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[Home](#) > Bangla PM Sheikh Hasina's India visit is critical for South Asia

Bangla PM Sheikh Hasina's India visit is critical for South Asia

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Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's forthcoming three-day visit to India (April 07-10), after two postponements, mainly because of the Indian government's preoccupation with domestic issues, is expected to take the bilateral relations a notch higher. The growing relations between the two countries (more exactly the governments and people) have had a salutary effect on the countries of South Asia. The relationship has been bereft of acrimony, building not only bilateral forward movements, but setting a template to follow, for others, in the interest of their peoples.

It is not surprising that the Bangladeshi prime minister has been invited to stay at the Rashtrapati Bhavan (Presidential palace). Indian President Pranab Mukherjee is an old friend not only of Sk. Hasina and her family, but also of Bangladesh. The Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka, Harsh Vardhan Shringla said in Dhaka, "From the Indian side, we are giving the highest importance to the honourable prime minister's visit to India". Encapsulated in one short sentence, High Commissioner Shringla conveyed to the people of Bangladesh India's sentiments.

Several sticking issues have been resolved between the two countries in recent years. Prime Minister Sk. Hasina led Awami League (AL) government has been instrumental and a powerful driving force.

The Indira-Mujib land boundary agreement initialled in 1974, was finally ratified last year by the Indian Parliament. This inordinate delay could have been avoided if Sk. Mujibur Rahman had not been assassinated on August 15, 1975 by a group of young army officers. The country went into a political tail spin with political assassinations, military rules, and revival of the Jamaat-e-Islami under President Gen. Ziaur Rehman in 1978. Efforts were made to reverse the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in some manner. Such efforts have not

ceased.

The sea boundary dispute with India has been resolved by Sk. Hasina. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is progressing, albeit a little slowly. This seven-nation regional group is being handled on a shared agenda, and India will be a major contributor.

This initiative will address common challenges being faced by its members, including traditional and non-traditional security challenges aimed at economic development and human issues.

Suffering from acute power shortage, Bangladesh is already purchasing power from India, and India is helping set up power projects in Bangladesh. But some sections are trying to scuttle the Ramphal Project on the grounds that it will harm the environment of the Sundarbans. Equally important, India has agreed to allow its territory for Dhaka's power procurement from Nepal and Bhutan. All these projects clubbed together will give a significant boost to the country's industry.

There are several other cooperation projects between India and Bangladesh, which include technical and higher education scholarships for Bangladeshi students and professionals, financial grants and soft aid/ loans at very low interest rates, increasing border trade to name a few. Unaccounted cooperation, not visible but important, include medical treatment in India, especially in Kolkata.

True, India cannot offer huge investments like China can, but the discerning can make out which is easier to accept if the fine prints are read carefully. This does by no means suggest that India is against Bangladesh-China cooperation or for that matter with any other country. The problems is the constant barrage of criticism and fomenting India-Phobia by the BNP and its allies. Putting up roadblocks at every step does not help the people of Bangladesh.

Admittedly, the delay in signing of the Teesta water sharing agreement is regrettable. Everything has been completed- only the signatures remain. It is unlikely to be signed during Sk. Hasina's upcoming visit, unless there is a miracle of sorts and West Bengal Chief Minister Ms. Mamata Banerjee changes her mind for a fairy tale ending. India understands that Bangladesh is a riverine agricultural country. But by describing the visit as a non-event without the Teesta deal, the BNP is being churlish. India is a federal democracy and there is a problem between the centre and the state in this case. It is internal politics on a hard track. The BNP must understand international relations in this manner. The entire bilateral relations cannot be held hostage to one issue, while relations are flourishing in almost all other areas.

Another possible agreement during the visit that has agitated the BNP is the framework for bilateral security and defence.

Senior BNP Joint Secretary, General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi while briefing the press in Dhaka said any defence or military agreement will be a betrayal of Bangladesh and its people, adding that, "such a deal will threaten the sovereignty of Bangladesh and the people will thwart

such anti-state deals”. Obviously, the BNP is holding out the threat of street agitation if the deal is signed.

One cannot but ask Mr. Rizvi from which eminent teacher or teachers he and his party learnt international relations and defence relations. During her visit to China in December 2002, BNP Chairperson and then prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia signed the defence cooperation agreement. As it stands today, Bangladesh’s armed forces are hugely equipped by Chinese hardware in every wing – small arms to tanks, naval frigates and patrol crafts, aircraft and the recent addition includes two Chinese made submarines. This apart, Chinese missiles have also been inducted. Has China usurped Bangladesh’s sovereignty? Or is the BNP hoping for that? India procures advanced weapons from different countries which produce them. Does that mean that India has compromised or mortgaged its sovereignty?

The BNP, if they have any respect for their country’s independence and sovereignty, should recall that in 1971 the Indian armed forces stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Bangladeshi freedom fighters and gave their life and blood. The Indian army did not remain on Bangladesh’s soil for one extra day and withdrew, handing over the newly formed nation to its leaders and people. It may also not be forgotten that US President Richard Nixon also considered using nuclear bombs on India.

The BNP does not have any takers among independent Bangladeshi experts, some of whom are retired army officers. One Bangladeshi political commentator opined that safeguarding the enhanced maritime security along the maritime border in the Bay of Bengal is a collective responsibility of India and Bangladesh. Third party interference or even involvement in these waters on the plea of safeguarding their interests is not acceptable.

Bangladesh is keen to develop a deep sea port in its eastern coast, perhaps in Payra or Kutubdia. The country needs this, a legitimate development project. But it would be prudent to ensure that any one country is given the construction and operation of such a sea port. Review the construction of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Over the years it is quietly moving towards a naval base for China. Unstated or even denied publicly, the reality is something different.

Given the warm acceptance of the BNP and its allies of China’s increasing tight fist capture of Bangladesh’s military equipment, a big question arises why so much heartburn over India-Bangladesh non-combat military accord.

The proposed India-Bangladesh defence cooperation is not an alliance. It is non-binding on this core. If this accord comes through, each side would have its sovereign rights to decide on a cooperative action or not at all. There is no infringement of sovereignty on either side.

Although the Jamaat has maintained a low profile on Prime Minister Sk. Hasina’s visit to India, that does not mean it is inactive. It is “hiding its strength and biding its time”, while strengthening its grass-roots organisations including its students’ wing, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) and increasing its activities in Islamist terrorism according to the Bangladeshi media quoting security agencies’ press statements.

Bangladesh is now moving towards the next general elections. The Jamaat is BNP's street and grass roots power. India is being made Enemy No. 1, Post 1975, politics in Bangladesh has distorted the history of the freedom struggle. BNP and Jamaat joined together to form a narrative where Hindus in the country are projected as anti-Bangladesh and extending the narrative to India. For them, construction and development in the country are very low priority. The focus is on a triangular relationship with Pakistan and China.

To achieve this objective they want to physically eliminate Sk. Hasina first. According to Awami League General Secretary (Dhaka Tribune, January 06) twenty attempts have been made on Sk. Hasina's life, the last being a technical glitch in a VVIP Bangladesh Biman flight in which she was travelling. The technical fault appears to have been a deliberate attempt at sabotage. She was severely injured in a grenade attack in 2004.

The coming two years could witness tumultuous times in Bangladesh. While India would have to work with whichever government comes to power in Dhaka, it will have to draw deep into its diplomatic and security reservoir to counter these challenges.

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Tags:

[India-Bangladesh Relations](#) [2]

[Pakistan-China-Bangladesh Relations Bangladesh Nationalist Party](#) [3]

Category:

[Papers](#) [4]

Countries:

[Bangladesh](#) [5]

Topics:

[Political](#) [6]

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