

# ISAS Brief

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## Come September, Manmohan Comes To Dhaka

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### Abstract

*This brief is a curtain-raiser to the visit to Bangladesh by the Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, in September 2011. It argues that globalisation is leading to a change in mind-sets that, if taken advantage of during that event, would lead to positive and beneficial results for both countries. If India has a disproportionate responsibility to improve ties, Bangladesh also has its own share, for, as the Bengali saying goes, it takes two to clap hands.*

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is due to visit Dhaka come September 2011. His Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina had travelled to India in January 2010. A decent interval has elapsed since then. A return visit has been very much on the cards for some time now. In recent times, concerned desks in both countries' foreign offices have been humming with activity. Final touches are being given to a raft of documents to be signed during the forthcoming event. As part of the preparatory process, the Indian foreign and home ministers had descended on Dhaka in July 2011. Also Sonia Gandhi, the Congress chief, is to receive a posthumous award for her mother-in-law Mrs Indira Gandhi, in a somewhat belated but justifiable recognition of her contribution to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Better late than never! This is not so much the acknowledgement of a historical gratitude, but a reaction to the political imperatives of the present when both sides appear keen to smooth their bilateral relationship.

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It has always been a tricky one, often fraught with petulance and pitfalls. Despite the Indian support at independence, when Bangladesh found itself geographically 'India-locked', it recognised its main foreign policy challenge was to live in 'concord with' but 'distinct from' its powerful neighbour. Understandably the result was at times hostility, often exacerbated by perceived Indian indifference when the latter was seen to be more concerned with other global issues. But on occasions there has also been a tendency to a 'pilot-fish behaviour pattern', that is, tacking closer to the shark to avoid being eaten. For India, the need was often to live down its obvious preeminent position in the region and treat Bangladesh as equal, and at the same time get Bangladesh to respond to India's priorities such as denial of haven to known insurgents and obtaining access to its own north eastern states through Bangladesh.

For Bangladesh, a rational consequence has been a tendency to use external linkages to make up for the bilateral power gap. China and, increasingly less so, Pakistan provide the cases in point. The extent to which this is the case depends on which of the two major political parties is in office in Bangladesh. The Awami League, currently leading the coalition, is generally seen to be 'friendly' towards India, which is not the case with its arch-rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), now in opposition. Broadly speaking, there are two constituent elements of the Bangladeshi national identity: 'Bengaliness' and 'Muslimness'. The Awami League, with its predilections for secularism, is seen as representative of the first, and the BNP of the second. Of the seeming external balancers, the domestic crises of extremism in Pakistan are rendering it less relevant to the political ethos of a syncretic Bangladesh, though China remains a factor, and is often used to counter India, mainly by the BNP, though the Awami League is also keen on the Chinese links, given China's broad appeal to the Bangladeshi masses. Bangladesh notably has one of the most vibrant civil societies in the world, and its democracy, extremely pluralistic and often noisy and chaotic, also contains a fiercely independent media. Both the civil society and the media keep a watchful and often critical eye on relations with India.

Certain things are changing, though in Bangladesh, in keeping with the rest of the world. While its economic growth is slower than that of India's, it is more equitable and its successes in the social sectors, including women's empowerment, are more remarkable. Increasing globalisation and burgeoning contacts with the world beyond, through the marketing of its garments, its key export and migrant workers, a major foreign exchange earner, have reduced the overall focus on India as a whole. 'Indo-centrism' is no longer that much a factor in politics and, therefore, 'for' or 'against' India can be used increasingly less as a rallying cry by political parties. Indeed, most of Bangladesh's 160 million people are young and eager to be rid of past political baggage. Many of them see their future linked to the rest of the world rather than to the quibbles with India.

The educated middle class students, a powerful driving force in politics, are keen to be associated with the current technological revolution and expanding knowledge-based industry, which implies a shift from chronic ‘anti-Indianism’, which has often been in the past as much a function of deprivation as anything else. They would be quite happy to ride on the coattails of a globally ‘rising’ India, provided, of course, India satisfies, or at least addresses with a view to satisfying, their key concerns. Sensing this changing mind-set, the ‘détente’ with India began even prior to the Awami League coming to power in 2009, by the previous caretaker government (2007-09).

The visit by Manmohan Singh provides a unique opportunity for both sides to take advantage of this new and changing mood. This is as good a time as any, and better than most, to take the bull of various pending issues by the horns. On the Bangladesh side, these would comprise questions of maritime security, possible diversion by India of upstream river waters, shootings by the Indian border security forces of suspected cattle-smugglers, ballooning trade imbalance, demarcation of land and maritime boundaries, and exchange of enclaves. On the Indian side, there would be interest in enhanced connectivity, transit facilities, non-provision of haven to insurgents and greater cooperation in international affairs for such issues as support for India’s bid for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.

Some of these would form parts of the agreements to be signed during the coming visit. In a prudent move, Singh would be accompanied by Mamata Banerjee, the new Chief Minister of West Bengal. Banerjee is more popular in Bangladesh than her predecessors of the Left Front government, which viewed border resolution with Bangladesh with a modicum of suspicion for fear of illegal influx of cheap Bangladeshi labour.

To be the largest is not necessarily to be the greatest, a fact which India will need to take on board if it is to be ready for the global role it aspires to play. India, the most blessed country in South Asia in terms of size, population, resources and power, must take the initiative to ease relations with its neighbours. For this, three things need to be done: first, the intellectual acceptance by India of a disproportionate, non-reciprocal responsibility; second, the ability to relate to and deal with the entirety of its neighbour’s population, not just a segment or a party; and third, generosity in negotiating. But Bangladesh also has its share of responsibilities, for as the Bengali saying goes, it takes two hands to clap. Should these two hands clap in September, the region and the world will applaud, and both nations would have deserved it.

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