

Foreign Secretaries meeting in New Delhi:

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There is a saying that one can choose friends but not neighbours. Bangladesh and India are neighbours and they cannot re-fashion geography. The two countries are destined to live next to each other. Therefore both Bangladesh and India must establish a framework in which political, economic, social and environmental concerns are sorted out amicably to the mutual satisfaction.

The annual meeting between Foreign Secretaries of Bangladesh and India is necessary to maintain a constructive bilateral relationship. These meetings nurture the continuing relationship and remove any obstacles in its path.

During the tenure of the past- immediate government of Bangladesh, the annual meetings became biennial events. The Foreign Secretaries met in 2003 and in 2005. After the caretaker government was installed, the Foreign Affairs Adviser of Bangladesh had spoken on sidelines with his counterpart in India during the SAARC Summit in April 2007 on the need of the convening of the meetings annually.

This New Delhi meeting on July 17-18 of Bangladesh and India's Foreign Secretaries M. Tauhid Hossain and Shiv Shankar Menon was a result of this effort..

Judging from media reports, it seems both the Foreign Secretaries attempted to break the deadlock in a number of issues that remain pending between the two neighbouring countries. In that sense, it can be viewed as a success.

Observers note that since April last year, the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been productive. Among the achievements were the start of the Maitri Express between Kolkata and Dhaka in April 2007 and the visit of the Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh, Lt. Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed. Furthermore, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee had visited Bangladesh twice in the last year.

Menon disclosed that Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor would be visiting Bangladesh soon, as also Union Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta.

Dynamics of bilateral relations:

There is always an "India factor" in Bangladesh foreign policy. Bangladesh is surrounded by west, east and north by India, and although south is open to the Bay of Bengal, it has to face powerful Indian Navy on the Sea. Furthermore, India is 23 times larger in territory than that of Bangladesh. This asymmetrical size has an impact on bilateral relations.

Bangladesh-India relations are complex, sensitive and multi-dimensional. Since the two countries are hugging neighbours and share about 4,025 kilometres of land and riverine border, bilateral relations touch many issues of common interest.

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Contemporary practice acknowledges that although governments do not bear the whole burden of bilateral relations, governments lay down policies and remain responsible for responses to issues between countries.

Bilateral relations are the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private manage relations between Bangladesh and India. There is no single model or form of bilateral relations because each nation sets its own priorities with other countries. In essence bilateral relations are based on each other's strength and weaknesses.

New Delhi meeting:

These meetings often are significant, not because they may resolve all issues but provide them with each other's point of view on bilateral issues. In such meetings, when essential points of a dispute are dispassionately analysed, parties may be able to see through areas of possible agreement. The areas of disagreement are to be resolved in future through peaceful negotiations.

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Hossain described his talks with Menon as very useful and constructive. He reportedly said "We did not shy away from discussing all issues which we considered important for the present and the future of the robust, friendly relations between Bangladesh and India. Our discussions have been candid, comprehensive and forward-looking. I have every reason to believe that ours has been a useful round of discussions which would enable us to continue to work constructively in the days and years ahead to enrich our already close bilateral relationship."

While India's Foreign Secretary said: "We had a very good discussion today where we discussed our trade and economic relations, our political relations, common security issues, water issues and the other aspects where we would like to carry our relationship forward," Menon said.

Further Menon said "We both exchanged views on how to deal with some of the humanitarian aspects, water resources issues for instance; and we are trying to enhance cooperation in agriculture and in science and technology. I am confident that this round of Foreign Office consultations helped build trust and understanding between our two countries, and we look forward to continuing this process."

Foreign Secretaries of India and Bangladesh today described terrorism as a global problem, and added that the governments of both countries have been discussing counter-strategies to neutralise this menace at both the bilateral and multilateral levels.

On terrorism addressing, India's Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and his Bangladeshi counterpart Mohammad Touhid Hossain said: "We are convinced that our security is interlinked, and that terrorism will have to be tackled resolutely."

The two officials also confirmed that they had discussed a number of other issues of mutual interest to both countries in great detail and in a candid manner.

Both replied in the affirmative that the issue of water sharing was taken up among others, and Foreign Secretary Hossain said that both sides were in agreement for the setting up of a technical committee "to resolve the issue of embankment protection of the rivers which has been harming the people on both sides of our border."

India and Bangladesh share a 4,096-km land and riverine border. India and Bangladesh have repeatedly accused each other of constructing concrete embankments on the Mahananda River, which causes massive soil erosion, and therefore, loss of territory.

Both sides claim their respective embankments are temporary protective structures while accusing the other of putting up concrete structures.

In fact, the confrontation over the embankment issue took an ugly turn on several occasions in the past and has also sparked off skirmishes between the Bangladesh Rifles and the Border Security Force, leading to the deaths of innocent civilians.

The idea of converting temporary embankments on both sides into permanent structures was mooted at previous meetings of the Joint River Commission and was also proposed by the two countries Water Resources Ministers last year.

To avoid skirmishes, what is necessary is to fix the river boundaries by geographical coordinates so that irrespective of the flow of the river, the boundaries of the two countries remain as they are. This type of boundary has been agreed upon on Naaf river between Bangladesh and Myanmar in 1966, confirmed in 1972.

Both countries share 54 common rivers, including the rivers Ganga and Brahmaputra. Foreign Secretary Menon described the talks with his Bangladeshi counterpart as having "covered all aspects of our relations."

When both were asked about the status of the bilateral investment protection agreement (BIPA), Hossain and Menon said discussions on it were at "an advanced stage of finalization" and "we believe that in the near future we will be able to do something on that."

Conclusion:

The promises of India's Foreign Secretary are indeed foundations of new era of hope for Bangladesh. We trust these promises are translated into action as speedily as possible.

If India nurtures its relation with Bangladesh with a heavy dose of common-sense, I am confident that Bangladesh and India will have lasting friendship and goodwill towards each other. Under that environment, no issue will stand in the way between the two neighbours.

Both nations need to be mindful that the geo-political scene around South Asia is changing. Economic globalization has made it compelling that both countries must seriously consider in integrating their economy first within the two countries, and then with the region including South East Asia and China. Speed and de-regulation are the mantras of globalization and key to success in economic growth and development.

India needs Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needs India in the current regional and global environment. Let the Indo-Bangladesh relations move on a mature partnership on economic, social and political level.

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