

Improving ties with India: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India

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The visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India from January 10 to 13, 2010, was long anticipated, after the Awami League won elections with a huge margin last year. The Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League is considered very positive about regional cooperation and forging good relationship, particularly with India and generally with other neighbours as well.

Agreements on mutual legal assistance on criminal matters, transfer of sentenced persons and combating international terrorism, organized crime and illicit drug trafficking were inked between Indian and Bangladesh during Prime Minister Hasina's visit, as well as two MoUs on power cooperation and cultural exchanges were signed. The trip was an eagerly observed event for many and for different reasons in Bangladesh. Many people wanted to see a successful and positive outcome of the visit so that years of hostility and mistrust with India should end and the relationship should prosper, while some in the opposition was sceptical of any positive outcome. Thus, the blame game was started even prior to the visit.

The successful nature of the trip can be seen in that it changed the atmospherics of the relationship of distrust which has often tormented ties between the two countries in the past. A joint communiqué¹ of 50 points was issued at the conclusion of the trip. In that communiqué, both the countries have come up with some strong, challenging and ambitious pledges. It can be assumed from the wording of joint communiqué that both the governments in New Delhi and Dhaka believe that their security concerns will be addressed. The Bangladeshi side believes that the sensitivity regarding its maritime boundary, common rivers, trade and economy, etc., will be addressed amicably by the Indian side.

Bangladesh and India's relationship has never been so cordial since the 1975 military coup which changed the power status in Bangladesh. With this visit and in their joint communiqué, the changed mood is clearly reflected.

India's good gesture of announcing of US\$ 1 billion credit/loan to Bangladesh and a promise to expedite agreements on sharing the waters

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of the Teesta² and other common rivers is seen as a great improvement in Indo-Bangladeshi relationship. India also agreed to supply 250 MW electricity to Bangladesh at a rate of around Indian Rs. 2.5 per kilowatt hours (per unit) for next 35 years which can be sold to other neighbouring countries. Such agreements will unleash a series of regional cooperation mechanisms for energy trading amongst Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and India.

However, when it was about opening up the Indian market to Bangladesh products, nothing significant happened. The maritime boundary problem and the Tipaimukh project³ were also discussed and both sides agreed to solve these issues through negotiations.

Bangladesh agreed to open up the Chittagong and Mongla ports to be used by India, Nepal and Bhutan and to allow direct links among Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. This will also promote a sort of sub-regional cooperation in trade of goods. It is entirely a different matter how Bangladesh with its infrastructural constraints will cope with the additional load at its existing port and road infrastructure, without making massive investments for the purpose.

After Prime Minister Hasina's trip to India, the two countries kept up the momentum, and on February 19, 2010, the Bangladesh-India Steering Committee on energy also signed another agreement to jointly set up a 13,250 MW coal-based power plant in the third largest city of Bangladesh, Khulna, and the Indian will have its operational control.

India's intentions in forging closer ties with Bangladesh have certain objectives. First, India wants to have closer cooperation with Bangladesh so that the growing Chinese influence in Bangladesh can be balanced. Secondly, India wants Bangladesh to act against groups that have reportedly established bases on the latter's soil; such as the Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, Jamaat-ul-Mujahidin, Purbo Banglar Communist Party, Bipplobi Communist Party and the Sarbahara Party;⁴all of which are said to be creating problems for India .

Thirdly, India needs energy recourses for its growing economy and Myanmar has huge gas reserves. The proposed Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline project has been in limbo for long because of the domestic opposition in Bangladesh to providing such transit to India.⁵ However, with improved relationship with India, this project could also become a reality. Finally, India is trying to build an image of a responsible regional power by showing its willingness to cooperate with its neighbours and having cordial relationships with them.

Notes & References

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- ¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/document/papers/indiabangjoint2010.htm>
 - ² The River Teesta or Tista flows for almost the entire length of the Indian state of Sikkim and carves out verdant Himalayan temperate and tropical river valleys. The river then forms the border between Sikkim and West Bengal before joining the Brahmaputra as a tributary in Bangladesh.
 - ³ The Tipaimukh Dam is a proposed hydroelectric project, to be built on the river Barak in Manipur state of India. The project has sparked off controversy as India has unilaterally planned to build the dam just 100 km off the Bangladesh border and is likely to affect two major rivers of Bangladesh; namely, the Surma and the Kushiara; and some 60,000 Manipuri people who depend on the rivers for livelihood and other activities.
 - ⁴ Utpal Bhaskar, "India and Bangladesh to hold talks on energy cooperation", www.livemint.com/
 - ⁵ "India proposes joint venture LNG plant in Bangladesh", <http://gurumia.com/2010/04/02/india-proposes-joint-venture-lng-plant-in-bangladesh/>