

## **WORSENING INDIA BANGLADESH RELATIONS**

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Traditionally global and regional geopolitical environments maintain a status quo disposition and radical changes do occur but infrequently. Notwithstanding this historical truth, post the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic four years back, the world has witnessed political upheavals, kinetic conflicts and geopolitical churnings as never before in such a short span of time. The haphazard exit of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021, the surprising albeit unjustified and unwarranted Russian invasion of Ukraine followed by the Israel-Hamas conflict graduating to serious Israel-Hezbollah and Israel-Iranian conflagrations and a few days back, the over 50 years rule of the Assad family in Syria terminating at the hands of the fundamentalist Islamist organisations have all shaken the world away from its quest for peace, harmony, and stability. Further, globally assertive China threatens tiny Taiwan and asserts its illegal dominance in the South and East China seas. Nearer home, serious Chinese incursions leading to physical clashes between Indian and Chinese troops have contributed to the deterioration in India - Chinese relations.

However, the most surprising geopolitical churning in recent times, has been the sudden and totally unexpected ouster of the pro-India Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, of India's eastern neighbour, Bangladesh. That both she and India were caught totally unaware of the rising opposition to 15 years of her party, the Awami League, being in power. Bangladesh now is being administered by an interim government led by former Nobel prize winner economist, Mohd Yunus, supported by the Bangladesh Army, the fundamentalist Jamat-e-Islamia and Sheikh Hasina's principal political opponents, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

It is indeed ironical that currently all these extremist elements display a pro-Pakistani tilt forgetting the fact that in the period 1969-71, before Bangladesh emerged, the breakaway East Pakistan from Pakistan had suffered millions of Bengalis had been slaughtered by the West Pakistanis, lakhs of Bengali women raped by the Pakistan Army and their homes and hearths destroyed by the Pakistanis. Millions of then East Pakistani refugees had sought and obtained refuge in India. Amazingly, India which had supported the East Pakistani struggle for independence from the Pakistani yoke had sacrificed over 17,000 of its troops in its military operations against the Pakistani Army based in the then East Pakistan. Subsequently, after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in Dec 1971, India went out of its way in assisting the economic development of its eastern neighbour. It is now inexplicably and unfairly bearing the brunt of fundamentalist criticism within Bangladesh. The ire of these extremist elements is predominantly now directed against its minorities comprising largely of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Ahmadiyas among others.

Since the expulsion of PM Sheikh Hasina, among its minorities, Hindus in Bangladesh are bearing the brunt of the sudden surge in communal violence. Scores of Hindu temples have been vandalized and torched, hundreds of Hindus homes and shops have been burnt and even the peaceful, charity and social service oriented ISKON temples and their offices destroyed. Just a few days back, the ISKON head monk Chinmoy Krishna Das was taken in custody on trumped up charges of sedition. All across the western world, especially in the United States and United Kingdom, international media has been highlighting the carnage unleashed on the Hindus in Bangladesh by their government, the police and radical elements. Understandably, the Bangladesh administration even at their highest levels have been denying all these charges blaming the Indian media for exaggerating this problem.

India too has been highlighting the atrocities on Hindus to the Bangladesh government, not very firmly though, on grounds of diplomatic correctness perhaps. However, on December 09 2024, India's Ministry of External Affairs Secretary, Vikram Misra, visited Dhaka to convey India's feelings in the current unfortunate events resulting owing to the deteriorating situation between the two neighbours, who once sported a very cordial relationship. He called on the Chief Adviser of the Interim Government of Bangladesh, Dr Mohd Yunus and the Foreign Secretary Jashimuddin. Reportedly, India conveyed its concerns especially related to the safety and welfare of minorities.<sup>[i]</sup> Both sides also held comprehensive discussions covering a wide range of issues like political and security matters, border management, trade, commerce and connectivity, cooperation in water, power and energy sectors and people to people ties. According to well-placed media information, the Bangladesh representatives endeavoured to play down the carnage on the Hindus and other minorities and called all what is happening in Bangladesh as their internal matter and nothing of India's concern.<sup>[ii]</sup> Meanwhile the Bangladesh government has taken, just the other day, unilaterally an unwelcome and an unnecessary diplomatic step of suggesting to the European Union to move its visa centre for its citizens from New Delhi to some other Asian country.

Pakistan, who had prior to its breakup in 1971, executed humongous genocide against its East Bengali population now chances an opportunity to embarrass India on its eastern front. What is surprising is that most of the Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh appear to have forgotten the worst form of atrocities committed on them by the then West Pakistanis in the period preceding their liberation in which India had played a major historical role. This lot of people seem to have replaced their proud Bengali identity by an Islamic fundamentalist one which does not bode well for the original secular orientation of this nation especially when it comes to its relations with India. Thus, a serious diplomatic challenge now awaits India from its eastern neighbour who would now be encouraged by both China and Pakistan to create problems for India.

The Indian government has to tread the path to repair India -Bangladesh relations now with an amalgam of political dexterity, sensitivity and, where required, with firmness. At the outset, we should politely and subtly convey to them that they should not go down the Pakistan way and get ruined politically and economically. Bangladesh depends very largely, economically, on Indian cooperation and to some extent on Indian largesse. Though it is a mutually beneficial trade relationship, Bangladesh is dependent heavily on India for its supply of rice, wheat, onions, sugar, cotton, cereals, iron and steel, plastic, refined petroleum and electronic equipment.<sup>[iii]</sup> Power generation for Bangladesh has been one of India's major assistance endeavours for its neighbour.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Under Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh achieved phenomenal progress in most spheres of economic activity. During her tenure from 2009 to 2024, Bangladesh's economy grew at an impressive rate of 6.3 per cent per annum with its GDP trebled from US \$123 billion to US \$ 455 billion, and its per capita GDP increasing from US \$ 841 in 2009 to US \$ 2650 in 2024. The World Bank has also stated that extreme poverty had declined from about 12 per cent in 2010 to about 5.00 per cent in 2022.<sup>[v]</sup> That Bangladesh imports a variety of goods from India, the current political turbulence will affect both neighbours substantially whilst impacting largely Bangladesh's growth. This adverse fall out will surely not be missed by Bangladesh's current economist interim political chief. India may have to use the economic card to keep Bangladesh on track.

Notwithstanding likely mischief emanating from China and Pakistan to create fissures between India and Bangladesh, this is indeed a testing time for India's diplomacy and strategic prowess. India should continue permitting Sheikh Hasina to stay in New Delhi, or wherever, in India for as long as she wishes. At the highest levels of political engagement, India must make all efforts to keep Bangladesh on the track of good neighbourliness, a secular orientation and it being fair to all its minorities. PM Narendra Modi may wish to invite Bangladesh's Mohd Yunus to meet him in New Delhi to clear the air and fraternal ties between

## End Notes

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