average Chinese tourist stays for three days, spending \$200 per day. In May, 1,500 Chinese tourists cancelled visits to the Philippines resulting in a loss of nearly \$1 million to the tourist industry.

China also announced imposition of

a unilateral fishing ban in the South China Sea covering the area that includes the shoal, warning that action would be taken against foreign fishing vessels that violate the ban, with the ostensible purpose of protecting fishing stocks during the spawning season.

The Philippines countered by refusing to recognize the validity of the Chinese ban, but issued its own fishing ban covering the shoal.

Many observers viewed the reciprocal fishing bans as a positive sign, offering a way to deescalate tensions. These expectations were short lived. In late May China dispatched three additional civilian enforcement vessels to Scarborough Shoal accompanied by 10 Chinese fishing boats according to Philippine sources. China admitted that 20 fishing boats were at the shoal. The Philippines claimed that, when dinghies operating from the fishing boats were added up, China had nearly 100 vessels at the shoal. Chinese civilian authorities took no steps

to prevent these craft from fishing while China's ban remained in force.

Security implications of the standoff could not be missed. In the midst of the standoff, the Philippines and the United States conducted their annual Balikatan military exercise. One phase involved Filipino and US forces conducting counterterrorism raids on an oilrig in waters off the west coast of Palawan Island facing the South China Sea. China charged that US support for the Philippines only emboldened Manila to act rashly and called on the US to rein in its ally.

To underscore its determination in pursuing area claims, China announced in May that its first locally produced deep water mega oil-drilling rig would commence operations in the South China Sea, leading to protests in the Philippines. In fact, the oil rig is off the mouth of the Pearl River, south of Hong Kong, well within China's EEZ, where it will likely remain for years.

The Philippines may have overplayed its hand with misguided expectations of receiving support from fellow ASEAN members and its US alliance. Some ASEAN members and even Filipino activists have expressed misgivings about how Manila confronted Beijing. In the words of one Filipino senator, the Philippines found itself an orphan.

Both sides stumbled into this confrontation, taking immediate actions that precluded quick diplomatic resolution. Subsequent posturing only served to entrench antagonistic positions, fueling domestic nationalism on both sides.

The United States must calibrate its response and avoid getting dragged into a territorial dispute with China not of its own making. At the same time, the US must prevent its Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines from being devalued through lack of perceived support for an ally.

China's actions refusing to make diplomatic concessions, deploying civilian enforcement ships and using economic sanctions serve as an object lesson to other regional states about potential costs of confronting China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The standoff also reminds Washington about the need for careful diplomacy that reassures allies without entangling itself in a distant conflict.

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