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Parrikar's Visit to Dhaka: Significance for Security in South Asia

Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar recently visited Bangladesh to create ground for defence cooperation between India and Bangladesh. His visit came shortly after Bangladesh bought two submarines from China. This paper will focus on the growing defence cooperation between India and Bangladesh and the security ramifications for the region.

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Introduction

The Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar visited Bangladesh on 30 November 2016 to firm up defence cooperation between India and Bangladesh. He held a meeting with Bangladesh's security adviser Major General Tariq Ahmed and discussed how the two countries could strengthen bilateral relations. Issues such as military and security ties were discussed during the visit (although no official statement was issued).

Both Bangladesh and India are keen on strengthening relations with each other. Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina is also expected to visit India soon. She was initially slated to visit Delhi on 18 December 2016 but her visit is postponed to 2017. The purpose of PM

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Hasina's visit is also to deepen mutual ties across a broad spectrum of issues including defence and security ties. During the visit, PM Hasina may also sign a defence cooperation agreement with her Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The timing of Mr Parrikar's visit to Dhaka was interesting, as it occurred immediately after Bangladesh purchased two submarines from China. He is the first Indian Defence Minister to visit Bangladesh in 45 years. Currently, Bangladesh is enhancing defence ties with China especially in areas such as military hardware and equipment. China has also agreed to invest in power plants, ports and railways in Bangladesh. Wary of growing ties between the two, India is keen on developing her own relationship with Bangladesh, especially in the military and defence arenas.

Historical Congeniality

India and Bangladesh share a cordial relationship. Their deep-rooted friendship dates back to 1971 when India supported the independence of Bangladesh. It was also the first country to recognise Bangladesh as a sovereign state and established bilateral relations shortly after.² Both countries share a close geographic proximity through the 4,096 km long international border, the fifth-longest land border in the world. The border runs through the Indian states of Assam, Mizoram, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Tripura and the Bangladeshi states of Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet, Chittagong and Rajshahi.³ Besides the isolated instances of firing, the Indo-Bangla border is relatively peaceful.

The two neighbours are connected by various modes of travel such as direct commercial flights and a railway network. In June 2016, a new transit route was opened to transport goods from the Indian state of Tripura to the Bangladeshi town of Ashuganj. This shorter and cheaper route was opened for residents from both countries to mutually benefit from the exchange of goods. India has also embarked on new projects to build infrastructure in Ashuganj.⁴

² "India-Bangladesh relations", *Indian Chamber*, December 2014, p1 Available at: https://www.indianchamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Bangladesh_Dec2014_Eng.pdf

³ "Bangladesh India Map", *Maps of India* Available at: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/neighbouring-countries-maps/india-bangladesh-map.html>

⁴ Senior Correspondent, "Bangladesh opens transit for India, beginning a new era in relations", *BD News*, 17 June 2016

Culturally, the people of India and Bangladesh bond in areas like literature, language, music and the arts. Their people-to-people relation is a key characteristic of the congenial relationship. Both countries are also members of regional bodies such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC).⁵

The two neighbours forged closer ties when the 25 years Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Cooperation, Friendship and Peace was signed by the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 19 March 1972.⁶ More agreements, such as the 1972 trade agreement, followed suit.⁷ It covered a range of issues such as uphold good relations, maintain non-alignment, protect peace stability and security and diplomatic co-existence.

India-Bangladesh: Cooperation and Strategic Ties

The two countries enjoy robust economic relations with each other. In 2012, Bangladesh became India's biggest trading partner amongst the SAARC member states.⁸ While Bangladesh's exports to India surged from US\$5.4mn in 1991 to US\$512.5mn in 2011, Indian exports to her neighbour went up from US\$200mn in 1991 to US\$4.56bn in 2011.⁹ The total goods trade, such as cotton, cereals and vehicle parts, between the two countries increased from approximately US\$1.6 billion in 2004 to US\$ 6.1 billion in 2014 with an average yearly growth of 18.66%.¹⁰

India and Bangladesh military cooperation started in 1972 when Bangladeshi officers were first sent to attend courses in India. Bangladesh regularly sends military officers for courses at the Staff College and National Defence College in India.¹¹ The two countries have

⁵ "India-Bangladesh relations", *Indian Chamber*, December 2014, p3 Available at: https://www.indianchamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Bangladesh_Dec2014_Eng.pdf

⁶ Jayapalan, N, "Foreign Policy of India", (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2001), p317

⁷ Uprety, Kishor, M.A, Salman, "Conflict and Cooperation on South Asia's International Rivers", (New York: World Bank Publications, 2003), p129

⁸ "India-Bangladesh Trade Potentiality: An Assessment of Trade Facilitation Issues", *CUTS International*, 2014, p4

⁹ Ibid, p5

¹⁰ Sarma, Chandrani, "India-Bangladesh Relations: Moving towards Friendship", ISAS Insights, 14 March 2016, p2

¹¹ Bammi, Y. M, "India Bangladesh Relations: The Way Ahead", (New Delhi: VIJ Books, 2010), p63

conducted dual military exercises, SAMPRITI since 2010. Most recently, SAMPRITI 2016 was held between 5 and 18 November 2016 to perform counter-terrorism and disaster management joint exercises between the partners.¹²

The defence cooperation agreement expected to be signed during PM Hasina's visit is likely to comprise of India increasing its military supplies, boosting military training, joint exercises and counter terrorism efforts. New Delhi has expressed interest to help Bangladesh construct its military infrastructure and capabilities. The defence pact will be signed between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India and ruling Awami League (AL) of Bangladesh.

Dhaka's foreign policy towards Delhi has shifted under various governments. While some governments have viewed India in a positive light, others have been wary of their neighbour. Whenever the AL party has been in power, Dhaka's foreign policy approach towards India has been upward and progressive. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recalibrated her country's foreign policy by inching closer towards India after her victory during the national General Election in 2008.¹³ However, if the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) assumes power during the next national General Election, it can adversely affect the defence cooperation. Indo-Bangla bilateral relationship broke down when the AL government was ousted by a military junta led by BNP leader General Ziaur Rahman (who succeeded into power). Mutual suspicion and distrust between the two once friendly neighbours was prevalent during Rahman's tenure.¹⁴

On the Indian side, the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed the importance of India's relationship with its neighbours from the start of his term. For instance, he invited all the SAARC member country leaders to attend his swearing-in ceremony.¹⁵

Overall, the progress achieved by the current heads of government of India and Bangladesh is far greater than that of their predecessors. The historic land boundary agreement signed during Modi's visit to Dhaka in June 2015 was a key development in bilateral relations.¹⁶ Under the agreement, the two partners exchanged roughly 200 enclaves (51 enclaves exchanged to India

¹² ANI, "India-Bangladesh exercise SAMPRITI-2016 to start from Nov.5", *Business Standard*, 2 November 2016

¹³ Chakma, Bhumitra. "Bangladesh-India Relations: Sheikh Hasina's India-positive Policy Approach", *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, 12 November 2012, pii

¹⁴ Ibid, p11

¹⁵ Swami, Praveen, "In a first, Modi invites SAARC leaders for his swearing-in", *Hindu*, 21 May 2014

¹⁶ "India is providing a whopping \$2 billion assistance to Bangladesh for infra, social sectors", *Business Insider India*, 10 March 2016

and 111 to Bangladesh) located around the 4,096 km border.¹⁷ This agreement gave tens of thousands of people living in enclaves the right to choose their citizenship i.e. live in their own enclave or migrate across the border.

India-Bangladesh: Outstanding Issues

Despite substantial progress between India and Bangladesh, there remain outstanding issues. For instance, water-sharing is an area of contention between the two countries. India shares 54 rivers with Bangladesh. However the only water agreement that is in operation between the two countries is the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty (12 December 1996). This treaty, which has survived under different governments, is enabling the two partners to share the Ganga Waters for thirty years.¹⁸

The Teesta water-sharing treaty which Bangladesh has brought up from time to time is yet to be resolved. During Hasina's visit to India, the two countries are expected to ratify a string of bilateral agreements ranging from military collaboration, trade and investment and infrastructure development. However, it is unlikely that the controversial Teesta river issue will be addressed. Hasina faces tough pressure from home, as she has often been criticised by her opposition parties for her failure to sign the Teesta agreement with India.

The 309-km Teesta River, fourth biggest river in South Asia¹⁹, starts in the Himalayas region and flows through the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal before flowing into Bangladesh. Since the Teesta River runs through West Bengal, the state government's approval is necessary.

Water-sharing from the Teesta River is a key concern for Bangladesh since agriculture, fisheries and livelihoods are reliant on it.²⁰ Dhaka has raised concerns on the decline of the river's waters. Sikkim has reportedly installed five dams on the upper area of the river.²¹ The Teesta water issue is a bone of contention in Indo-Bangla relations.

Previous political efforts for the Teesta water sharing pact have not materialised. During then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011, the two countries were eager

¹⁷ "India, Bangladesh Sign Historic Deal That Ends Border Disputes Between the 2 Nations", *NDTV*, 6 June 2015

¹⁸ Bansil. P. C, "Water Management in India", (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2004), p70

¹⁹ Jha, Ram Kumar, "India-Bangladesh politics over Teesta river water sharing", *South Asia Monitor*, 27 June 2015

²⁰ Zaman, Sheikh Shahariar, "Modi arrives on historic visit today", *Dhaka Tribune*, 6 June 2015

²¹ Rashid, Barrister Harun, "Teesta water sharing: Some hard facts", *Daily Star*, 11 October 2014

to sign a water-sharing agreement. However West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the signing of the agreement arguing that it ran contrary to her state's interest.²² Banerjee said that she was not wholly consulted before agreeing to a certain quantity of water to Bangladesh which would hurt farmers' interest in her state. The dispute could not reach a resolution during Modi's visit to Bangladesh in 2015.²³

China Making Inroads into South Asia

China's efforts to widen its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal has become conspicuous in recent years. The Indian Ocean is of strategic significance to China as 82% of its energy supplies, both gas and oil, pass through it. In addition, 30% of China's maritime trade (worth around US\$300 billion annually) goes through the Indian Ocean.²⁴

China has also been making inroads into South Asia with its Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). Introduced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the OBOR is one of China's most ambitious plans to connect Asia with Africa and Europe.²⁵ Bangladesh is considered a key element in the OBOR project. To that end, China is assisting Bangladesh in building a deep sea port at Sonadia. This port may potentially connect the landlocked Yunnan province in China to the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal.²⁶ To build consensus on the OBOR initiative, Beijing is hosting a Silk Road summit in May 2017. To date, leaders from approximately 20 countries have accepted the invitation to participate in the summit.²⁷

Along with Bangladesh, China's is developing economic relations with other South Asian countries. Between 1999 and 2008, China's trade with SAARC members increased from US\$4.2 billion to US\$65.6 billion.²⁸ The regional bloc consists of eight member states:

²² Bhattacharjee, Joyeeta, "India and Bangladesh need to bring the Teesta out of muddled waters", *Hindustan Times*, 10 December 2016

²³ Bharati, Luna, et al, "The Ganges River Basin: Status and Challenges In Water, Environment And Livelihoods", (New York: Routledge, 2016), Chapter 3

²⁴ Sokinda, Sanjive, "India's Strategy for Countering China's Increased Influence in the Indian Ocean", *Center for defence and Strategic Studies*, October 2015, p1

²⁵ Tiezzi, Shannon, "China, Bangladesh Pledge Deeper Military Cooperation", *Diplomat*, 4 December 2015

²⁶ Riaz, Ali, Rahman, Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, "Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh", (New York: Routledge, 18 February 2016)

²⁷ Blanchard, Ben, Piper, Elizabeth, "China invites Britain to attend new Silk Road summit: sources", *Reuters*, 8 February 2017

²⁸ Wang, Gungwu, Zheng, Yongnian, "China: Development and Governance", (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 21 December 2012), p418

Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. China has been bidding for full membership of SAARC. Currently she is an observer along with other states such as Japan and the US.²⁹

China is also developing defence ties with SAARC countries by supply military hardware. While China has long exported arms to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are tilting towards China to purchase equipment for their own militaries.³⁰ For instance, during Nepali Defence Minister Bal Krishna Khand's visit to Beijing in October 2016 China agreed to provide military hardware for the Army and for disaster management.

Simultaneously, India is enhancing defence ties with its neighbours in South Asia. Delhi recently inked a defence agreement with Maldives in 2016 to train Maldivian security personnel and supply military hardware.³¹ The Indo-Maldivian Action Plan was signed during Maldives President Abdulla Yameen's visit to New Delhi in April 2016. During the same visit, the two countries signed five other agreements related to taxation, tourism, conservation and SAARC satellite.³²

India-Sri Lanka relations improved drastically after the Sri Lanka Presidential Election 2015 which ushered a new government to power. Their bilateral ties were not at its peak during Mahindra Rajapakse's presidential stint. During President Maithripala Sirisena's visit to India in 2015 both countries showed inclination to boost defence cooperation.³³

India and Nepal have traditionally been close allies. Until 2005, practically all of the military training and equipment for the Royal Nepal Army came from India.³⁴ The Indo-Nepali defence relationship involves military exchanges and joint army exercises. Nepal had requested India for deliveries of military stores and hardware.³⁵ In 2009, then Chief of Army Staff of the Nepal Army, General Chhatra Man Singh Gurung, requested India to supply tanks, INSAS rifles, artillery guns, ammunition, bullet-proof jackets and troop carriers. India helped Nepal to build

²⁹ Razdan, Nidhi, "Pakistan Demands Greater Role for China as Observer at SAARC: Sources", *NDTV*, 25 November 2014

³⁰ Fingar, Thomas, "The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform", (California: Stanford University Press, 2016), p200

³¹ Roche, Elizabeth, "With eye on China, India signs key defence pact with Maldives", *Livemint*, 12 April 2016

³² Roy, Shubhajit, "India, Maldives sign six pacts, resolve to expand defence cooperation", *Indian Express*, 12 April 2016

³³ Ramachandran, Sudha, "A New Era for India-Sri Lanka Relations?" *Diplomat*, 26 February 2015

³⁴ Devi, Sanasam Sandhyarani, "India Nepal Relations: Historical, Cultural and Political Perspective", (New Delhi: VIJ Books, 2011), p69

³⁵ "Fact Sheet: India-Nepal Partnership", *Ministry of External Affairs*, 9 July 2013 Available at: <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/21920/Fact+Sheet+IndiaNepal+Partnership>

an airbase for its army and offer training to military personnel to improve their capabilities. Both countries also decided to share intelligence.

New Delhi also has a strong defence relationship with neighbouring country Bhutan. India has deployed the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) to train the Royal Bhutan Army. In 2003, Bhutan worked closely with India to evict the bases of militant outfits such as United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and Bodo groups from its area.³⁶ Bhutan was also the first foreign destination for General Dalbir Singh Suhag when he became India's new army chief in July 2014.³⁷

China-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation

China, a close ally of Pakistan, vetoed against Bangladesh's membership into the United Nations (UN) in August 1972.³⁸ It recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign state only after Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh in 1974, making her one of the last few countries to recognise her independence.³⁹

Despite initial differences as stated above, Sino-Bangla bilateral relations grew swiftly from the late 1970s onwards. Although the two countries do not share a land border, strategic concerns have played a part in China's foreign policy to move closer towards Bangladesh. Since mid-1980s, the Bangladesh Armed Forces has increased its military dependency on China for hardware, armament and weapons. Beijing has been supplying an assortment of hardware equipment for all three branches of Bangladesh's armed forces. They use Chinese artillery weapons and tanks, the Air Force flies Chinese airplanes and the Navy has ships obtained from China.⁴⁰ Most recently, the Bangladesh Navy paid US\$ 203 million for two Type 035G-class submarines from China.

The purchase of arms sales was incorporated in the 2002 Defence Cooperation Agreement signed during then Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to China. Zia is the leader of the BNP which has been perennially opposed to the AL. The agreement paved way for

³⁶ Sikri, Rajiv, "Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy", (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2013), p88

³⁷ Lee, Victor Robert, "Bhutan: The Indian Army's Front Line", *Diplomat*, 6 November 2014

³⁸ Riaz, Ali, Rahman, Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, "Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh", (New York: Routledge, 18 February 2016)

³⁹ Kohli. S.C, "Bangladesh's sprouting bilateral relations with China: An overview", *Merinews*, 28 February, 2015

⁴⁰ Bammi, Y. M, "India Bangladesh Relations: The Way Ahead", (New Delhi: VIJ Books, 2010), p64

Beijing to train Bangladeshi military personnel and help the latter to further advance its nuclear technology.⁴¹

The two countries have also shown eagerness to tap on nuclear energy. In 2005, they inked an agreement for China to help Bangladesh in building nuclear power plants to meet her increasing energy requirements. They also pledged to take their military cooperation forward during Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff Abu Belal Muhammad Shafiul Huq's visit to Beijing in December 2015.⁴²

Conclusion

Mr. Parrikar's timely visit to Dhaka highlights India's urgency to deepen defence relations with Bangladesh. When PM Hasina visits New Delhi this year, the two countries are likely to take a step forward by signing a range of trade and defence agreements. However, areas of disagreement such as the Teesta water treaty over shared rivers must be addressed immediately.

India's economic and military clout in South Asia has ramifications for the region. As China makes inroads into SAARC members, New Delhi is following suite by enacting defence agreements with neighbouring states. Bangladesh is a key state in the region and will continue to play a vital role in the security and stability of South Asia.

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⁴¹ Jain, B.M, "India in the New South Asia: Strategic, Military and Economic Concerns in the Age of Nuclear Diplomacy", (New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2010), p148

⁴² Tiezzi, Shannon, "China, Bangladesh Pledge Deeper Military Cooperation", *Diplomat*, 4 December 2015