



THE FOURTH INDIA-BANGLADESH JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMISSION

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj arrived in Dhaka for a brief two-day official visit to the Bangladesh capital on October 21-23, 2017 for the fourth annual meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) to take stock of several issues of bilateral interest.

The JCC meetings between Foreign Ministers and other high ranking officials from the two countries started in 2012, and since then three meetings have taken place. The first such meeting, on May 7, 2012 in New Delhi had set the tone for the JCC, with India and Bangladesh agreeing to increase cooperation in several bilateral issues, including economic ties, visa processes, cross-border activities, water resources, development, and people-to-people contact.¹

The next JCC meeting came less than a year later in February 2013, with a will to sustain the momentum and ensure that high level contacts are maintained, and on this occasion as well past and future projects in multiple sectors were reviewed and directions for the future of the relationship determined.² The third JCC meeting on September 13, 2014 also covered several bilateral issues, assessing the progress in previously agreed projects and agreements, such as those on shipping, water resources, and border controls.³ Effectively, the JCC has emerged as an occasion

¹ "Joint Press Statement on the First Meeting of the Joint Consultative Commission Between India and Bangladesh," *High Commission of India, Dhaka*, May 7, 2012. <https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pages.php?id=530>

² "Visit of Mr. Salman Khurshid to Bangladesh from February 16-17, 2013," *High Commission of India*, February 14, 2013. <https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pages.php?id=345>

³ "Joint Statement on the Third Meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh*, September 20, 2014.

to confirm commitment to bilateral cooperation in multiple areas, discuss and highlight the progress made on erstwhile agreements and commitments, and increasingly to also demonstrate the importance of the relationship to the two countries. Given the strength of the bilateral ties currently between India and Bangladesh, the intent and motivation of the JCC appears to have been successful. It was in this vein that Swaraj was now visiting Dhaka in a delayed fourth JCC meeting.

The visit also showed the increasing importance of India to the internal matters of its eastern neighbor, and indeed the growing economic and political role of India in the region, as well as the role that Bangladesh has in this context. Indeed, this was indicated by Swaraj's emphatic statements, as she noted that Bangladesh gets priority among all neighbors for India,⁴ and that relations were now outstanding, and both countries were working to resolve irritants in the spirit of "friendly relations and with the right intention".⁵

During her short stay, Swaraj inaugurated 15 Indian-assisted development projects in Bangladesh worth about \$8.7 million. These include water treatment plants, community clinics, and temple restoration projects.⁶ The extent of India's significance to the economic and political – and indeed the narrative-building – processes in Bangladesh can also be gauged from Swaraj's meetings with the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajid, and former Prime Minister and leader of the main Opposition party (the Bangladesh Nationalist Party), Khaleda Zia,⁷ as well as the significance given to discourses and memorabilia from 1971 that were highlighted during the visit as well.⁸

Swaraj also backed Bangladesh on the issue of the safe return of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, as Bangladesh had been seeking Indian pressure on Myanmar for the resolution of the ongoing crisis. She said that, "India is deeply concerned at the spate of violence in Rakhine State of Myanmar. We have urged that the situation be handled with restraint, keeping in mind the welfare of the population. It is clear that normalcy will only be restored with the return of the displaced

⁴ "Sushma: Bangladesh gets priority among all neighbours," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 23, 2017. <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2017/10/23/sushma-bangladesh-gets-priority-among-neighbours/>

⁵ "Neighbours first, Bangladesh foremost: Sushma Swaraj," *The Hindu*, October 24, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/neighbours-first-bangladesh-foremost-sushma-swaraj/article19907839.ece>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Sushma Swaraj's Dhaka visit," *First Post*, October 23, 2017. <http://www.firstpost.com/photos/india-gallery/sushma-swarajs-dhaka-visit-external-affairs-minister-attends-india-bangladesh-consultative-committee-meet-4167101.html>

⁸ "Sushma Swaraj to inaugurate 15 India-funded projects during her stock-taking Bangladesh visit," *BDNews24*, October 22, 2017. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/10/22/sushma-swaraj-to-inaugurate-15-india-funded-projects-during-her-stock-taking-bangladesh-visit>

persons.”⁹ Discussions between Swaraj and her Bangladeshi counterpart Abul Hasan Mahmud Ali also included commitments to working together to eliminate terrorism and extremism, as well as water sharing agreements between the two countries.¹⁰ In addition, other matters addressed during the meetings included improved and expansive visa schemes and assessments of the three lines of credit extended by India to Bangladesh over the past few years.¹¹

While it remains to be seen whether this rhetoric and sentiment can be sustained over the years, especially after elections in both countries, the mutual expressions of friendship and commitments to the relationship were visible throughout Swaraj’s visit. It was thus that Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister described the relationship as being at a “historic new height” while Swaraj called it an “all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust and understanding that goes far beyond a strategic partnership.”¹² This phase of the relationship has also been seen as an attempt by India to counter Chinese influence in Bangladesh, where Beijing is making inroads in infrastructure ventures.¹³ Clearly then, these are signs that India and Bangladesh have worked extensively to build a platform for productive bilateral ties, which are also likely to have effects on the region at large.

⁹ “India for safe return of Myanmar nationals, says Sushma Swaraj,” *The Hindu*, October 22, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/return-of-displaced-persons-can-restore-normalcy-in-myanmar-swaraj/article19901490.ece?homepage=true>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “India, Bangladesh resolve to fight terror together,” *The Hindu*, October 22, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-bangladesh-resolve-to-fight-terror-together/article19901477.ece?homepage=true>

¹² “India for safe return of Myanmar nationals, says Sushma Swaraj,” *The Hindu*.

¹³ “India, Bangladesh resolve to fight terror together,” *The Hindu*.