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Issue Brief

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Hasina-Modi Renewed Power Play in South Asia

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Ahead of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in the second week of April 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "Your dream of golden Bangla is our dream too."¹ However, Modi's love for Bangladesh is largely being viewed with scepticism.



India-Bangladesh relations have been on the upswing since Sheikh Hasina Wajid came to power in 2009. The improved relations are largely due to her efforts to stamp out anti-Indian sentiment from Bangladesh. However, cooperation between the two countries strengthened steadily after Narendra Modi assumed office over three years ago.

What is most notable is the visible growing alliance between the two leaders. Both leaders have enhanced relations in several fields. During Sheikh Hasina's visit to India from April 7 to 10, 2017, both leaders inked 22 agreements in the areas of border security, power, energy, shipping and railways. However, the most challenging issues including water-sharing of Teesta and Feni rivers remained elusive.

There are two compelling reasons for this renewed bonding between India and Bangladesh. First, Sheikh Hasina has continuously been acting upon an anti-Pakistan policy. Secondly, she has been dedicated in her support for Modi's drive to isolate Pakistan.²

Adhering to a pro-Indian design, Sheikh Hasina has always maintained an anti-Pakistan posture and has not been hesitant in expressing her animosity and resentment. In order to please India, Bangladesh, under her leadership, has kept the "hate Pakistan" agenda alive by exploiting the feelings of masses. This ruse has helped the ruling Awami League and Sheikh Hasina Wajid to remain important in Bangladesh's politics regardless of their failure to deliver good governance to the people.

¹ Bangladesh's dream of 'golden Bangla' is also India's dream: High commissioner, *Bangladesh News*, March 20, 2017.

² When Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina visits New Delhi soon, she will be looking for deliverables, *The Times of India*, March 17, 2017.

In this regard, obsessed with her motives of reprisal and political convenience, Sheikh Hasina hastily executed her political opponents. Despite the fact that India had played a major role in the separation of former East Pakistan by manipulating differences between the Bengalis and the non-Bengalis, Hasina remained persistence in hanging her challengers for their loyalty to Pakistan. Over the years, India has also been exerting different tactics to entrap Bangladesh by taking advantage of Hasina's pro-Indian tilt and achieve strategic interests against Pakistan. In this context, Sheikh Hasina has been pursuing Indian directions by conducting an anti-Pakistan campaign and awarded several foreign friends, particularly from India with 'Foreign Friends of Bangladesh Award' in 2013.

Intention behind this gesture was to distort the image of Pakistan and its armed forces vis-à-vis alleged atrocities committed against the Bengalis in 1971. Nevertheless, several writings proved the cited figures of casualties by Sheikh Mujib ur Rehman and his followers as 'exaggerated'. Sarmila Bose a renowned Bengali journalist in her book "*Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*" rejected the three million figure and revealed that total number of Bengalis killed was around 50,000. She also underscored the fact that Bengalis were likewise involved in the bloodshed of Punjabis, Biharis, Pashtoons and Balochis in former East Pakistan.³

In order to pursue its geo-political influence in South Asia, India has openly admitted its role in the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971. In June 2015, speaking at an official ceremony in Dhaka, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted that Indians fought side-by-side with Mukti Jod (freedom fighters)* and realise the dream of Bangladesh."⁴ Yet again, during Sheikh Hasina's recent visit to New Delhi, he admitted that Indian soldiers fought alongside Mukti Bahini during the 1971 war and said that "Every Indian takes pride in the knowledge that Indian soldiers and Bir Mukti Jod have fought together to liberate Bangladesh."⁵

Also, motivated by Indian endeavours to isolate Pakistan, Sheikh Hasina pulled out of the 19th SAARC Summit in 2016. However, despite Indian attempts, its efforts to isolate Pakistan have failed miserably.

At larger level, Indian bonding with Bangladesh is driven by two major objectives. First, to lead Bangladesh as key stakeholder in the Bay of Bengal and make it a centre for India's 'Act East' policy. Secondly, to limit China's rising economic influence in the region. In order to counter China's growing

³ Sarmila Bose, *Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: Hurst, 2011), p. 181.

⁴ Vajpayee an inspiration for many: Modi, *The Hindu*, June 7, 2015

* MuktiBahini

⁵ Hasina, Modihonour Indian martyrs of 1971 war, *Dhaka Tribune*, April 9, 2017.

relations with Bangladesh, Modi's relations with Bangladesh are at an all-time high. Seeking to inject fresh dynamism, Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi signed a defence pact worth \$500 million credit line to support defence related procurements on Sheikh Hasina's visit to India.

Moreover, within Bangladesh, Shiekh Hasina has continuously used her mandate against opposition which has not only undermined the true concept of democracy, but has also prompt a political turmoil within that country. Bangladeshis, especially the political opposition, strongly criticized the recent visit of Hasina to India and called it as a sell out to India.⁶

Despite all resentments from Bangladesh, Pakistan has made continuous efforts to further strengthen relations with Bangladesh. However, Sheikh Hasina has chosen to overlook Pakistan's positive approach and continued her anti-Pakistan policy to please India. While ignoring the public protests within the country, Sheikh Hasina has instigated instability in the country.

Thus, her romancing with India in her drive for regional hegemony, shared acrimony with Pakistan did not do any good to Bangladesh. Rather, it dragged the country into a greater flux and increased suspicion about Hasina's policies for future cooperation. Moreover, such aggressive posture towards Pakistan is not only hampering regional economic development, but also posing challenges to regional peace and stability. Therefore, Sheikh Hasina instead of creating an atmosphere of hatred and revenge by following Modi's vague lines, should adopt an inclusive, tolerant, participatory and democratic approach to ensure regional peace and stability and enhance economic development.

⁶ Larger Conspiracy Behind BNP's Bitter Criticism Of Sheikh Hasina's India Initiative – Analysis, *Eurasia Review*, May 1, 2017.