

Indian Foreign Minister's Visit to Dhaka

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India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee is no stranger to Bangladesh. He visited Bangladesh a few times in the past. He is a senior Congress politician from West Bengal and whenever the Congress –led government wins election and occupies power in New Delhi, he gets a senior cabinet post. In 1980, he was a Commerce Minister under the Indira government.

His one-day visit on the 19th February to Dhaka is very significant, although his principal purpose was to extend an invitation to the head of Non-Party Care-taker government to participate in the 14th SAARC Summit in New Delhi. Bangladesh occupies the chair of the SAARC as it hosted the last summit in November, 2005.

The Foreign Minister, it seems, is very much aware what issues are sensitive and important for Bangladesh- India relations. Accordingly he specifically touched the trade and water diversion issue of common rivers at the press briefing before he left for New Delhi.

He announced duty free access to two million pieces of ready-made garments from Bangladesh every year to Indian market. He also said that restrictions imposed on cosmetic products from Bangladesh have been eased out. These two announcements are to be considered in the context of huge deficit in trade annually Bangladesh suffers with India.

Dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh relations:

Indo-Bangladesh relations are complex one, vacillating between being very close at certain times and not so close at other times. The ups and downs of relationship appear to arise from different perception on each other's policies by governments of the time. Added to this is the physical size of the two countries.

Bangladesh is placed into a dilemma because it cannot ignore powerful India and at the same time its closeness with asymmetrical identity, such as India, is felt like a "bear hug", somewhat comparable to relations between Canada and the US, which a former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said that living with the US is "like sleeping with an elephant, no matter how friendly and even tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt".

The massive size of India is a geographical reality but this fact should not be a bar to good and friendly relations. If France and Switzerland can have the best of relations, why should it not happen between India and Bangladesh?

My personal experience in Bangladesh Foreign Office (as Director General South Asia & later as Additional Foreign Secretary in the 70s and mid 80s) leads me to believe that

India's policy towards Bangladesh has been largely grounded on strict reciprocity, that means give and take. It is true that reciprocal actions are a part of normal foreign relations. However, in the context of Indo-Bangladesh relations, adherence to strict reciprocity does not always pay dividends for India.

India, being a larger power with large resources, has the responsibility to understand and respect the sensitivity of small neighbours. It may show unilaterally generosity and good neighbourliness towards the neighbouring countries. Former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral in his book (*A Foreign Policy of India: 1998*) writes: "The Gujral doctrine, if I may call it so, states that first with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, we do not ask for reciprocity but give what we can in good faith".

(It is noted that Pakistan is excluded in the list of countries).

Trade issues:

Bangladesh's need for larger market access to India is of some urgency. One of the issues that have disappointed Bangladesh is the absence of seriousness of India in attempting to reduce the trade gap between them. Trade and non-tariff barriers impede the flow of exports to India from Bangladesh.

Huge trade deficit has become a political issue in the country. It is partly because India's dominance in Bangladesh market is seen by many people as "exploitation" of a big country to a small country (India is at least 23 times larger than that of Bangladesh). This is a reality.

The formal and informal trade from India to Bangladesh is almost US\$3 billion, while Bangladesh exports to India stand to nearly US\$ 100 million only. Furthermore Bangladeshi products including cement and fruit juices reportedly meet strict non-tariff barriers such as government's rules, regulations and certification from Bureau of Indian Standards.

The requirement of 40% per cent value addition in export items from Bangladesh to India to qualify duty free access is very difficult to meet for Bangladesh traders. India has been so far lukewarm to grant of preferential access for exports from Bangladesh. Although India proposed FTA (free trade agreement), the devil lies in details.

Many economists of both countries believe that in the days of economic globalization, closer economic integration of Bangladesh's economy with that of India is likely to bring benefits to both. Before 1947, their geography gave them a common market and a common communication and transit system. Now as independent nations, both can take advantage of the most obvious similarities and opportunities they have. (By the way it is regrettable there is no direct air link between Dhaka and New Delhi).

New era of cooperation:

The Foreign Minister's announcements bring a new hope that the two countries may steadily move forward to explore and exploit advantages each nation has in the area of resources, so that they can make greater use of their own resources, national and collective, in trade, investment, energy and harnessing of water resources.

It is desirable that both countries should have a comprehensive planning and view of cooperation. Steps may be taken by phase-wise but the comprehensive view must not be lost in the way.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's call at the Dhaka summit that "all South Asian countries would provide to each other, reciprocally, transit facilities to third countries, not only connecting one another, but also connecting to the larger Asian neighbourhood, in Gulf, Central Asia and South East Asia" has been a visionary statement. Leaders of all South Asian countries must seize this opportunity to make it happen.

Water resources development and Tipaimukh Dam:

Water resources management of common rivers is a multilateral effort and endeavour among riparian countries. Any siphoning off water at the upstream will certainly affect downstream flow. No upper riparian country can interfere or disturb by artificial structures in the normal flow of a common river without consultation and agreement with other riparian countries.

The Foreign Minister's statement that the Tipaimukh 1500 MW hydro-electric dam on the Barak River across the Bangladesh border in the east will not divert waters from the river appears to skirt the real issue.

The issue in the Tipaimukh dam is not the diversion of water but storage of water of Barak River for generating electricity that India reportedly might sell to other countries.

Bangladesh water resources experts believe that the dam will have a negative impact on the normal flow of water of Barak River and that is of great concern to Bangladesh. Any interference on the normal flow of water in Barak River would have adverse effect on Surma River in Bangladesh that in turn feeds the mighty Meghna River that flows through Bangladesh. Therefore the adverse chain effect from the Tipaimukh dam in Bangladesh needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, no detailed planning of the dam has been provided to Bangladesh to assess the full impact in Bangladesh. India, being an upper riparian country, has an obligation under international law, coupled with spirit of good neighbourliness, to discuss the construction of such a huge infrastructure on the common river, with its lower riparian, Bangladesh.

India is a coal rich country, Bangladesh is gas-rich and Nepal is hydro-rich potentiality of 80,000 MW. It is desirable that Bangladesh, India and Nepal should establish a common

energy grid and harness the water resources of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin linked with hydro-power potential.

SAARC Summit in New Delhi:

Let me say a few words about the April summit in New Delhi. The 14th summit is a great opportunity of the leaders of South Asia to discuss and map out a strategy for a long term vision for common benefits of 21% percent of world's population (1.3 billion people) of South Asia, where 50% per cent of world's poor live.

Many believe previous summits were very much a pageantry show. The Summit Declarations were largely "motherhood statements" and concrete action on key issues was absent.

Against the background, the New Delhi summit should be a working one without much fanfare. Ceremonial aspect of the summit may be kept to a minimum like that of the G-8 summit.

Furthermore, agenda-items in the past summits are too many like those of the UN General Assembly and lacked sharp focus. It is desirable to prioritise items of the summit and it should not be more than five common "burning" issues. It is suggested that at the New Delhi summit may include items such as, energy, transit and communication, water resources development management, and environment. A Monitoring Cell may be created by SAARC nations to oversee the implementation of decisions.

Conclusion:

It is long term interest of India to have a cooperative and friendly relation with a neighbour because a disgruntled neighbour may cause difficulties in the way of India's pursuit of long run regional or global interests. At the same time Bangladesh has to face the challenge of living with the reality that India is a rising power in Asia with its own regional and global interests.

In this context, India's Foreign Minister's visit has injected a fresh dynamism in Indo-Bangladesh relations. One hopes that a stage has been set for a mature partnership. There is no adequate reason why the relations between the two hugging neighbours cannot but be friendly and harmonious if mutual respect and understanding exist for each other.