

A new turn in Indo-US relationship

Obama visit, an impetus to sustainable partnership

THIS was for the first time that a US President visited India twice during his incumbency and two summits were held between the heads of government in four months of each other. These 'firsts' coupled with another maiden gesture of having US President as the chief guest at the Indian Republic Day celebrations clearly underlined the current level of importance Washington and New Delhi attach to their relationship.

What transpired from the second summit between Obama and Modi transcended beyond symbolism, what with the latter's glamorous trip to Washington earlier on and their chemistry gelling. The present outcome has been a concrete follow-up on the commitments made in the first summit. In order to take Indo-US strategic partnership to the next higher stage a robust political will has come into play to move forward in terms of cooperation in economic, defence, nuclear energy and climate change spheres.

Both the leaders have come to realize that their values, interests and needs are converging, even mutually complementary. America has the biggest Indian Diaspora who are making the host as well as their country of origin stronger. Job creation in the USA is dependent on expansion of trade. Little wonder, Washington and New Delhi aim to increase their trade five-fold to US\$500 billion.

Both the countries are wedded to democratic values and fighting terrorism. In Obama's words, "the world will be safer, more just place, when two democracies—the largest and oldest—stand together." With Saarc in perspective, we would like the approach to be inclusive.

We welcome the outcome of Obama's visit to India and hope that it will augur well for the region.

Who accounts for unimplemented DAP?

Any revision should be well thought out

WITH the old detailed area plan (DAP) remaining unimplemented in the face of opposition from certain vested quarters, the authorities are learnt to be in the process of getting approval, from the Cabinet, a reshaped DAP. What's new in the revised DAP is that realtors and their respective housing projects have been given a priority. Our concern is whether this DAP will take into account the protection of flood plains, rivers, farmlands, et al, so crucial for the sustainability of the city. From what has been reported in this newspaper, we understand that the fresh DAP will cover an area of 1,500km² and will keep intact several controversial projects. It is interesting to note that this DAP had suggested that authorities reclaim some 2,500 acres of flood flow zones and agricultural lands that had been taken hold of illegally.

Apparently those suggestions are not going to be incorporated. Hence we are forced to ask once again precisely whose interests will be served by the supposedly revamped DAP? The sustained destruction of flood plains and filling up of natural wetlands will usher in, according to experts, natural disaster for the capital city. Reality is being cited by RAJUK to justify these measures, yet doing away with natural protection systems will bring in water logging and health issues to name but a few problems for the more than 15 million residents of Dhaka city. Those too are "realities" on the ground. Doing away with conservable wetlands is not an option if Dhaka is to survive as a city.

Environment: At the mercy of the policy makers

QUAMRUL HAIDER

AT every opportunity, the leadership of Bangladesh reminds the industrial nations that global climate change is pushing the country towards a grim, uncertain future. Yet, the government staunchly defends not only the construction of the coal-fired Rampal Power Plant near the Sundarbans, it also gave green signal to commercial vessels to ply the Shela River flowing through the forest despite the recent environment-threatening oil spill and recommendation by UN experts to declare the river an out-of-bounds area.

And the recent news that the government is considering a proposal to build another power plant, an oil-fired one, in Mongla makes one wonder which advisors to the government are calling the shots about building these environment-degrading power plants near an endangered mangrove forest?

The environmental crisis we are facing today affects everyone on the planet. However, the degree to which different countries contribute to this crisis depends on the decisions made at the top tier of the respective governments. Injudicious decisions made in the past have caused irreparable damages to our environment. These damages include global warming, air quality deterioration, resource depletion, water pollution, soil erosion, species extinction, rainforest destruction and acid rain.

Making decisions that will have far-reaching consequences on the environment require insights and working knowledge of other disciplines, such as physical, life, agro and earth sciences, ecology and forestry, to name a few.

From an economic standpoint, it is much cheaper to produce fossil fuel electricity than sustainable methods of power generation. Nonetheless, fossil fuel burning power plants are one of the major factors for the fast disappearance of tropical rainforest—the habitat of the majority of the species on Earth.

According to the World Wildlife Fund, the world's forests are indeed being destroyed at a rate of 30-37 million acres per year, resulting in vegetation degradation, nutrient imbalance, flooding and animal displacement. The death toll of wildlife from fossil fuel power plants is staggeringly high.

The Sundarbans is undeniably in real jeopardy because 2040 is only 25 years away. The life-support systems of the forest will certainly be ruined once the Rampal and Mongla power plants start producing electricity. Hence, the policy makers cannot overlook the magnitude of the environmental problems that will eventually arise from the pollutants emitted by these plants and oil spills from vessels navigating through the forest's rivers.

If we want an enduring human presence around the Sundarbans, we have to rebuild a society according to the pattern laid down by nature. For that to happen, we have to put pressure on the government to tailor the pace of economic growth without destroying our national treasures. We will also need highly competent eco-conscious people at the helm of the decision-making ladder.

The writer is Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.



RUBANA HUQ

KNOT SO TRUE
"She stayed for 8 minutes!"
"No, she stayed for 3!"
"They thanked her for her almost-a-visit!"
"No, they did not!"

While we are incessantly discussing about failure of courtesies and indulging on how many minutes our Prime Minister stood near the gate of the Mrs. Zia's office while digging out past instances of who visited who when someone had died at some point, the rest of the world is moving on. The 'rest' includes our next-door neighbour, India, which has just celebrated its sixty-eighth year as a Republic on the 26th of January 2015, which marked the day when the Constitution of India came into force on 26 January 1950.

It was a day when the Prime Minister of India was seen sharing with President Obama how he had once survived a crocodile attack, how he once climbed a tree to free a bird entangled in a kite, and how a cup of tea or coffee in the garden can change someone's spirits, while we, in Bangladesh were busy with bickering amongst our own selves. While we, in our country ponder on what food or drinks are being served to Mrs. Zia in her office, Modi was seen busy serving Obama a spicy kebab (Nadru Ke Goolar) made with lotus stem (which is India's national flower and also the symbol of BJP) with gajar-ka-halwa (carrot pudding) laced in orange, the BJP colour. While we talk about how many hours Mrs. Zia dedicates to her sleep-time, busy Modi was seen telling Obama how he could survive with 3 hours of sleep at night while Obama needed 5. Modi even beat President Obama and his wife in outfit. While President Obama's wife landed wearing an outfit designed by her favourite Indian-American designer, Bibhu Mohapatra, Prime Minister Modi wore paisleys on a saffron shawl. To top it all, the stripe suit that Modi wore during his talks with Obama had his name all over his \$8100 dollar suit tailored by Jade Blue in Ahmedabad in the prime minister's home state of Gujarat. Economic diplomacy for Modi obviously comes with fashion statement, cuisine, style and pledges of utter flexibility.

There's a point of warning here for all of us. While our neighbour moves on, our own reality is edging towards despair. If we, in Bangladesh, continue burning our soil with killing innocent people, adopting undemocratic means, filling our productive time with our squabbles, we need to understand that while our neighbour India marches forward, we will be pushing ourselves to a position close to that of a failed state.

We need to learn lesson from History, which always stands witness to events, which push nations to the brink

of failure. Pakistan could be one such example to pay heed to. Can we afford to ride on Pakistan's track? Can we afford to end up being a failed state? Certainly not...

At 68, Pakistan is way behind India while once upon a time it was closest to India in terms of prosperity. After 1947, while India opted for democracy, Pakistan chose an unhealthy mix of dictatorship and democracy. India ranked 55th and Pakistan 57th in terms of per capita income as per a UN study of national income published in 1949. By 2007, positions were reversed. India was ranked 122 with \$1012 in World Bank's per capita income ranking while Pakistan stood at 131 with \$884. Today India has a Gross National Income of \$477 billion, while Pakistan is at \$60 billion. India's exports stand at \$301 billion, Pakistan's stands at \$25 billion.

Apart from economy, if we bring ourselves into the picture, in Human Development Index 2013 report from the UN, Bangladesh's HDI value for 2012 is 0.51 in the low human development category, positioning us at 146 out of 187 countries and territories. Unfortunately we share the rank with Pakistan. India is at 135. In terms of the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, India is ranked at 100th position with 0.418, Pakistan at 108th with 0.398 and Bangladesh at 103rd with 0.396. We are only 0.002 away from Pakistan.

Let us not forget that both Pakistan and India have nuclear capabilities, yet there are 43% children in India who are below 5 years of age while in Pakistan the number's 31%. Truth is also that both India and Pakistan have neglected their human resources by failing to provide health, education or even basic sanitation. Yet both countries take pride in sophisticated defense arsenal.

As an independent nation, Bangladesh today stands poised to take off. Potential of export is unlimited; possibility of remittances increasing from our very own Non-Resident Bangladeshi super heroes is a reality. As a proud state, we also have progressed better than many in South Asia in terms of MDG goals. The only thing that we need now is to make sure that we use our resources and choose human welfare over ambitious, undemocratic political positioning. While Narendra Modi promises Obama the ease of doing business in his land and secures a \$4 billion dollar pledge from the latter, we need to immediately assure the rest of the world that real people won't anymore lose lives in this land, buses won't anymore be burnt, and mutual demonization of the leading political parties will come to an immediate halt. Unless this happens, Bangladesh just stands to lose a lot more than all of us put together can imagine.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

Modi-Obama bonhomie in Delhi

MAHMOOD HASAN

President Barack Obama was in Delhi between 27 and 27 January. He was the first US President to be the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day parade. Obama is also the first US President to visit India twice while in office. Republic Day parade is a colourful pageant held in Delhi from the Raisina Hill (near Rashtrapati Bhavan) along the Rajpath past the landmark India Gate.

The visit, which was seen as a symbol of US-India friendship, had also achieved a major breakthrough. Three documents were issued—the 59-paragraph US-India Joint Statement titled "Shared Effort: Progress for All", India-US Delhi Declaration of Friendship, and US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

The most significant breakthrough was in operationalising the stalled civil nuclear deal. The Joint Statement released on July 18, 2005 by President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh introduced the "123 Agreement"

also known as "US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement", under which India agreed to separate its civil and military nuclear facilities and place all its civil nuclear facilities under IAEA. But because India had not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) it took three years before US Congress gave final approval to the deal on October 1, 2008. The deal was supposed to lift US moratorium on nuclear trade with India, allow US companies to build nuclear reactors in India and provide nuclear fuel for its civilian energy program. However, two issues held up implementation of the deal.

The first was related to India's liability law. The Congress-led UPA government was forced to pass "Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages" in August 2010, when BJP and the Left Front stiffly opposed the agreement. The bill allowed operators (i.e. India) to sue suppliers (from US) in case of accidents but suppliers and the US government were against such a condition. The second problem was that the US insisted on tracking fuel supplies to reactors. India was against this condition because of it being intrusive.

After formal talks at Hyderabad House, Modi and Obama announced a breakthrough. India will create a "pool of insurance" to take care of damages in case of accidents—meaning US reactor suppliers will not be liable for accidents. US withdrew the 'fuel tracking' clause as India agreed to sign "Additional Protocol" with IAEA, which will allow more intrusive inspections of its civilian nuclear installations.

India is already a nuclear-weapon state but not a NPT signatory. Fear is that this deal may lead to further proliferation against which US is vocal. The devil always lies in the details of agreements. We shall have to wait and see how the deal is "operationalised" by US suppliers and Indian government.

Beijing has already reacted strongly to the mention of South China Sea in the "Strategic Vision." In his Republic Day message to President Pranab Mukherjee, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned India not to step into a "zero-sum trap" that Washington was setting up for India. Beijing cautioned Delhi that US friendship was part of Washington's "pivot to Asia" strategy -- which means encircling China. Meanwhile Pakistan Army Chief General Raheel Sharif went to Beijing to discuss security and defense-related issues.

The "Friendship Declaration" lists a number of steps to enhance defense and commercial ties between the two countries. President Obama also attended the US-India CEO summit in Delhi. Speaking to the corporate leaders President Obama pledged \$4 billion in lending by US banks. Though the potentials are immense, the hurdles relate to India's intellectual property rights (IPR) protection standards and India's regulatory environment. US investment is shy because the two countries still do not have any bilateral investment agreement.

Narendra Modi assured US Corporate chiefs that India will have a stable tax regime that is predictable and competitive, and vowed to make India business-friendly.

What is significant is the way Modi handled President Obama. During the press conference Modi called the US president by his first name. "Barack and I have forged a friendship. There is an openness with which we talk; we talk comfortably over the phone, joke with each other... This chemistry has not only brought us close or Washington and Delhi nearer but also the people of the two countries.

India-US relations have never been smooth. However, there has been a U-turn in American position towards India since Modi's massive electoral victory in May 2014. Narendra Modi also took the opportunity to put unpleasant incidents involving Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade and US refusal to grant him visa behind and reached out to Washington.

With President Obama's second visit a new beginning has been made. Will this "partnership" between the two largest democracies but unequal economies sustain? Will India become an "ally" of US? And one should wait and see what the implications of Modi-Obama bonhomie are for the SAARC and the region as a whole.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No more killing please

We have never countenanced the way Sheikh Hasina came to power, that is, through uncontested elections; but it was also imprudent of Khaleda Zia to remain intransigent to her demands, one being election under CTG. And now the blockade programme to unseat Hasina's government is continuing. The BNP leaders are saying that blockade is a peaceful programme, then why are people falling victims to arson attacks? The death toll is rising every day. Why doesn't the BNP chief ask her party activists to stop killing innocent people in the name of peaceful blockade?

A. H. Dewan
Dhaka Cantt., Dhaka

Bring back peace and harmony

Bangladesh is one of the countries in the world where Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and people of other religions live peacefully. People of different opinions and different political affiliations have been living in this country peacefully, but now fear has gripped us. My husband has been working in Dhaka for many years. He used to come to Rajshahi on weekends. But he has not visited us for the last couple of weeks because of the political unrest. We always remain worried about his safety. Our request to the political leaders, please bring back peace and harmony in the country as early as possible.

Mawduda Hasnin
Rajshahi

Best wishes to Tigers

Last year, our team had a torrid time on the field. Some might say we were unlucky and some might have other opinion. However, I would like to wish



PHOTO: STAR

our national team every success on this very challenging mission. The bouncy wickets are going to be a challenge for them. However, they have left for Australia three weeks before the start of the World Cup. Therefore, I hope they will adjust to those wickets. We all know our players have got the talent to upset big teams. Our players should draw confidence from the prime minister's speech and display their true mettle on the field and make us proud once again.

Nasif Ferdous
BBIS, Sylhet

Comments on news report, "Only if the two wish," published on January 24, 2015

Saleh Tanveer
Our people need to get out of the feudal mentality where legitimacy to power is only through family connections to late icons, never mind how ill-suited they are to be leaders. The idea that people will accept them and them only as legitimate leaders has stunted the political development of the country. The two major parties have been enslaved at the whims of these two ladies.

Rey 619
Is democracy for the citizens or for BNP? We don't need another money-wasting election if the country is on the road to development. We want peace. Killing people with petrol bombs is not politics, it is terrorism. And the BNP leaders who give instructions to do so deserve to be in jail. The BNP can wait till the 2019 election, until then please let us, the ordinary citizens, live in peace!

S.M. Iftexhar Ahmed
How unfortunate it is that the nation is being held hostage by two stubborn leaders who have no wish to compromise or listen to logic.

Snr Citizen
"Where there is a will, there is a way." Have we forgotten this adage? Please demonstrate magnanimity.

"Good Luck Tigers" (January 25, 2015)

Snr Citizen
Luck is only created by the smart and skilful. Those who train well, rest well, eat well, play well and think positive can succeed on the ground. Best wishes to the Tigers!

"Agenda peaceful but consequences fatal" (January 24, 2015)

Shafquat301
Will the PM agree to a dialogue? People understand the need for dialogue to get out of this mess. How come the leaders don't want to sit and talk?