

## **Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: A Palpable Thaw**

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

### **Summary**

*For nearly a decade, Bangladesh-Pakistan relations have been icy. Now a palpable thaw appears to be in the offing. This paper seeks to explain why. It argues that the current sovereign nations of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – the ‘core’ of the former British India – constitute a subsystem of their own within the subordinate state system of South Asia. Bilateral relations between any two of them cannot be properly understood without a reference to the third, with all three reacting to the foreign and domestic policies of one another.*

### **The Prime Ministerial Phone Call**

The most significant telephone conversation in the South Asian subcontinent in recent times was that between the Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Imran Khan of Pakistan which took place on 23 July 2020. There was nothing exceptional about the contents of the call. What was remarkable, however, was the fact that such a call was made at all (by Khan) and received (by Hasina), and the impact it had, not loud but subtle, on bilateral relations. It was, in the least, a signal to all concerned, including to their respective compatriots, businesses and officials that a thaw in the ties was in the offing.

These relations have been cool, bordering on icy, since Hasina became Prime Minister in 2009. The main apple of discord was the decision of the Bangladesh government to try and, thereafter, proceed with the execution of a number of right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, reputed to be pro-Pakistani. Khan’s predecessors in Islamabad went public with their disapproval and Hasina took umbrage. Diplomatic relations soured to the extent that Dhaka withheld the agreement of the Pakistani High Commissioner. When Khan came to power in 2018, a change was expected. However, it was slow in coming. It seemed that both sides were waiting for the right time. Eventually, the constellation of forces was perceived to be favourable and the moment was seized as the July call indicated.

### **Bangladesh, India and Pakistan: A Three-Body Subsystem**

At this time, particularly as the wider regional organisation, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has become ineffective, it would perhaps be more apt, for the purpose of this analysis, to see India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as a three-body subsystem within what Michael Brecher has called “the subordinate state system of Southern Asia”.<sup>1</sup> These three countries share a common ethos rooted in their social, ethnic and historical tradition, also having been a part of British India in their colonial past administered initially from Calcutta (1857-1911) and, thereafter, from New Delhi (1857-1947). Those

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Brecher, ‘International and Asian studies: The Subordinate State System of Southern Asia’, *World Politics*, Vol 15, No 2, January 1963, pp. 213-35.

elements bind them together as well as set them apart from the other state actors in the sub-region.

This is why any examination of bilateral relations among any two of the three would need to factor in all three countries. Their continued interactions have bred conflict and cooperation, drawn from past experiences still relevant, and each is a factor in the external expression, in policy and action, of the others. However, since each is a sovereign entity now, the countries also relate to the rest of the international community, unlike in the past. One powerful neighbouring country, which has inserted itself into this intra-mural sub-regional relationship in contemporary times, is China.

## **Determinants of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy**

Since its independence, Bangladesh has followed a strategy, and this is a constant with almost all its governments, of seeking to live *in concord with* but *distinct from* its neighbour, India. The concord was, and is, necessary because Bangladesh is geographically almost totally 'India-locked', and that India is much larger and far more powerful. The distinctiveness was, and is, essential because Bangladesh's own identity, as a nation with largely two major components, 'Bengali-ness' and 'Muslim-ness', cannot be otherwise defined. As a weaker country, the tendency was to make up for this power-gap on the part of Bangladesh by creating for itself a web of extra-regional linkages with other sovereign actors. Bangladeshi policymakers have not articulated it in these terms, but it has been almost a reflex action on their part in their diplomacy.

India lay at the centre of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Much of everything else was peripheral. An important extrapolation from these factors is the fact that the distinctions between national identities in the same region or sub-region can often become blurred. In such situation, the weaker nation-state needs to maintain, whatever distinction there is, in constant focus to prevent total submergence in the 'mother culture'. A continuous assertion of such behaviour can, and often does, breed strain in mutual relations.<sup>2</sup>

## **Bangladesh and Pakistan**

At the outset, bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan did not work well, as Pakistan, angered by the loss of such vast territory, was hostile. Pakistan followed the 'Hallstein doctrine'<sup>3</sup> severing diplomatic relations with any country that recognised Bangladesh's sovereignty, a policy that was unsustainable as most countries eventually did. Thereafter, the Organization of Islamic Countries (then called the Organization of Islamic Conference) intervened and brought about a détente between the two member-states. Subcontinental politics are often determined by rapport among individuals, which oftentimes have rendered rivals eventual partners. So, it was between Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's Father of the Nation, and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Leader and Prime Minister of Pakistan. Eventually, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

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<sup>2</sup> Iftekhar A Chowdhury, 'Strategy of a Small-Power in a Subsystem', *Australian Outlook*, April, 1980, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> This flows from the principle followed by the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) not to maintain diplomatic relations with any country that recognised the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in the early days of the Cold War. However, it did not apply to the Soviet Union.

joined in; the Shimla Agreement was signed in 1973, establishing working relations among the three countries.

In the decades that followed, Bangladesh-Pakistan relations developed in phases. There were two outstanding issues hanging fire: one was of division of assets and the other was the fate of Bihari refugees in Bangladesh who, Bangladesh claimed, were actually 'stranded Pakistanis' and should be repatriated. However, the countries were not neighbours and had no border issues or territorial disputes. Oftentimes, they had common positions on global issues, such as Palestine, Afghanistan and postures against Islamist fundamentalism. Trade grew. The militaries, powerful constituency in both countries, cooperated in United Nations peacekeeping activities. Both countries became deeply involved in SAARC activities, an organisation that Bangladesh took a modicum of pride in initiating. What evolved was a favoured relationship, even though without fervour.

## **Bangladesh and India**

With India, relations, that in the past were both fair and fraught, advanced with Hasina's Awami League in power. Land boundaries were demarcated. Bangladesh assured India security by denying Indian insurgents a safe haven within its territory. It also allowed transit and trans-shipment for Indian goods. The personal rapport between Hasina and earlier Foreign Minister and thereafter President Pranab Mukherjee of the Congress Party acted as an additional fillip. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while his standing within the Indian government might have lacked authoritative clout, was respected as an economist by his Bangladeshi professional peers, who were also key members of the civil society elite, a powerful pressure group in the polity. The Gandhi family, whose scion now was Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi, occupied a niche in Bangladeshi hearts because of their contribution to the country's liberation. All these connections led to expressions and articulations of closeness and proximity, expressed by leaderships on both sides, bordering on the euphoric.

However, there were differences: the failure to accede to the Teesta river water distribution agreement was a sore point with the Bangladeshi government and its people. The continued shooting of Bangladeshis at the borders by the Indian security forces was the subject of considerable ire in Bangladesh. However, New Delhi's Congress leadership seemed to be able to persuade Dhaka, and resolutions to the issues were just beyond the rim of the saucer. One could be forgiven for thinking that Bangladesh was adopting the 'pilot fish behaviour', that is, a small fish tacking close to the shark (or much larger fish) in order to avoid being eaten.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, India underwent a huge political change. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept into power in New Delhi. Initially, Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to follow a 'neighbourhood first' policy, though the thrust was on Pakistan. Then, there was the emphasis on 'Acting East'. On both counts, Bangladesh ought to have been on focus. However, in terms of Modi's wider aspirations, which from regional quickly went global,

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<sup>4</sup> Erling Bjøl, 'The Small State in International politics', in August Schou and Arne Olav Bundtland (eds.), *Small States in International Relations*, (Almqvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1971), p. 33.

Bangladesh did not find a place of priority on the agenda. The leadership in Dhaka and the new rulers in Delhi were mostly unknown to each other. Gradually, the unresolved issues dating back to the days of the Congress came to the fore. India-Bangladesh relations continued to inch forward, but the differences now assumed more salient proportions.

## **Structural Problem**

Eventually a structural problem developed. The BJP's drive towards *Hindutva*, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the National Register of Citizens and the abrogation of the special status to Jammu and Kashmir were perceived negatively by Bangladesh's Muslim majority. While the Dhaka government acknowledged that many of these were India's internal matters, the dynamics of sub-continental politics rendered them regional. Furthermore, Bangladeshis, striving to maintain secularism in their own constitutional and social fabric, perceived BJP India's predilections for illiberal majoritarianism as a misguided value providing wrong signals vis-à-vis their own societal equilibrium.

Forced by the pressure of public opinion, at a time when Bangladesh was being buffeted by the twin challenges of floods and COVID-19, the government went circumspect on proximity to India. Matters were exacerbated by the reception that Hasina received during the last visit to India, which apparently lacked the warmth of those of the past.

## **Enter China**

Into this complex cauldron entered the influence of China with its deep pockets. China had all this time been penetrating important segments of the Bangladeshi constituencies: businesses, industry, intelligentsia and the military. On a visit in 2016, President Xi Jinping offered project support worth over US\$24 billion (S\$33 billion). It seemed for a while that in Bangladesh, China and India had reached a *modus vivendi* whereby China focused on the economic while India on the political and security matters.

However, the lines became blurred with Bangladesh's large military procurements from China, including two submarines. For instance, submarines would require an eco-system to be maintained, which meant Chinese personnel and material in the Bay of Bengal, which India would find unsavoury. Also, this dichotomy with China focused on the economy and India on political connections, became further unsustainable when China-India relations deteriorated at the Himalayan borders. Placed between having to choose between Scylla and Charybdis, Dhaka became muted when Delhi expected support. A Bangladeshi analyst and retired Ambassador recently wrote, "Prime Minister Modi's domestic agenda will enhance the present distance between Hindu India and Muslim Bangladesh and push Bangladesh further towards China."<sup>5</sup>

## **Beginnings of Bangla-Pak Thaw**

For some years in the meantime, there had been very little interaction between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Diplomatic spats followed the differences over the trials of those accused of

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<sup>5</sup> M Serajul Islam, 'Riva Ganguly Incident as Dhaka Drifts towards Beijing', *The New Age*, 9 August 2020.

war crimes in Bangladesh. However, Khan projected what seemed a deftly calibrated set of moves, such as praising Hasina's and Bangladesh's economic achievements and being critical of Pakistani army actions in 1971, which were well-received by the Bangladeshis.

Eventually, after two years of wait, in November 2019, Bangladesh accorded approval to the appointment of a new Pakistani High Commissioner, Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, who arrived in Dhaka in January 2020. He became active fairly quickly and the prime ministerial telephone call in July 2020 cited earlier, followed a meeting between him and the Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdul Momen. Speaking to the media, Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson, Aisha Farooqui, said, "We look forward to having a sustained dialogue with the government of Bangladesh on how best our bilateral relations can move forward on a positive trajectory".<sup>6</sup>

## Partitions and Prognosis

Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan, as well as with India, can be explained in terms of its dual heritage of Muslim-ness and Bengali-ness. Historically, Bangladesh nationhood evolved through its dealings with both the major communities of the sub-region: Hindus, of largely West Bengal, Assam and Tripura; and their fellow Muslims in the subcontinent, including in parts of the latter that assumed the form of Pakistan.

It had taken three partitions to reach this point of the 'three states in the sub-system': 'Partition Mark I' in 1905 when eastern Bengal was hived off from Bengal and linked to Assam by the Viceroy Lord Curzon (the British rescinded the Partition in 1911 under pressure from political movements by the Calcutta-based Hindu *bhadralok*);<sup>7</sup> 'Partition Mark II' when East Bengal was once again separated from West Bengal in 1947 and formed a part of Pakistan; and finally 'Partition Mark III' when East Bengal was bifurcated from Pakistan in 1971 leading to its current sovereign status as Bangladesh. It seems that the ferment, domestic and external, will cease only when the two major communities in South Asia, Hindus and Muslims, are able to mutually co-exist.

## The Swinging Pendulum

To conclude, the traditional behaviour-pattern of the East Bengali Muslims in the three-body system (comprising themselves, and their Hindu and Muslim neighbours) has been the basic strategy of countering threat perception from one by seeking an alliance with the other.<sup>8</sup> This was reflected in their politics through the period of British India. There was one significant change by 1971 when Bangladesh became independent. The 'three bodies' of the sub-system previously operated within a single political entity, British India. However, by now, they were three sovereign states: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. These were now operating on a 'multi-body' global matrix, comprising many nations.

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<sup>6</sup> Saima Shabbir and Shehab summon, 'Pakistan, Bangladesh in 'quiet' Diplomacy to Ease decades of Acrimony', *Arab News*, 2 August 2020.

<sup>7</sup> For an explanation of the *Bhadralok* as a Weberian status group, see JH Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, (University of California Press, 1968), pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> For further elaboration of this practice and behaviour, see my essay, 'Prehistory of Bangladeshi Nationalism and a Theory of Tripartite Balance', *Asian Affairs*, December 1982, pp. 406-433.

This rendered the situation more complex, for instance, as this paper indicates, by the insertion of China into the power play. The author would, however, argue the broad behaviour pattern of Bangladesh and the Bangladeshis remain much the same as in their past *avatar*, like a pendulum swinging from one side to the other, in reaction to domestic and external stimuli. It would, therefore, be logical to view the predictable thaw in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations in this light.

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Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. He was former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.