

Indo-Bangladesh Summit: A Security Agenda for Bangladesh

Introduction

Since the assumption of the office by the current Awami League led Grand Alliance government, the upcoming visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India is one of the most high profile bilateral visits. Due to reasons of security and geography, the relationship with India is critically important for Bangladesh. The forthcoming visit, though in a setting of conflicting interests, is a significant one in this changing milieu of emerging perspectives in Bangladesh-India relations. Both countries look forward to bringing about a positive change and settling the unresolved issues through building trust and confidence when a number of agreements and memoranda of understandings are likely to be signed. Security is likely to be the most prominent item on India's agenda for this meeting. However, the security concerns of Bangladesh are required to be adequately highlighted. While it is important to understand and appreciate India's security concerns, similar concerns by Bangladesh also need to be discussed and analysed. In this regard, an assessment of some of vital issues that both countries essentially share has been made in this paper to draw a brief sketch of the concerns having greater security implication for Bangladesh.

What constitutes security: Appreciating Bangladesh's security concerns

While we discuss issues of security with our largest neighbour, it is important for Bangladesh to understand and evaluate our core national interests and values. Once those values are clearly identified and delineated, our discussions on security with our interlocutors in the region would be much easier. While diverse opinion is a basic element of democracy, homogeneity in preserving the core interests is a prerequisite to our safety and security. National interest is best served by friendship and cooperation with all our neighbours. At the same time, while being desirous of building good relationship with a neighbour, a singular focus in our regional relationship may not be to our best interests. We should rather go for a balanced and inclusive relationship with all.

Maritime Security

The issue of maritime dispute with India poses one of the most serious threats to Bangladesh's security. The Bangladesh-India maritime boundary remains unresolved since 1974.¹ To keep pace with the rapidly growing population of the country, the state needs to explore the vast marine resources and the likely reserve of mineral resources in the Bay of Bengal. The maritime disputes with India over delimiting Bangladesh's territorial water and the Exclusive Economic Zones are intertwined with its national integrity. Owing to the disputed nature of maritime boundary, Bangladesh cannot explore and exploit the potentials that lie in the sea.

Not only Bangladesh's economic advancement and progress depend heavily on unobstructed maritime zones and potential resources lying under the sea bed, but an undisputed maritime

boundary gives Bangladesh immense leverages in terms of geo-strategic maneuvering. If the country's sea line of communication is hindered, the pulse of entire economy of Bangladesh and its status as a maritime nation will be hit. Despite the fact that Bangladesh has opted for UN arbitration mechanism to settle maritime dispute with India, the door to negotiation has not been closed entirely. Therefore, the maritime issue needs proper attention when the Prime Ministers of the two neighbours meet in New Delhi.

Environmental /Water Security

The ecological destiny of Bangladesh and India are intertwined. Both the countries share common river basins and hydrological cycles. Being an agrarian state, Bangladesh is heavily dependent on the fifty four rivers that enter Bangladesh from India carrying water. The availability of river water in Bangladesh, both during monsoon and dry season, is determined by the level of water flow from upstream, i.e. India. Unilateral withdrawal of river water by the India will call in catastrophic consequences for Bangladesh. Indian analysts suggest that Indian Government is actively planning to build dam on the Barak river.ⁱⁱ The proposed dam has raised environmental concerns and already has become a political issue in Bangladesh, which is still experiencing the adverse impacts of Ganges and Teesta barrages built in India. Analysts believe that the dam, popularly known as the Tipaimukh dam, on the Barak River would result into drying up of Surma and Kushiara river.ⁱⁱⁱ Indian government is also implementing its "river linking project" to link up major rivers to hold up water in reservoirs and to channel it to Northeast and Southern India.^{iv} This is already a concern for Bangladeshis as many believe it would divert the current flow of water entering into Bangladesh from India.

The dam and the river linking project will render negative ecological and environmental changes in Bangladesh having security fall out. It will create millions of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) impacting national and trans-national stability and peace. Therefore, when the two heads of Governments meet this January, both parties should adequately talk to initiate and establish a regime for "Cooperative Management of Common Rivers". This will not only ensure Bangladesh's water, environmental and ecological security but will also play a vital role to secure peace and stability in the region.

Border Issues & BSF's Killing of Civilians

Bangladesh shares its longest border (4,096 km) with India.^v Some 6.5 km long land border is not demarcated^{vi} and the exchange of enclaves under the '1974 Indira-Mujib Land Boundary Delimitation Agreement' is yet to be implemented by the Indian government^{vii}. On the top of that erecting barbed wire across the Indo-Bangladesh border by the Indian Government and the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians in the borders by Border Security Force (BSF) have posed serious national and human security threats to Bangladesh. According to statistics projected by 'Adhikar', a non-government human rights watchdog, some 62 Bangladeshi civilians were killed by the BSF from January 1 to July 11 2009. In more than nine years between 1 January 2000 and 10 July 2009, a total of 789 people were reportedly killed, 846 injured and 895 abducted by the Indian BSF.^{viii} Addressing this issue in the upcoming meeting at Prime Ministerial level is quite necessary to stop such acts of atrocities affecting peoples' lives. For India, the issue is very important in the sense that it creates a sense of insecurity in the minds of the people of Bangladesh vis-à-vis India and thus generates a feeling of mistrust, suspicion and discord.

Unsettled Enclaves & Human Sufferings

The issue of enclaves along the Indo-Bangladesh border still remains contentious. The Indo-Bangladesh Border agreement inked in 1974 stipulated for expeditious exchange of enclaves.^{ix} The clauses under the 1974 agreement are yet to be implemented by India, despite the fact that Bangladesh has taken some steps unilaterally. There are 111 Indian enclaves in the territory of Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in the Indian territory.^x People in these enclaves lead inhuman lives. The sufferings are immeasurable as people barely have access to medical facilities, education, sanitation, safe water, legal services and relief facilities. The issue has turned into a humanitarian one and needs to be resolved immediately. It is the prime responsibility of the state to provide security to its citizens. If it can not do it, it fails to meet basic rights of the citizens.

Economic Security

Physical proximity has made India the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh while the balance of payment has constantly skewed towards India. It has been observed that large volumes of irregular or informal trade along the border are soaring upwards. In the formal channel, however, Bangladesh's imports in 2007-2008 FY were worth \$3.274 billion and its exports to India were only worth \$358 million in the same year.^{xi} If the informal figure is added, the actual figure in gross imbalance is estimated to be even higher. Moreover, informal trade adds to the denial of legitimate custom revenue for Bangladesh.

This issue continues to be a major irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations as India is perceived to be indifferent to Bangladesh's request to balance the trade relations. Even today, Indian market remains inaccessible for Bangladeshi products for its intriguing and complex trade regime, beset with tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff barriers imposed over the years. This gross imbalance in trade for decades has caused economic insecurity for Bangladesh and it should put increased emphasis and pressure for resolving this nuisance issue aggravating relations with its neighbour. In this cooperative setting of engagement it is also in India's interest to minimise the gaps and seek a workable solution for the outstanding issues between the countries.

Transnational Security Threats

In a mixture of regional conditions and the intrusive forces of globalisation and more importantly for the porous nature of borders, the Indo-Bangladesh border remains both source and destination of inter-related, transnational nature of threats. The smuggling and trafficking in arms, drugs, and human life and organised crime have become rampant impacting the security of the states. Human trafficking involving women and children from Bangladesh is one of the major concerns. A UNICEF report says that approximately 400 women and children fall victim to trafficking each month; a large portion of them are of the ages between 12 and 16 and are forced to work in the commercial sex industry. Another study reports that, approximately 300,000 Bangladeshi children and women between the ages of 12 and 30 have been trafficked to India alone in the last 10 years.^{xiii} It is alleged that India is also being used as a transit route for human trafficking from Bangladesh. In the upcoming dialogue between the two Prime Ministers, this issue must be put on the table. An effective and sustained way out has to be formulated to combat human trafficking in integrated, transnational and collaborative approach.

Militancy and Terrorism

On this critical issue, Bangladesh and India need increased bilateral and regional cooperation to effectively manage a counter terrorism regime. Borders are long and porous, and mutual political antagonism has led the agencies in each country to blame the other for aiding insurgents/separatists. Now, transnational links between religious extremists moving between the two countries are further complicating bilateral relations. These problems can not be resolved without inter-state cooperation. It is in India's interest to cooperate with Bangladesh to prevent the access of militants of Indian Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), infiltrating and operating in Bangladesh.^{xiii} Some cooperation has begun; Bangladesh, for example, has handed over wanted Indian insurgents and their leaders to Delhi^{xiv}, but this cannot be an one-sided process and must be seen to be mutually beneficial to have long-term effect. In addition, to address the roots of the problems of religious extremism and other forms of political violence (such as the radical left, or Maoist insurrection), long-term socio-economic and cultural changes are required, but at that level, neither India nor Bangladesh has shown much wisdom.

Cultural Security

The flow of information and cultural exchanges and literature between Bangladesh and India has become grossly one-sided. While Indian television channels have open and wide access to Bangladesh, the latter does not enjoy the same in India.^{xv} It must be mentioned that Bangladeshi TV programmes are traditionally very popular with the Bengali speaking Indians. This has led a cultural disparity and culture is not mutually exchanged. The denial of information leads to denial of appreciation of the truth regarding each other. Appreciation reduces the gaps in understanding the dynamics of bilateral relations. This issue should be taken seriously and equal access of Bangladeshi media to India needs to be ensured. Through a process of mutual exchange of information and culture, better understanding and cooperation can be assured.

Conclusion

In the context of contiguity of borders and evolving nature of threats from within and outside South Asia, the area of potential cooperation on security issues is much broader. Both countries share interests in effectively managing a security regime which is important not only for countering terrorism but also for maintaining and underpinning a secure atmosphere in relations between the countries. Nonetheless, a security cooperation based on reciprocity in which the concerns of both countries will be given proper attention is a precursor to manage a fruitful security regime. It is in Bangladesh's national interest not to harbour or provide shelter to any insurgents or militants detrimental to Indian security. On the other hand, India should pay due attention to Bangladesh's security concerns and take necessary steps to remedy the existing problems. In the interest of a strong bilateral relationship, while it is important for Bangladesh to understand and address India's security concerns, in turn, it is imperative for India to reciprocate the same for Bangladesh.

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