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**Migration, River Management,
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the Future Hold for India-
Bangladesh Relations?**

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ABSTRACT

India and Bangladesh's relationship has been growing steadily over the past few years, especially since Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power in January 2009. In 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the relationship as being in its "golden era (*Sonali Adhyay*).” Indeed, Bangladesh is at the centre of India's flagship 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, and has been crucial in ensuring peace and stability in India's northeast region. Bangladesh and India have also been collaborating in various regional and sub-regional groups like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal grouping). However, despite these developments and the existing bonhomie between the two countries, there remains a degree of scepticism about the future of the relationship. This paper analyses the challenges that threaten to cloud India and Bangladesh's relations.

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INTRODUCTION

India and Bangladesh had a warm and cordial beginning, with India being one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Not only did India help the Bangladeshi freedom fighters during the 1971 war, it also assisted in its post-war reconstruction by providing financial assistance—around US\$32 million worth of commodity assistance, and another US\$12 million to help Bangladesh meet its foreign exchange reserves. The Indian Railway Board and Corps of Engineers of the Indian Army repaired 247 bridges and restored around 1,747 miles of railway tracks.¹

Over the years that followed, India and Bangladesh made significant progress in furthering bilateral ties. It has not been a straight and upward trajectory all throughout, however. For a long time, the relationship was mired in mistrust and suspicion, but the political will displayed by the top leadership of both countries helped in resolving some long-standing issues; other important issues remain unaddressed. In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described India–Bangladesh relationship as being in its “golden era (*Sonali Adhyay*).”²

This paper is an attempt to identify the various factors that might challenge the bilateral relations, and highlights the need for pre-emptive policy formulations to avoid potential pitfalls in the relationship. The first section gives an overview of the bilateral relationship since 1971, when Bangladesh attained independence. The second section deals with the current challenges affecting the bilateral relationship, taking into account both internal and external factors. The third section highlights the need for a detailed analysis of the economic transformation adding new dimension to issues like migration and trade relations ahead, and

the need for effective policy response that is free from influence of any kind of geopolitical contestations in the region. The fourth section concludes the paper.

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Mujibur Rahman, the leader of Bangladesh's freedom struggle and the country's first Prime Minister, in his first press conference in independent Bangladesh on 14 January 1972, said that the relationship with India is special and the friendliest one. In February 1972, he visited Kolkata at the invitation of the Government of India and addressed a gathering where he expressed the gratitude of the government and people of his country to the government and people of India, particularly to the bordering states of West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam for the support and cooperation given to millions of Bangladeshi citizens during the liberation war.³ Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi reciprocated with a visit to Bangladesh, and emphasised that India's friendship with Bangladesh is based on equality and mutual benefit, and that India's offer of cooperation is not to wield any influence but its desire to see Bangladesh emerge as a self-reliant nation.⁴

During Mujibur Rahman's tenure, India and Bangladesh signed some important agreements related to water, connectivity, cultural relations, science and technology. These include the Statute on Joint River Commission, Agreement regarding Telecommunication, Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, Trade Agreement, and Agreement on Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy. However, the most significant was the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace, a 25-year-long treaty signed with the vision of cementing the relations. The two countries continued their efforts in resolving disputes and signed the Land

Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 1974. However, the agreement could not be operationalised because it was not ratified by the Indian parliament. This would happen only in 2015, bringing closure to the various land boundary disputes between India and Bangladesh. The deal paved the way for the exchange of 162 enclaves, as well as the resolution of issues related to undemarcated territory.

After the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in a military coup in 1975, the military dictators who succeeded him started distancing the country from India to an extent that anti-India rhetoric became a mark of patriotism for the regime. The military dictator Gen. Ziaur Rahman called for national unity to thwart foreign intervention. Analysts had no doubt that he was referring to India in his speech.⁵ Amidst the strained relationship, the agreement on the Farraka Barrage was signed in November 1977, which devised a formula for the sharing of Ganges water in the dry season, though the agreement was in place for only five years.⁶ Ziaur Rahman was killed in a military coup in 1981, following which there was an era of political instability.

Justice Abdus Sattar, who was Vice President under Ziaur Rahman, was elected as President of Bangladesh in December 1981 but his government was soon toppled by Army Chief General Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1982. Although H.M. Ershad visited India in October 1982 and July 1986 and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reciprocated twice—to express solidarity for the flood victims of Urir Char and to participate in the 1st SAARC summit in Dhaka—there were no tangible outcomes. The Ershad regime ended in 1990 after a mass movement led by the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in support of democracy.

In 1991, democracy was established in Bangladesh. Although

there was a ray of optimism about a better relationship, the Begum Khaleda Zia-led BNP won the election in 1991 and was known for its reservations towards India. Indeed, India became one of the key factors in the election campaign. The perception of Awami League being India-friendly led BNP to take an anti-India stance. In May 1992, Khaleda Zia visited India and the two countries came to a resolution of some of their key issues, like India handing over the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh. The Khaleda Zia government maintained an antagonistic attitude towards India and, at the same time, enhanced the country's ties with Pakistan. Bangladesh was used as a transit by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence to foment subversive activities within India during Begum Zia's tenure (1991–96).⁷

The Awami League's victory in 1996 marked improvement in India–Bangladesh relations. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Mujibur Rahman, declared that she would not allow any anti-India activities in her country. Bangladesh's gesture was reciprocated by many Indian leaders and particularly by I.K. Gujral, the then foreign minister in the H.D. Deve Gowda government and who later became prime minister and propagated a policy of India garnering goodwill among the neighbours by accommodating their demands without seeking reciprocity.^a The landmark 30-year-long Ganges Water Treaty was an outcome of this doctrine. The upward trajectory of the bilateral relations continued and a Dhaka–Kolkata bus service was started on 19 June 1999 to improve connectivity between the two countries. India also agreed to provide duty-free access to select Bangladeshi products and provided INR 200 crore (approximately US\$28 million) of credit line to Bangladesh for buying transport equipment from India. Given the warmth in the relationship, Prime Minister Hasina initiated efforts

a This would eventually be known as the Gujral Doctrine.

to implement transit to India to reach its northeast regions (NER) by land. However, the effort was lost in the interplay of politics inside Bangladesh because of resistance from the opposition parties.

The bonhomie between India and Bangladesh faced a jolt when BNP won the election in 2001. The BNP led by Khaleda Zia formed the government with the support of the hardline religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami as coalition partner. The anti-India activities grew in Bangladesh and despite India's repeated plea, Bangladesh did not act against the anti-India insurgents operating from there, and in fact, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia referred to them as 'freedom fighters.'⁸ To make matters worse, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Morshed Khan accused India of harbouring anti-Bangladeshi militants and claimed that India's intelligence agency RAW was behind the countrywide bomb attacks in August 2005.⁹ The Khaleda Zia government's antagonistic stance towards India hampered the progress of various regional and sub-regional projects. For instance, her government declined to join the Trans-Asian Highway Project, an idea floated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), on the grounds that it will pass through India and might help India to gain transit to its north-eastern states via Bangladesh. The India-Myanmar-Bangladesh (IMB) trilateral gas pipeline also got stalled. The pipeline would have helped resolve the problem of energy deficiency in both the countries.

Khaleda Zia's tenure ended with political logjam after Awami League declined to participate in the parliamentary election, questioning the transparency of the caretaker government in 2006.¹⁰ Violent clashes broke out and the caretaker government resigned, resulting in a constitutional deadlock. Emergency was imposed and a military-backed caretaker government stepped in to break the impasse.

The military-backed caretaker government was in power from January 2007 to December 2008. The bilateral relations improved over this period, the highlight being the rejuvenation of military cooperation and the exchange of visits of the army chiefs in 2008 that took place after a gap of nearly a decade. The train service between Dhaka and Kolkata was also resumed after being suspended in 1965. India, in a friendly gesture, unilaterally declared to provide duty-free access to two million pieces of Bangladeshi garments, which was widely appreciated in Bangladesh.

The victory of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina in December 2008 strengthened the relationship further. Sheikh Hasina declared that improving relationship with India was her priority and pledged not to allow any group inimical to India's interest to be active in her country. Accordingly, security forces in Bangladesh launched operations against such groups and helped in arresting leaders of various northeast Indian insurgency groups, including the chair of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Arabinda Rajkhowa and chief of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Ranjan Daimary. Several militant leaders of these two organisations were handed over to India.

India's relationship with Bangladesh deepened further with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's consecutive victory in the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections. It has helped to maintain consistency in the relationship and to expand cooperation in multiple areas including connectivity, energy, space, and climate action. Around 50 institutional mechanisms have been established between India and Bangladesh in areas of security, trade, power and energy, transport and connectivity, science and technology, defence, river management, and maritime affairs. The initiation of consultations between the foreign ministers every six months alternatively in India and Bangladesh to review the

bilateral relationship has been promising. The peaceful resolution of the boundary dispute (land and maritime) is a success of this period. Other key outcomes include: (a) India's US\$ 8-billion line of credit to Bangladesh for development of various infrastructure projects including railways and energy pipelines¹¹; (b) Initiation of power trading by connecting the electricity grids of the two countries (India is exporting around 660 megawatts of power to Bangladesh); and (c) Enhancement of the rail and road connectivity with the revival of many old rail and road linkages that were abandoned in 1947, and the addition of new links.¹²

FUTURE RELATIONS: KEY FACTORS

Bangladesh stands at the centre of India's flagship 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies. A good relationship with Bangladesh will help ensure peace and stability in India's NER, increase connectivity with the NER and promote its economic development. Bangladesh is also collaborating with India in various regional and sub-regional cooperation groups like the BIMSTEC¹³ and BBIN.¹⁴ To be sure, however, there are several crucial factors that are threatening to affect the relationship.

Cross-border Migration

Cross-border migration has been a persistent problem between India and Bangladesh. Despite the improvement of bilateral ties, the issue has hardly been resolved. Illegal migration from Bangladesh is a concern for India, especially in the NER.

India's concern arises out of the demographic shift in the bordering states that gives rise to the fear of socio-ethnic tensions among the locals and migrants.¹⁵ People in the bordering states are wary of being

marginalised in their home with the influx of migrants from across the border.¹⁶ During the period 1979–85, for example, Assam witnessed a six-year-long agitation against the migrants from Bangladesh. The rise in the number of Bengali-speaking people in Assam, considered as migrants from Bangladesh, was the main reason behind the agitation.¹⁷

India claimed to have raised the issue of illegal migration with Bangladesh when home ministers of the two countries met in August 2019. Bangladesh, however, denied India's claim. Media reports claimed that the disagreement over the issue of illegal migration prevented them from issuing a joint declaration following the meeting.¹⁸

India's efforts in dealing with migration have met with little success. Initially, the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) was established in 1985 as a measure to detect foreigners, particularly in Assam. It could not resolve the immigrant issue and was nullified by the Supreme Court of India (SCI) in 2005.¹⁹ Foreigners Tribunals have been established in place of IMDT for detection of foreigners in Assam.

The absence of reliable data on the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India has been an obstacle in convincing Bangladesh for a dialogue.²⁰ Recently, the National Registration of Citizens (NRC) was carried out in Assam under the supervision of the SCI in an attempt to identify the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The final list of NRC excluded around two million people. The NRC was mired in controversy after allegations were made that the exercise left out genuine Indian citizens while failing to detect illegal migrants.²¹

The people of Bangladesh expressed concern about NRC and feared an influx of thousands of people across the border following

deportation.²² Initially, the government maintained that NRC is India's internal issue,²³ thus, covertly indicating that no migration has taken place from Bangladesh to India. Nevertheless, the matter came up in the bilateral discussion between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in September 2019.²⁴ Sensing popular concern in Bangladesh and its possible implications on the relationship, India gave assurances that no one will be deported to that country.²⁵

Of late, illegal migrants and refugees are being viewed differently. Members of the religious minority communities who came to India from that country to escape persecution are treated as refugees. In December 2019, Government of India amended the Citizenship Act of 1955 to ease terms of citizenship by naturalisation for religious minorities—Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the amendment, religious minorities as mentioned from any of these countries could secure Indian citizenship within six years of their stay instead of 11 years provided they have come to India on or before 31 December 2014.²⁶ The amendment of the law caused major resentment in Bangladesh and the cancellation of Bangladesh Foreign Minister's visit to Delhi in December 2019 was interpreted as an expression of displeasure over the passing of the bill.²⁷ The official sources in Bangladesh, however, did not give any specific reason for the cancellation of the visit.

In Bangladesh, there is a consensus amongst the political parties with respect to the issue of migration to India. Members of civil society have also joined the government bandwagon, dismissing the need for Bangladeshis migrating to India and saying that they have better options like Malaysia, Singapore or countries in the middle east.²⁸ Interestingly, effort has been made to create a counter-narrative

by arguing that thousands of Indians are working in Bangladesh and remitting billions of dollars back home.²⁹

Notably, India–Bangladesh cooperation on combating human trafficking has made significant progress. An agreement on cooperation in preventing the trafficking of women and children was signed by both countries. However, security agencies have expressed concerns that counterfeit documents may be used for these criminal activities.³⁰

Border Deaths

The death of Bangladeshi nationals following firing by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) is also a concern. Bangladesh urged India to stop such incidents permanently, in response to which India introduced non-lethal weapons at the Bangladesh border in 2010–11. The BSF uses non-lethal weapons including pump-action guns, stun taser shots and rubber bullets along the Bangladesh border,³¹ which has resulted in less number of deaths. In Bangladesh, NGOs estimated that the number of Bangladeshis died in the BSF firing has reduced from 1,000³² to 455³³ in 2001–10 and 2009–18, respectively. However, the authenticity of the data is doubted. According to Bangladesh government data, around 294 Bangladeshi nationals have died from 2009 to 2018.³⁴ While Bangladesh has been urging India to reduce the number of deaths to zero, the BSF personnel argue that they open fire only in self-defence, i.e., when they are attacked by the criminals in border areas, usually involved in smuggling of arms, narcotics, fake Indian currencies, cattle and trafficking of women and children. The introduction of non-lethal weapons has emboldened the criminals and attacks on BSF have increased steadily.³⁵

Water Issues

India and Bangladesh have 54 common rivers including Ganges and Brahmaputra, and the number is likely to increase in the future. Bangladesh had conducted a study and listed at least ten rivers which could be included in the list of common rivers—Moharoshi, Uddakhali, Sonkosh, Mohadeo, Harivanga, Chela, Luva, Loha, Kamjhora and Khasimara, located in northern Bangladesh and Meghalaya and Assam.³⁶

Water is an emotive issue as it occupies a special position in the lives of and livelihood of the people in Bangladesh. The major issues are sharing of river waters, interlinking of the rivers and building of dams. Amongst these, the issue of sharing of water attracts considerable attention.

India and Bangladesh signed an Agreement in 1996 and a Memorandum of Understanding in October 2019 on water sharing of the Ganges and Feni rivers, respectively. Significant development has also been achieved on water sharing of the Teesta river. So far, both India and Bangladesh have agreed on a draft agreement on Teesta, but a comprehensive treaty which was to be signed during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011 did not fructify because West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee posed an objection at the last minute on the ratio of water sharing agreed in the draft agreement.³⁷ Since water is a state subject, all decisions related to water require the consent of state authorities. The agreement has still not been signed because according to CM Banerjee's understanding, Teesta does not have sufficient water that could be shared in the lean season (January–March).³⁸ The root cause of the Teesta dispute is the construction of barrages on the river by India at Gozaldoba in Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal and by Bangladesh at Dalia in Rangpur division for irrigation purposes, which is benefiting agriculture in the catchment

areas. In fact, the Dalia barrage contributed in increasing the number of harvests (from one to three crops) thereby enhancing the prosperity of the people of Rangpur region in Bangladesh. It is understandable that Bangladesh's demand for water is to sustain the benefits enjoyed by the people in Rangpur region, but West Bengal is concerned that any change in the water allocation ratio might disturb harvests and will have ramifications in the socio-economic life in North Bengal.³⁹ CM Banerjee offered to provide water from some other river as an alternative to Teesta, but it was not received well by Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is also concerned about India's plan of interlinking of rivers, under which the water-surplus rivers would be connected to the water-deficient ones. Bangladesh has voiced concerns about the project, but India has repeatedly assured that the project would not affect Bangladesh. Despite India's assurance, the issue has created deep-seated resentment in Bangladesh which often turns into widespread anti-India rhetoric.

The Tipaimukh Dam proposed to be constructed on the Barak river in Manipur in the 1980s has been another point of contention between India and Bangladesh. Though the idea of construction of the dam was shelved after Bangladesh raised serious concerns, civil society groups continue to raise the issue.⁴⁰

India has also expressed concerns on the transboundary rivers with Bangladesh, especially the level of pollution in the Churni river due to the discharge of effluents from factories in the upstream Bangladesh.⁴¹ The green tribunal had asked the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to raise the issue with Bangladesh.⁴² Other issues like siltation and salinity also require detailed discussion.

India and Bangladesh have instituted a joint river commission (JRC) for the resolution of water disputes. However, doubts have been raised about the credibility of JRC, and the demand for reforming JRC has gained traction recently. In August 2019, the 38th round of meeting of JRC was held in Dhaka, which took place after a gap of at least seven years. The JRC meeting scheduled for 18 December 2019 with the agenda to exchange and update data on six common rivers and discuss a framework for water sharing was postponed at the last moment.⁴³ It only deepens apprehensions about the robustness of the JRC and the seriousness of the two governments in resolving their water issues.

Additionally, it is important that the existing bilateral dialogue on water takes into account climate change, which has caused the Himalayan glaciers to deplete fast. Global warming has also hampered the river flows, which will only complicate water disputes further.⁴⁴

Rising Radicalisation

The rise of radicalism in Bangladesh has required close observation since the country first experienced a surge in activities of religious militant groups like Harkatul Jihad (Huji) and Jamaatul Mujahedeen (JMB) in the early 2000s. After the Awami League formed the government in 2009, the country declared a policy of zero-tolerance to terrorism and militancy and the security forces launched massive counter-terrorism operations against the network of militant groups like JMB. However, the problem could not be eradicated completely, and several writers, bloggers, publishers and NGO workers have been killed by these religious radicals.

In 2016, the terror attack in a cafe in Dhaka by the militant groups that targeted primarily foreigners⁴⁵ revealed a new dangerous trend of the perpetrators belonging to affluent backgrounds with liberal

education. The attack revealed the spread of influence of the radicals among the elites of the society.

The growing presence of international militant organisations like the Islamic State in the region is also a serious concern.⁴⁶ Even though the government in Bangladesh has denied the existence of any international militant organisations on its soil,⁴⁷ India needs to be vigilant and monitor the borders effectively. Groups like JMB have already developed linkages in India.⁴⁸

As per an official of Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crime unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, despite reduction in the incidents of terrorism, radicalisation in Bangladesh is on a rise,⁴⁹ and the influence of the radicals is believed to have increased in the country's politics. Jamaat-e-Islami's links with the BNP is well known. In the 2018 election, Jamaat candidate fought the election under BNP's ticket indicating the amalgamation of the radicals in the mainstream party.⁵⁰ This trend is likely to influence the liberal political parties in the country.

The ruling Awami League, a champion of secularism, had tied up with the Hafajat-e-Islami before the election of 2018.⁵¹ Hafajat is a religious group famous for the seizure of Dhaka in 2013 against the Shahbagh protestors, the popular movement that demanded death penalty for the criminals of the 1971 liberation war. In Bangladesh, political analysts close to Awami League opined that the party's tie-up with Hafajat before the election was more an electoral ploy to counter the BNP's links with Jamaat.⁵² This move by the party points to the growing importance of the radicals in the country's politics and that even those parties with secular credentials are equally vulnerable.

The hardline religious groups do not have a favourable opinion about

the country's relationship with India. Jamaat-e-Islami's reservations regarding India are well-known. Recently, the religious groups have tried to cash on abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir as a move by India to suppress Muslims to evoke popular sentiment. They carried out protests against India in Dhaka though it did not find much support.⁵³ The government of Bangladesh, however, has been categorical that Kashmir is an internal issue of India.⁵⁴ The radicals were also vocal in their criticism of the Awami League government for inviting Prime Minister Modi as chief guest in the gala event to celebrate the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 17 March 2020 that was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The radicals warned the government of disruption of peace and harmony in the country if Prime Minister Modi is allowed to visit Dhaka on the occasion.⁵⁵ Prime Minister Modi's visit was postponed following cancellation of the event.

Trade and Economic Factors

India and Bangladesh share a close trade relationship, Bangladesh being India's largest trading partner in South Asia with a bilateral trade worth US\$ 10 billion. Bangladesh has often complained that the bilateral trade tilts towards India and has urged India to take measures for reducing the trade imbalance. Responding to Bangladesh's request, India took some measures to reduce the trade deficit, the most prominent step being India providing duty-free entry of all Bangladeshi products except 25 narcotic substances. India also took measures to address the non-tariff and para-tariff barriers that Bangladesh highlighted as an obstacle to the growth of trade. Establishment of Integrated Check Posts (ICP) in the designated borders is a key step in addressing the issue. ICPs have facilities like testing labs and quarantine areas.

India and Bangladesh are also working towards deepening cooperation in the field of standards. In June 2015, an agreement was signed between the Bureau of Indian Standards and Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institution. These efforts have substantially improved exports from Bangladesh. In 2019, the value of readymade garments' exports from Bangladesh to India touched US\$ 1 billion.⁵⁶

To strengthen the economic relationship, India is encouraging its companies to invest in Bangladesh. During Prime Minister Hasina's visit to India in 2017, around US\$ 13 billion of investment was promised to Bangladesh. The countries have also signed a bilateral investment protection agreement. However, local businesses in India have voiced concerns about the complementarity of products between India and Bangladesh, for instance in the garment sector.⁵⁷ Indian garment traders fear that a rise in export might hamper their business and lead to job loss. Concerns have also been raised about the sourcing of the products. Indian businesses feel that the duty-free facilities enjoyed by Bangladesh could be utilised by a third country to export products into India which would hamper local industries and result in loss of revenues. Another concern has been that not all the regions of India enjoy equal trade advantage with Bangladesh. For instance, Bangladesh has a trade surplus with Tripura and a major impediment to the growth of trade between Tripura and Bangladesh has been port restriction by Bangladesh on the products that could be exported from Tripura.

Increasing Influence of External Factors

Bangladesh follows an independent foreign policy and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina propagates a principle of equidistance in dealing with China and India, the two Asian giants. She has expressed desire to maintain friendly relations with both countries. Nevertheless,

Indian analysts closely watching Chinese engagement in South Asia are sceptical of Chinese engagement in Bangladesh.⁵⁸ Bangladesh declared a strategic partnership with China and joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), touted to be a major economic initiative that has strategic underpinnings. India refrained from joining BRI.

Bangladesh observes that its relationship with China is economic and not driven by the intention of counterbalancing any country. Bangladesh claims it is open to make friendship with any country that will contribute to its economic development.

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh in 2016, China promised US\$ 28 billion in financial assistance to Bangladesh. Bangladesh does not appear to be bothered by the so-called Chinese debt trap, and the country claims it can negotiate better terms for itself and is confident of withstanding any pressure from China in this regard.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, India remains watchful of Chinese engagement in Bangladesh. Previously, China has used Bangladesh's territory to support NER insurgent groups. ULFA leader Paresh Baruah is claimed to have fled from Bangladesh to China.⁶⁰

FUTURE DIMENSIONS AND POLICY RESPONSE

Bangladesh's economic progress has been significant in the past few years. It is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world with a steady growth rate of six percent every year for over a decade. It has already qualified to become a middle-income country by 2021 and is confident of being capable of graduating to a developed country by 2040. The economic prosperity of the country resulted in speculations about the migration of labour from India to that country for work.⁶¹ Currently, India and Bangladesh lack a formal mechanism to address the issue.

Bangladesh's economic success makes it imperative to analyse India's approach to its trade and economic relations with the country. For a long time, India has been a major source of imports for Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh is diversifying its production base and has attained self-reliance in many products at home and is constantly widening its exports basket globally. This shift is likely to change the dynamics of the trade relations and impact India's exports to Bangladesh. The country is expected to emerge as a competitor of India largely because of the complementarity of the products they manufacture.⁶² Given the competition, it remains to be seen whether India will be able to continue providing privileges to Bangladesh, such as duty-free access to certain commodities.

As far as the policy response is concerned, it is important to acknowledge that no readymade solution is available that can resolve the issues discussed in this paper. Policy formulation will require innovation. This paper provides some indicative prescriptions.

Experience suggests that there is no easy solution to stop cross-border migration. Considering the demands of the changing times, there is a need to think about a mechanism to deal with cross-border migration. In this respect, a study should be convened on the possibility of work permit, its impact and challenges in the society and economy of both the countries. Besides, there is a need to bring in transparency and strengthen infrastructure for the issuance of identity documents that validate one's claim to citizenship. In this regard, priority should be given to digitalisation of governance at the grassroots level, primarily in the bordering states. Additionally, India needs to sustain its efforts of engaging with Bangladesh because cooperation will be crucial in resolving the migration issue. It would also resolve the issue of border deaths often raised by Bangladesh.

Water issues should be viewed from the point of *managing* the resources, and not just *sharing* them. India is helping Bangladesh to rejuvenate its rivers by providing economic assistance for activities like river dredging. India also shares flood data of Brahmaputra and Barak rivers, thus helping Bangladesh to manage floods effectively. While the Teesta issue needs a speedy resolution, the two countries should also simultaneously explore the possibility of institutionalising a framework for management of the rivers. The civil societies of both the countries are advocating for a basin-wide approach given that most of the rivers shared by India and Bangladesh are part of the transboundary Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna basin. It will be worthwhile to convene a study to explore its potential.

More people-to-people interactions should be encouraged to counter propaganda and misinformation. Lately, popular resentment is emerging in Bangladesh about the treatment of minorities in India. The basis for such perception has been various media reports that are exploited by the radical groups for propaganda.⁶³ Steps need to be taken in the management of public perception about India in Bangladesh and adequate emphasis should be given on strengthening the counter-terrorism cooperation between the two countries.

An in-depth study should be conducted to calculate the impact of Bangladesh's economic transition into bilateral relations to avoid any future conflicts. India and Bangladesh should undertake a collaborative approach in dealing with trade issues, and policies should be framed accordingly. Enhancing investment from India to Bangladesh and *vice versa* could be considered as a starting point.

Initiating a study group on the issue of climate change and its impact on the bilateral relations could be worthwhile for mitigating the challenges requiring joint action.

Recognising the distinctness of India–Bangladesh relationship, the countries should adopt a neutral approach free from influence of any kind of geopolitical contestations in the region.

CONCLUSION

India–Bangladesh relationship has progressed significantly in the past few years. The two countries should strive to maintain this positive trajectory and explore pathways of enhancing the growth of the relationship. Identifying the issues that might disrupt the relationship will be useful in framing suitable policy responses.

This paper has highlighted the issues that might challenge India and Bangladesh's relationship: migration, water dispute, border killings, trade imbalance, radicalisation, and the influence of external factors.

This paper calls for a cooperative approach in dealing with these issues. Cooperation will not only promote peace and stability in the India–Bangladesh bilateral space but will also help promote stability in the larger South Asia region.

India will be required to deliver on the promises it has made to Bangladesh. For its part, Bangladesh will have to display willingness to elevate ties to a more strategic partnership. It has to give more recognition to India's sensitivities, especially with regards to its security interests and issues of border management.

ENDNOTES

- 1 J.N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relationship* (The University Press, 1999, p. 181).
- 2 “It is ‘Sonali Adhyay’ in India–Bangladesh Relations: Modi tells Sheikh Hasina,” *Business Standard*, 5 October 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/it-is-sonali-adhyay-in-india-bangladesh-relations-modi-tells-sheikh-hasina-119100500782_1.html
- 3 Joint communique issued at the end of the visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to India, Calcutta, 8 February 1972.
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