

Three questions for Khaleda Zia

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WITH Bangladeshi leader of opposition Khaleda Zia in New Delhi for a week-long visit, one can expect a flurry of substantive exchanges. There are two main reasons why Zia's visit is more than a courtesy call. First, Bangladesh goes to polls sometime late next year, and Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) could very well come to power. After all, a mere 3% difference in vote share is what separates the current opposition from the ruling Awami League regime. Given the massive anti-incumbency factor that all incumbent governments in Bangladesh face, that's hardly a comfortable margin. Besides, it hasn't helped the Awami one bit that its tenure has seen several (alleged) scams. The BNP will surely try and capitalise on these missteps.

For New Delhi, the engagement with Zia is part of an effort to build ties with all stakeholders in Bangladesh. There is a growing understanding that for India-Bangladesh ties to become irreversible, New Delhi can't be seen as favouring one Bangladeshi political formation over another. Of course, New Delhi has its own interests and preferences. But it realises that it cannot choose which government is in power in Dhaka. Plus, India-Bangladesh ties have made significant progress over the last four years, notwithstanding room for improvement. New Delhi would want to protect and sustain the gains even if the BNP were to win the next election.

So, what's on the agenda for Zia's visit? Yes, Teesta river water sharing, border killings, Tipaimukh dam and exchange of enclaves are all on the cards. But these are hardly surprising. According to my reading, New Delhi would want to know three things from Zia and her entourage:

Caretaker government: A topic of huge political debate in Bangladesh that is bound to get more pronounced as polls approach. Last year, the Awami government repealed the system that saw elections being held under a neutral, non-party caretaker government. The BNP wants the system reinstated and has even threatened to boycott the next election if it's not. However, the last time the system was in place, the caretaker government, backed by the military, plunged Bangladesh into a state of emergency that lasted for almost two years. A repeat of such suspension of democratic rights would be a problem. On the other hand, if the BNP sticks to its demand and boycotts the polls, it would

certainly cast a shadow on the credibility of the next government. So, New Delhi would want to know what is the BNP's strategy going forward. Is it really serious about boycotting the polls? For, another round of political instability in Bangladesh won't do anyone any good.

Transit or transshipment: One of the key economic advantages of enhanced bilateral ties is mutually beneficial transit facilities. India has agreed to facilitate transit between Bangladesh and Nepal, and between Bangladesh and Bhutan through its own territory. Bangladesh, on the other hand, is

yet to finalise the modalities of the transit package it would like to offer India. While India would love nothing more than to have the rights to move goods and people through Bangladesh to its northeast or from the northeast to the Bangladeshi ports of Chittagong and Mongla, the BNP is not too keen on such unfettered transit facilities. It may be more amenable to transshipment, which would see Indian goods being transported across Bangladesh by Bangladeshi transporters. So, New Delhi would like to know from Zia what exactly is her position on providing transit to India.

War crimes trials: Bangladeshi politics is fundamentally linked to its Liberation Struggle, and the ongoing trials of war criminals represent an effort to come to terms with the past. It is in the interest of a strong, secular Bangladesh that justice be done and those responsible for war crimes ranging from genocide, rape, arson, looting, torture, etc be suitably punished. Indeed, Bangladesh's secular credentials depend on the successful conclusion of the war crimes trials. But the fact that those on trial are former and incumbent leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islamian ally of the BNP and the BNP itself means that the future of the trials under a BNP regime is in doubt. New Delhi would want to know from Zia her position on the war crimes trials and whether she would

allow them to continue if she were to come to power.

Khaleda Zia has an important decision to make. She could choose to stick to her traditional anti-India stance for narrow political gains. Or she could choose to effect a shift in her policy towards India and pursue equitable, friendly relations. In making that choice she would do well to heed the words of former Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee: "We can choose our friends, but we cannot choose our neighbours."

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STAR ARCHIVE

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Begum Zia's visit to India: New dawn in BNP's relations with India?

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VISIT of Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of opposition and the Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), is one of the first such visits by her. There are anticipations and expectations from this visit given BNP's relations with India in the past. From 2001 to 2006, during the four-party alliance government's rule in Bangladesh, the relationship between India and Bangladesh was uneasy and concrete result of that was official ritualistic relation without any substantial progress to showcase. The only visit that Begum Zia took while in office was in 2006 which was followed by a visit to Pakistan, obviously to keep its core constituency at home happy.

Now, what does this visit portend for the BNP and India given the fact that the election to the Jatiyo Sangshod is round the corner. To quote the Ministry of External affairs spokesperson the visit is part of India's "ongoing engagement with a democratic and multi-party polity in Bangladesh." Begum Zia's itinerary includes meetings with the president, prime minister, foreign minister and other important members of the Indian cabinet and the opposition.

It is true that India's relation with the Awami League (AL) goes back in history. Many political leaders have personal friendship with the politi-

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cal class in India, which goes back to the liberation war days. This relationship transcends the political party divide in Bangladesh. Yet, it is generally perceived in India that while AL is sensitive to India's security concerns and desires friendly ties with India, BNP does not have any such empathetic ties, rather its vote bank politics is couched with anti-India overtones. While some of the economic liberalisation policies adopted in the early nineties when BNP was in power favoured the business communities in both sides, its position on the issue of transit and trade creates doubt on forging a robust economic engagement between the two neighbours.

Both, India as a neighbour of Bangladesh and the BNP as the major political party, having support of the people of Bangladesh, are political realities. Perhaps this reality has made India and the BNP to have a re-look at their relations. Though the dynamics of their relationship may not change dramatically given the compulsion of coalition politics, yet it is important that the BNP and India are aware of the reality of politics.

Unlike India, China has always extended invitation to and cultivated political parties in Bangladesh whether they are ruling the country or are in the opposition. There are often complaints in political circles in Dhaka that India's relations have remained confined to Awami League both when they are in power or in opposition, and the BNP is treated "differently" when they are in opposition.

BNP, in spite of its past approach to India, understands that if voted to power it needs to

engage the two Asian powers India and China in developing infrastructure, improving port facilities and transforming Bangladesh into an economic hub connecting South Asia with South East Asia. India has always been keen to develop a bipartisan relationship with the two political parties that spare New Delhi's engagement with Bangladesh from the electoral calculation and raise it to another level.

In one of my interviews with late Brajesh Mishra, former national security adviser of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, he said the NDA wanted to establish close ties with all the neighbours of India irrespective of the ideological affiliation of the regime. Thus, in spite of post election violence of 2001 in which minority communities were affected, he went to Dhaka as Prime Minister Vajpayee's personal emissary to congratulate Begum Zia on her victory.

Some policy makers in India continue to be skeptical about whether there would be change in BNP's approach towards India given the anti-India constituency of its alliance partners, especially the Jamaat e Islami. Similarly, in Bangladesh there is also a sense of "victimhood" with regard to real and perceived policies of India and their consequential effect on Bangladesh, be it the issue of water, border incidents, trade and smuggling. Taking these perceptions into account, in a recent article on "Bangladesh-India

Relations" (strategic analysis, September-October, 2012)

Begum Zia wrote: "There are forces in both of our societies who have played, and continue to, play on this fear psychosis to perpetuate mutual suspicion and thereby keep us

apart... the need of the time is a changed mindset."

The interests of the BNP and India are mutual. Both the sides want to dispel the popular notion that India is close to the AL and that BNP is anti-India. While there are many unresolved issues between the two countries, for India, any bipartisan ties with the two major political parties in Bangladesh would be a welcome development. Bangladesh is also vital for connecting the North Eastern part of India to the nearest port and commercial centres. Some of the Indian infrastructure projects in Bangladesh have long gestation period to fructify.

Similarly, BNP would like greater economic engagement with India that would fuel Bangladesh's growth engine; moreover, its major constituency is businessmen in Bangladesh. This mending of fences by the two sides will go a long way in the bilateral relations. If AL is not constrained by its relations with India and managed landslide victory in the last election, one does not see how the BNP will be affected if it develops meaningful relations with its largest neighbour. For the two democracies ultimately it is vox populi that matters.

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The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Who threw Israel under the bus?

EFRAIM HALEVY

ON Monday, in their final debate, Mitt Romney denounced President Obama for creating "tension" and "turmoil" with Israel and chided him for having "skipped Israel" during his travels in the Middle East. Throughout the campaign, Romney has repeatedly accused Obama of having "thrown allies like Israel under the bus."

But history tells a different story. Indeed, whenever the United States has put serious, sustained pressure on Israel's leaders from the 1950s on it has come from Republican presidents, not Democratic ones. This was particularly true under Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush.

Just one week before the Iraq war began in March 2003, Bush was still struggling to form a broad international coalition to oust Saddam Hussein. Unlike in the 1991 Persian Gulf war, Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, decided to opt out, meaning that the United Nations could not provide formal legitimacy for a war against Hussein.

Britain was almost alone in aligning itself with America, and Prime Minister Tony Blair's support was deemed crucial in Washington.

Just as the British Parliament was about to approve the joint venture, a group of Blair's Labour Party colleagues threatened to revolt, demanding Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in exchange for their support for the Iraq invasion. This demand could have scuttled the war effort, and there was only one way that British

support could be maintained: Bush would have to declare that the "road map" for Middle East peace, a proposal drafted early in his administration, was the formal policy of the United States.

Israel's prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, had been vehemently opposed to the road map, which contained several "red lines" that he refused to accept, including a stipulation that the future status of Jerusalem would be determined by "a negotiated resolution" taking into account "the political and religious concerns of both sides."

This wording implied a possible end to Israel's sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, which has been under Israeli control since 1967.

On March 13, 2003, senior Israeli officials were summarily informed that the United States would publicly adopt the draft

road map as its policy. Washington made it clear to us that on the eve of a war, Israel was expected to refrain from criticizing the American policy and also to ensure that its sympathizers got the message.

The United States insisted that the road map be approved without any changes, saying Israel's concerns would be addressed later. At a long and tense cabinet debate I attended in May 2003, Sharon reluctantly asked his ministers to accept Washington's demand. Benjamin Netanyahu, then the finance minister,

disagreed, and he abstained during the vote on the cabinet resolution, which eventually passed.

From that point on, the road map, including the language on Jerusalem, became the policy bible for America, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. Not only was Israel strong-armed by a Republican president, but it was also compelled to simply acquiesce and swallow the bitterest of pills.

Three years later, the Bush administration again pressured Israel into supporting a policy that ran counter to its interests. In early 2006, the terrorist group Hamas ran candidates in the Palestinian legislative elections. Israel had been adamant that no leader could campaign with a gun in his belt; the Palestinian party Fatah opposed Hamas's participation, too. But the White House would have none of this; it

pushed Fatah to allow Hamas candidates to run, and pressured Israel into allowing voting for Hamas even in parts of East Jerusalem. After Hamas won a clear majority, Washington sought to train Fatah forces to crush it militarily in the Gaza Strip. But Hamas pre-empted this scheme by taking control of Gaza in 2007, and the Palestinians have been ideologically and territorially divided ever since.

Despite the Republican Party's shrill campaign rhet-

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oric on Israel, no Democratic president has ever strong-armed Israel on any key national security issue. In the 1956 Suez Crisis, it was a Republican, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who joined the Soviet Union in forcing Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula after a joint Israeli-British-French attack on Egypt.

In 1991, when Iraqi Scud missiles rained down on Tel Aviv, the administration of the first President Bush urged Israel not to strike back so as to preserve the coalition of Arab states fighting Iraq. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir resisted his security chiefs' recommendation to retaliate and bowed to American demands as his citizens reached for their gas masks.

After the war, Shamir agreed to go to Madrid for a Middle East peace conference set up by Secretary of State James A. Baker III. Fearful that Shamir would be intransigent at the negotiating table, the White House pressured him by withholding \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel, causing us serious economic problems. The eventual result was Shamir's political downfall. The man who had saved Bush's grand coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1991 was "thrown under the bus."

In all of these instances, a Republican White House acted in a cold and determined manner, with no regard for Israel's national pride, strategic interests or sensitivities. That's food for thought in October 2012.

The writer was the director of the Mossad from 1998 to 2002 and the national security adviser to the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, from October 2002 to June 2003.

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