

Trajectory and Future of India-Bangladesh Relations*

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Esteemed Director of the United Service Institution of India (USI), Chairperson, distinguished members of the USI, senior government officials, excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good morning to you all. It is a great pleasure for me to be here at the USI.

I commend USI for their sustained efforts in organising this lecture series every year. Indeed, the Institution has established itself as a true platform for sharing of ideas and thoughts on contemporary issues, including that of security, among scholars from different disciplines. I was pleasantly surprised to note that the quarterly USI Journal is the oldest surviving defence journal in Asia, having first appeared in 1871. This also reflects on how, as a platform, USI is continuing to be the torchbearer of knowledge from generation to generation. I hope we can identify areas where USI can engage in newer areas of cooperation between Bangladesh and India.

As I speak here this morning to reflect on “Trajectory and Future of India-Bangladesh Relations”, I would say that indeed the two countries have been able to sustain and deepen the relations despite profound geo-political changes around the world. You would certainly agree that some of the global changes in the recent times have been ‘transformational’, as we reflect on global politics. New political leaderships in different parts of the world and changed position of the States on key global issues have already changed the traditional perceptions of the geo-politics and diplomacy, putting the world on a roller-coaster.

Amid all these transformations, uncertainties, tension and volatility, Bangladesh and India have been able to further strengthen and consolidate the friendly bilateral relations that so happily exist between the two countries which the former President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee had termed as “best ever since 1974”. It is my great pleasure to tell you that indeed our cooperation is fast moving ahead based on mutual benefit, equality and respect for sovereignty and as an example of progress in looking at a shared future.

Visit of Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India

Let me start with the most recent event i.e. the visit of our Hon’ble Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina to India from 07 to 10 April this year. The visit was a grand success and both the Prime Ministers have taken our bilateral ties to a new level which is well beyond the “strategic partnership”. The 11 agreements and 24 MoUs signed during this visit virtually encompass every important sector in our bilateral cooperation; namely, security, trade, connectivity, energy, civil nuclear agreement, defence and introduction of new bus and train services etc.

The visit was also high on the optics. The fact that Prime Minister Modi broke protocol and received our Prime Minister at the airport and was present at “Sommanona” (to honour the Indian martyrs of Bangladesh Liberation War) and other events, Hon’ble President Pranab Mukherjee’s invitation to our Prime Minister to stay at Rashtrapati Bhavan and the former hosting a banquet in her honour clearly underscored the very special relationship which exists between our two countries. In addition, a prominent road in New Delhi has been named after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of our Nation.

In addition to the two earlier Line of Credits (LOCs), India during this visit has extended a fresh LOC to the tune of USD five billion which also includes USD 500 million for defence purchase. Bangladesh will utilise this credit for the projects that she needs on priority basis.

Likewise, she will utilise the defence credit on the purchase of the items as she requires. Our private sectors also made their valuable inputs when they signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) for the investment to the tune of USD13 billion primarily in the energy sector.

Despite all round success, the biggest disappointment during the visit has been the lack of progress on the Teesta Water Sharing issue. However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has assured us that the issue would be resolved soon. Let me clarify here that we need water sharing only during the critical 90-day lean period. I will reflect on the water sharing issue little later.

The Emotional Bond Stemming from History

Now let me highlight a bit on the historical perspective of the relations between the two countries. It is indeed most appropriate that our multifaceted relations are rooted in our shared history, geographical proximity and commonality of our culture and heritage. As a freedom fighter diplomat posted in Washington DC in 1971, I recall with deep appreciation and gratitude, the whole-hearted support and cooperation that we received from the Government and people of India during the critical period of our Liberation War. The emotional bonds stemming from the invaluable contributions of the Government and the people of India during Bangladesh's War of Liberation remain a dominant factor in the country's political, cultural and social wave.

Bangladesh Perspective – A Shift from the Past

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of our Nation, soon after our Independence, had laid down the foundation of our close and cooperative ties with India and had taken every step to resolve all outstanding problems between us. After his tragic assassination on 15 August 1975, our relations had suffered a major setback. However, after his able daughter Sheikh Hasina assumed charge as the Prime Minister, she has been relentlessly working for all round cooperation between our two countries based on mutual trust and confidence. Both the countries are jointly making efforts to strengthen and expand bilateral cooperation in existing and newer areas.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken the bilateral relations to a new height. Since assumption of power for the second time in 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has consistently tried to restore mutual trust and cooperation and she has brought a change in our mindset in our bilateral ties. There is now a greater recognition on both sides that the destinies of our countries are inescapably intertwined and we must grow together. Our stability and prosperity are inextricably linked with each other. Given our geographical proximity and objective condition on the ground, our long-term benefit can best be served by strengthening relations. India is a fast emerging global power with strong economic growth coupled with scientific and technological advancement, and Bangladesh should take full advantage of the high growth of the Indian economy to further her own economic development. On the other hand, a strong and stable Bangladesh provides the best security guarantee for India which surrounds Bangladesh on all three sides with a huge maritime boundary on the South.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi after assumption of office little over three years ago, had also expressed his keen desire to promote all-round bilateral cooperation. His historic visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 has taken our ties to newer heights. Sixty eight years after the Partition of 1947, and forty-one years after the conclusion of the Indira-Mujib Border Accord of 1974, the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between the two countries was concluded and ratified. Premier Narendra Modi had demonstrated how a long-standing complex bilateral issue could be resolved unanimously through consultation, compassion, and consensus-building. The

successful conclusion of the LBA also signaled fulfillment of the vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who had taken the initiative soon after the Independence of Bangladesh.

Coincidentally, the longstanding maritime boundaries issue between the two countries was also resolved in July of 2015 through United Nations arbitration. Good borders make good neighbours, as disputed boundaries very often create tension, and nations do resort to the use of force to settle their disputes. With the LBA and the demarcation of maritime boundary, that chapter should be over for India and Bangladesh and peace and security prevail on our borders.

Security and Terrorism

It may be recalled that the security issue had bedeviled Indo-Bangladesh ties in the past. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, since assumption of power in 2009, has firmly controlled the situation and has not allowed any terrorist activities, or any terrorist group, to use Bangladeshi soil to launch any attack against India or any other neighbouring country. Naturally, Bangladesh expects strict reciprocity from all her neighbours on this account.

Since then, security cooperation has been the high point of our relations. It is the principled and unequivocal position of Bangladesh to not tolerate terrorism in any form and not allow its soil to be used against the interest of any country, particularly India, has significantly strengthened confidence of both sides. But we have to be vigilant and alert.

The Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) which had started in 2011, has significantly improved the security climate in the area. We have signed MoUs on prevention of human trafficking, smuggling and circulation of fake currency notes, drugs and narcotics etc. as well as cooperation between our Coast Guards to effectively meet any unconventional security threats. Border killings have been substantially reduced, but it should be our common endeavour to bring it down to zero level soonest possible. It is a highly emotive issue. The recent visit of our Prime Minister has given new directives towards further strengthening of our bilateral cooperation in this area.

Both countries are now setting up Integrated Border Check Posts (ICPs) to facilitate and closely monitor passage of people and transportation of goods. So far, three such ICPs have been established in Agartala-Akhaura, Benapole-Petrapole and Phulbari-Banglabandha areas. These ICPs will also significantly improve the connectivity between our two countries and in the sub-region.

Energy Cooperation

Cooperation in the energy sector is the hallmark of our renewed engagements. There is a positive momentum in cooperation between our two countries in the power sector and the achievements so far have been highly encouraging. Currently, 600 MW of power is flowing through the two existing inter-connections between India and Bangladesh at Bheramara-Bahrampur and Tripura-South Comilla. From the additional inter-connection with Parbatipur (Bangladesh) with Bornagar (Assam, India) and Katihar (Bihar, India) for power evacuation facilities, Bangladesh could further draw 1000 MW of power from Assam-Bihar transmission line. There has been further discussion on the supply of 340 MW from various NTPC Ltd. stations. Besides, Indian state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC) has been awarded gas exploration in two blocks of Bay of Bengal.

We have also signed MoU on renewable energy and nuclear cooperation between the two countries. It has further been agreed that India would release hydro-power from its northeast across Bangladesh territory.

Bangladesh has also expressed its desire to participate in hydro-power projects in the northeastern states of India as well as in Bhutan and Nepal. Cooperation in other sectors of power/energy is also taking shape, especially in the fields of supply of, *inter alia*, High-Speed Diesel (HSD), natural gas, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), trans-boundary pipelines etc. Bangladesh has decided to purchase the excess diesel from one of the Indian refineries in Assam (Numaligarh Refinery). Besides, MoU has also been signed between Petrobangla and Petronet for the setting up of a Joint Venture re-gasification LNG Terminal at Kutubdia Island.

In the Private sectors, the major Indian conglomerate like Adani Groups and Reliance also concluded agreement on supply of electricity; and the total Indian investment in energy projects would be of USD nine billion.

Bilateral and Sub-regional Connectivity

It is heartening to note that Prime Minister Modi has not only expressed his interest in strengthening Bangladesh-India bilateral ties but has also viewed these cooperative ties as a catalyst for regional and sub-regional integration, progress and stability. Bangladesh also figures prominently in Prime Minister Modi's 'Look and Act East' policies and both countries are working on strengthening sub-regional connectivity under the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) as well as inter-regional cooperation with South East Asian countries under the aegis of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Taking advantage of its unique geographical location, Bangladesh is poised to play its natural role as hub of connectivity. We are keen to establish seamless connectivity with sub-region and beyond which we believe would bring about unprecedented benefits for all the countries. Bangladesh is also actively participating in other regional connectivity initiatives such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) Economic Corridor. BCIM, originally a civil society initiative/private sector initiative, has made considerable progress. But further progress will require consensus building among the nations. A study team had been formed at the governmental level to work out a possible framework for the BCIM. All these demonstrate our commitment to establish a better connected South Asia with other adjoining regions.

To ensure unhindered movement of people and goods in the region, the two countries are also working to restore road, rail, and coastal shipping links that had existed in the pre-partition period. At the same time, new land ports and better infrastructure are being built to facilitate greater trade. Building a bridge over Feni river, establishment of rail connectivity between Akhaura and Agartala and development of Ramgarah-Subroom may look like small steps but those will be "game changer" which would directly connect northeast Indian states with the Chittagong Port.

We have opened up new inter-country bus routes between the cities to connect the northeast with West Bengal. Both governments are currently working on the restoration of eight railway links between West Bengal and the north-eastern India with Bangladesh which were snapped during 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. Last April, both the Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated the newly restored railway link between Birol (Bangladesh) and Radhikapur (India). We have done Dhaka-Delhi cargo trial run successfully in October 2016 and we have already concluded the trial run of a passenger train between Khulna and Kolkata. We are also working on establishing a new rail link between Panchagarh (Bangladesh) to Siliguri (India). We are trying our level best to make the train services cost effective and user friendly and we are urging to the

Indian side to complete their immigration and custom formalities in the train itself, instead of asking them to get down from the train and board a new train. Dhaka has gone one step further and has proposed completion of the customs formalities at the point of origin. Recently, both the Prime Ministers inaugurated bus service between Kolkata-Khulna-Dhaka which would definitely facilitate people-to-people contact between the two countries. Our people have achieved much higher purchasing power and hence, air connectivity between Bangladesh and other northeastern cities should be considered on a top priority basis.

We have agreed to further facilitate the movement of goods through our waterways to the northeastern hinterland. It may be recalled that in the past, the products from Assam were transported through Bangladesh waterways to Kolkata. With the passage of time, owing to the constant siltation, the navigability of these rivers has shrunk to an alarming extent. The earlier passage of sea-going has now reduced to small motor launches. It is now necessary to jointly dredge these water-ways and restore their hitherto navigability which in turn, would promote tourism and trade in our region and beyond.

Coastal shipping is another mode of transport that could enhance connectivity significantly between the two countries. The Agreement on Coastal Shipping for movement of cargo was signed during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh in 2015 and in this regard, Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was signed later in the same year during the Shipping Secretary level talks. A coastal vessel of Bangladesh (MV Harbour-I) made its maiden voyage from Chittagong to the Indian Port Krishnapatnam on 23 March 2016 marking the operationalisation of the coastal shipping services. Simultaneously, trans-shipment of goods through the Ashuganj River Port under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) has been started. During the visit of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India, we have concluded MoUs concerning cooperation on 'Aids to Navigation and Passenger and Cruise Services in Coastal and Protocol Routes' which definitely added a new dimension to water route connectivity.

Water Sharing Issues

Bangladesh and India share 54 common rivers and the issue of water sharing during the lean season has been a sensitive and delicate one as it has a direct impact on the food production and quality of life of our teeming millions. As mentioned earlier, Ganges Water Sharing Agreement was signed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's first term. After the assumption of power in 2009, she took the initiative to break the deadlock on the Teesta water sharing issue during the lean period. The two countries had also worked out a solution for an interim water sharing agreement in 2011 but it could not be concluded due to last minute objection raised by the West Bengal Government. Since then, the Union Government has been undertaking internal consultations with the Government of West Bengal and Prime Minister Modi has assured our Prime Minister that the agreement would be finalised during his current term of office. Bangladesh is eagerly looking forward to an early conclusion of the Agreement as it would open up newer opportunities for cooperation.

The common rivers which we share require joint management as constant siltation has significantly reduced their capacity to hold water for the lean season and consequent flooding in monsoon. As the latest evidence, we have disastrous flood this year both in the northeast India as well as Bangladesh. The rivers are unable to hold rain water and any excess rain has been passed on to the downstream, resulting in floods and causing havoc in terms of agricultural production. The Joint River Commission between our two countries needs to be strengthened and it should undertake more frequent consultations to redress the situation. The navigability of the joint rivers also has a direct impact of the riverine connectivity between our two countries.

Recently, positive and encouraging steps have been taken for joint development of the Ganges Barrage on the river Padma in Bangladesh. A 'Joint Technical Sub Group on Ganges Barrage Project' will study the riverine border in the upstream area of the project. We are optimistic that the matter would be further taken forward.

Water sharing is a very emotive issue and it must be addressed on a top priority basis, with care and compassion, to reach a win-win solution. In the final analysis, it will be necessary to involve all the concerned countries under joint basin management schemes for a full and comprehensive solution.

Trade and Commerce

Let me now address cooperation in trade and commerce areas. You will agree that in this age of globalisation, greater economic integration is the call of the day worldwide. Synergies of our two economies, which are growing at high rates in the past several years, could be harnessed further to the benefit of not only the two countries but also for the prosperity of the entire region. India has allowed duty-free and quota-free access to all Bangladeshi items to the Indian market except for a few items on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) negative list, while we have offered two Special Economic Zones for Indian investors with the hope that they would invest more in Bangladesh which in turn would lead to expansion of Bangladesh's exports to India and thus create a balanced trade and commercial bilateral ties.

The balance of trade, however, is still largely in India's favour. Bangladesh imported goods worth USD 5.4 billion and exported goods worth USD 689.60 million in FY 2015-16. It is necessary to point out here that a small and capital shy economy like that of Bangladesh would need substantial investment to broaden her exportable base. The most practical cause of action would be to set up series of "buy-back" projects. Similar equation exists between US-Canada and US-Mexico. Indian investors should take advantage of our cheaper labour costs and closer proximity to northeast markets. To this end, several Indian mega companies like Hero-Honda, Tata group or CEAT Tire companies have set up such projects in Bangladesh. These are small projects but they mark the beginning of a much needed process. It may be mentioned here that within a very short time, Canada and Mexico have emerged as the largest trading partners of the USA. If they can do it, we can do it as well.

We are happy that, during the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, private sectors of both the countries have signed agreements that should result in investment of over USD nine billion in Bangladesh, primarily, in the energy and communication sectors. Both the sides are working on dismantling the Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) and Para-Tariff Barriers (PTBs). A few Border *Haats* are already in operation and some others are also in the pipeline. These *Haats* are formalising the informal border trade. Recently, we have concluded MoU and Mode of Operation on Border *Haat*.

The projects under First Line of Credit (LoC-1) have been already utilised, while implementation of various projects under the Second Line of Credit (LoC-2) is underway. These credits have enhanced capacities in vital areas such as roads, railways, bridges and inland waterways connectivity. Recently, under the 3rd Line of Credit (LOC 3), the Indian Government has given USD 4.5 billion to Bangladesh. In the meantime, infrastructural development of Land Customs Stations/Land Ports is continuing for boosting smoother exchange of goods.

People-to-People Contact

Last but not the least, is the people-to-people contact. There is no alternative to peoples' camaraderie in any bilateral relations. We are lucky that the emotional bond and people-to-people contact between our two countries, having genesis in our common history and struggle,

form the strongest and most treasured part of our relationship. It has a profound effect on the psyche of the people of the two countries and a huge salutary impact on the overall bilateral relations. The people-to-people contact has increased manifold over the past years. During Premier Modi's visit to Bangladesh, we started Dhaka-Guwahati and Dhaka-Kolkata and Agartala bus services. We have already upgraded our Mission in Agartala to Assistant High Commission level and opened new Assistant High Commission in Guwahati. Earlier we opened a Deputy High Commission in Mumbai with a view to facilitating the issuance of visa and other consular services. Now we are soon going to open a new Mission in Chennai basically to strengthen our cooperation with the southern States. To ensure greater mobility of people between the two countries, visa regime has been relaxed by issuing five years multiple entry-exit visas for the senior citizens. Medical visas have further been streamlined. Recently there has been a decision by the Indian Government to ease the restrictions on entry/exit of Bangladeshi visitors. Now the travelers in addition to the designated points can also travel through any airport and two ICPs. Besides, Bangladesh and India also exchange each other's books at book fairs held in Dhaka, Kolkata, and Delhi. Recently *Akashvani* has started its "*Moitree*" programme. We should now focus on greater air-connectivity between Bangladesh and northeast India.

It is natural to have bilateral problems with one's neighbours, more so, for India and Bangladesh which share huge land and maritime boundaries, and also use common rivers, rail, road and river networks. However, it is heartening to note that the earlier mistrust and tensions between Bangladesh and India have been largely cleared.

Bangladesh and India can neither change their common history and heritage nor their geography. The only way to resolve the outstanding issues between them is through sustained dialogue with an open mind.

Therefore, as close neighbours, Bangladesh and India should take note of each other's sensitivities and vulnerabilities, and demonstrate greater political will to establish mutually cooperative ties. A stable, strong and friendly neighbourhood is a necessity for any country, big or small, and especially in our region where several armed terrorist groups are eager to exploit differences between the two countries to further their own objectives.

Before I conclude, I would like to mention about the "Sommanona Programme" that was jointly organised by the Governments of India and Bangladesh during the visit of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This was a gesture from Bangladesh in recognising the supreme sacrifice made by 1661 Indian martyrs for the liberation of Bangladesh. Never in the history of the world has a country recognised the contribution of another country by honouring the martyrs at their motherland. The spirit of comradeship of 1971 still remains the foundation stone of our ties and we must remain faithful to it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me underscore, that the recent developments, have taken our bilateral ties to a new multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and comprehensive platform and we have to proceed with a view to establishing a win-win equation for the benefit of our two countries and for the entire region.

Long live Bangladesh-India friendship and cooperation.

Thank you all.

*This is the slightly edited text of the talk delivered by His Excellency Mr Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of People's Republic of Bangladesh to India on the subject 'Trajectory and Future of India-Bangladesh Relations' at the USI on 06 Sep 2017 with Mr Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, IFS (Retd) in Chair.

®**Mr Syed Muazzem Ali**, the Bangladesh High Commissioner to India is a former Foreign Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh. Mr Ali had joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1968, and retired from a distinguished career in the Diplomatic Service in December 2001. Mr Ali regularly contributes articles on South Asian and international issues to various newspapers, magazines and journals. His current interests lie in the interplay of democracy, security, development, and regional cooperation.

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