

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India: Momentous Occasion

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Majority of people in South Asia looks at India, the larger and resourceful neighbour with admiration and apprehension.

Admiration is felt because the neighbour, having common bonds of history and geography, has been emerging as a global political and economic power and apprehension emanates from stresses when neighbours are not sure of their position in the new geopolitical environment

In Bangladesh foreign policy, "India factor" looms large because many bilateral issues are pending for a long- time, some of them affect directly people in Bangladesh. It cannot be denied that a negative image of India in the country does exist because of non-cooperative policy toward Bangladesh.

All the pending bilateral issues are well-known and they cannot be resolved mainly because of lack of confidence and mistrust on each other.

The overall relationship between Bangladesh and India has often been affected by varying political complexion of governments in two countries.

In settling the disputes, Bangladesh's gains do not have to come at India's expense, or vice versa. India and Bangladesh are not locked in some *Manichean*, existential conflict. "win-win solutions" are possible on all the issues.

It is easy, and pointless, to spend endless amount of time in a dialogue of the deaf discussing how one country has never done the right thing by the other. It is of no use of playing "blaming game" on each other. We must look forward with constructive spirit to develop sustained friendly and cooperative bilateral relations.

The opportunity must not be missed:

The installation of the Awami League and the Congress party to power with the large mandate from people in the two countries in 2009 created a congenial ambience to settle the long-standing issues through productive negotiations because of the historic links between the two parties since the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

The opportunity must not be missed during the tenure of the two governments. One year has almost passed and four more years lie ahead to put Indo-Bangladesh relationship on a firm friendly and trustful footing.

Against the background, Bangladesh Foreign Minister's four day visit to New Delhi from September 7 to 10 was productive. A positive direction of relationship may be gleaned from the joint statement issued after the Foreign Minister's visit.

Bangladesh to be “an economic hub of activities”:

The Prime Minister has expressed her desire to strengthen Bangladesh’s relations with all the neighbours and her four-day visit to Bhutan on 6th November is a testimony to this fact. Her vision to turn Bangladesh into “an engine of economic growth” in cooperation with neighbours has found resonance in other countries.

The use of geographical and resource endowments has been the key to peace and prosperity and the eastern region of South Asia including Bangladesh will flourish most when connected to itself and the rest of the world.

Bangladesh Prime Minister has emphasized the need for interconnectivity within the region and Bangladesh became a party to the Asian Highway Network, proposed by ESCAP. She also proposes to build a deep seaport near Cox’s Bazar, a gate way to the Bay of Bengal, which may be used by all neighbours and China.

New Delhi Visit:

The New Delhi visit is viewed as crucial to demonstrate a commitment to addressing bilateral issues and the recent announcements from Dhaka and New Delhi are a mix of aspirations, good intentions and in most cases the targets are politically plausible or doable.

As the Bangladesh government prepares for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s inaugural visit in the third week of December, India’s Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao visited Dhaka on 14th November and the two Foreign Secretaries have reportedly finalised the agenda for the trip.

Against the background, there is a macro list which identifies topics that may require regional or sub-regional solution. This list would include matters, such as, environment, energy, food security, utilization and management of water resources, human trafficking, terrorism, smuggling of arms and sub-regional economic integration among Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and North-East Indian states.

Among bilateral issues, a few “deliverables” could be identified and if implemented would significantly contribute to confidence-building measures and would create a positive image of India in Bangladesh. In this context, vigorous preparations are afoot by both governments for the visit with a view to concluding five agreements in New Delhi.

On 2nd December, in New Delhi, the Home Secretaries of both countries agreed on deals on crime-related matters and counter-terrorism. Furthermore, it is reported that two more deals on energy and road and rail infrastructure in the country are being discussed between both the parties.

On 4th December, the Joint Rivers Commission has met in Dhaka and Bangladesh has been pressing India to conclude an agreement on sharing of Teesta River, partly because the country's largest irrigation project is sited on the Teesta,

Without going into specific issues, I would argue that overall bilateral relations may proceed within the following framework:

First, as an aspiring regional and global power, India has the responsibility to understand and respect the sensitivity of a smaller neighbour, such as Bangladesh.

Second, the gains in each and every case are unlikely to be equal for both countries. Bangladesh may gain more than India in some areas and reverse might be the case in other areas for India. It is a challenge to the skill in negotiations to make it a "win-win" situation for two countries.

Third, a comprehensive or sector-wise approach of all bilateral issues is to be considered, rather than addressing an issue on a piecemeal. In the past, India sought to negotiate a single issue on a bilateral basis, without appreciating that it is inter-connected with other issues and does not admit easy solution.

Fourth, if India pursues its policy in terms of the "Gujral doctrine", goodwill will emerge between the neighbours. The "Gujral doctrine" means strict reciprocity is not intended for smaller neighbours and whatever accommodation India is able to give, it provides without asking reciprocity

Finally, what India has to do is to adopt a regional or sub-regional policy-approach where all its smaller neighbours are on board for commonality of interests. A sub-regional unit comprising Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and northeastern states of India could be made an engine for economic growth because there are many opportunities to explore and exploit natural and human resources to mutual benefits. Later, the sub-region may extend its links with ASEAN and China.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has to live with a reality that the country cannot remain insular from developments in India and China and Bangladesh must explore the advantages of its geographical position for its benefits.

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

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.

Given the right spirit and the desire to live together in cooperation, there is no reason why the two countries cannot proceed with constructive relations for mutual benefit.