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Xi Jinping in Dhaka: Implications for South Asian Politics

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh (14-15 October 2016) is being assessed as a 'great success'. But the greatest success could be the potential of persuading India and China that, should these two major Asian protagonists collaborate for bringing progress and prosperity to the region of South Asia, this could lead to the fruition of the expression 'win-win cooperation' which the leaders of the two countries are so prone to use but with so little to show for it in terms of achievement to-date.

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China and Bangladesh are close. The episode when China sought to prevent the entry of Bangladesh as a sovereign member state of the United Nations, on behalf of its ally Pakistan, in the early-1970s has been long-forgotten. China tried to explain it away at that time as not having opposed Bangladesh *per se* but only 'the singing in a duet of Soviet social imperialism and Indian expansionism'. It may be recalled that the Soviet Union and India were the principal champions of Bangladesh's independence at its nascence. But unwilling to affront China, the new People's Republic of Bangladesh was quite willing to accept the Chinese explanation and thereafter move forward with creating and expanding bilateral linkages.

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Both countries perceived this to be in their national self-interest. Ultimately Bangladesh was able to reach the high status in Chinese view of an ‘all-weather friend’, a notch or so below that enjoyed by Pakistan, but high enough to qualify for the ‘win-win cooperation’ that China reserves for its favourites. But unlike in the case with Pakistan, there was one associated problem in that context. Bangladesh had grown close to India once again, and therefore the chumminess between Beijing and Dhaka was fraught with more complexity than the one between Beijing and Islamabad. Nevertheless, over time China won friends in every powerful segment of the Bangladeshi system: the civil society, the political parties, the intelligentsia, the officialdom and, importantly, the military. Proximity to China had become akin to ‘motherhood’. None appeared to oppose it.

But, now, the other major protagonist in the Asian scene, India, is also in a close relationship with Bangladesh. Bangladesh and India have behaved like text-book good neighbours, having concluded a historic land boundary agreement that has removed a major apple of discord between them. The Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has managed to earn the goodwill of her Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, by denying sanctuary to Indian insurgencies that ail its North East. This has helped Hasina consolidate her own position domestically. But the water-sharing promised by India on the Teesta River is still to take effect, much to the chagrin of many Bangladeshis.

Hasina, a seasoned politician, needs to keep a wary eye on public opinion, and of necessity has to tread a careful line in not appearing to be seen to follow the Indian script in regional and global politics. When India withdrew from the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Summit, which Pakistan was planning to host in Islamabad in November, so did Bangladesh, almost immediately. But she was at pains to explain to an Indian journalist, Suhasini Haider of *The Hindu*, that Bangladesh had its own reasons for doing so which were “not the same as India’s”.² These related to Pakistan’s open criticism of the war-crime trials in Bangladesh which she saw as an outright interference in Bangladesh’s sovereign rights. In the same interview she cautiously declined to be drawn into making any comments on Indo-Pakistani bilateral relations, stressing the sanctity of the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir on both sides (which implied distancing from endorsing cross-LoC ‘surgical strikes’, without specifically saying so). To the Indian journalist, she strongly defended Bangladesh’s

² The Hindu 14 October 2016

relationship with China, in consonance with the evident public opinion. On another occasion, she said “China as a trusted partner is realising our dreams too”.³

The Chinese media, however, took a few pot-shots at India, rather condescendingly stressing that “India has nothing to fear from a closer relationship between Beijing and Dhaka”. In an editorial, the Chinese State-run *Global Times* stated that Xi’s visit to Dhaka was “seen by *some* as being designed to “snatch the South Asian country from the embrace of New Delhi”.⁴ It did not specify who the ‘*some*’ were, nor did it seem to appreciate the fact that the Bangladeshis would be averse to be seen or portrayed as being in the “embrace” of India. The editorial’s *coup de grace* was delivered when it went on to say “...it would not necessarily be a bad thing if an increasingly close relationship between China and Bangladesh puts some pressure on New Delhi to rethink its strategy in the region and encourages it to put more effort into improving relationship with China during the up-coming meeting between President Xi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the BRICS [Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa] Summit” (Xi’s visit to Dhaka, 14 and 15 November, was actually *en route* on his way to Goa in India for the BRICS Summit).

However, the importance given to Xi’s Dhaka visit by Hasina was echoed by the Chinese leadership. A Minister in the Foreign Office in Beijing described it as a “milestone”. The Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka termed the relationship as reaching “new heights”. The hyperbolic description of relationship in Chinese *diplomatese* is actually not empty words but fraught with deep meaning. It was left to Xi himself to give meat to these articulations. In Dhaka he said: “We agreed to *elevate* the relations between China and Bangladesh from a *closer comprehensive partnership of cooperation* to a *strategic partnership of cooperation*...so that (our bilateral relations) continue to move ahead at a *higher level*”. So, in his view, while relations were already at a high level, a higher level was still potentially possible. Parsing of the formally stated Chinese remarks are essential for a proper understanding of perspectives.

The evidence of warmth and jubilation were everywhere. Dhaka wore a festive look that was reminiscent of a historic visit to that city over six decades ago, by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Colourful festoons were ubiquitous during the day, and a near-magical illumination lit up the night-sky. China’s closeness to Pakistan (Dhaka was then the capital of Pakistan’s eastern wing) began to take firm roots during Zhou’s trip, and his slogan then *Pak–Chin Bhai Bhai*

³ bdnews24.com 12 October 2016

⁴ Global Times as cited in Shailaja Neelakantan in Times of India, October 12, 2016

(‘Pakistan and China are brothers’) turned out to be far more sustainable than the *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai* (‘India and China are brothers’) raised during his visit to India on that occasion. In fact it was thirty years since there had been a Chinese Presidential visit to Bangladesh: by Li Xiannian in 1986. But that did not mean China was idle in courting Bangladesh in the intervening three decades. Massive China-aided infrastructural projects dotted the country. Roads built connected cities, ‘friendship bridges’ spanned the rivers. The largest Convention Centre in Dhaka was called “Bangladesh–China Amity Hall”.

But nothing came close to the number of deals inked in course of this visit. There were 27 such signed, which comprised 15 agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), and 12 loan documents. Among these was a Cooperation Agreement on increasing investment and production capacity building, under which 28 development projects are to receive US\$ 21.5 billion in concessionary Chinese co-funding. A number of MOUs came under the purview of China’s ‘One-Belt One-Road’ initiative, so central to Xi’s *Zhong Guo Meng* or ‘China Dream’. The agreements were across a large span of economic activities, as well as of governance – maritime cooperation, joint feasibility study on a free trade area, new ICT framework, counter-terrorism collaboration, information sharing, tackling climate change, rail links and communications and power and energy. But the Chinese did not walk away with the Chittagong deep-sea port project, obviously as this would upset India, and along with it, the US enormously. Analysts view that the Chinese would be willing to go ahead with partnering with a consortium which could include India, Japan and even others. To the Chinese this could be the best of a bad bargain, and the Chinese know how to convert any bad bargain eventually into a good one.

Defence is an area in which bilateral cooperation is burgeoning. In 2002 China and Bangladesh signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement. Since then China has become by far the largest source of procurement for the Bangladeshi Armed Forces. This includes tanks for the Army, fighter jets for the Air Force and frigates and missile boats for the Navy. The Navy is also expecting the delivery of two submarines. This is meant, in Sheikh Hasina’s words, to build the Bangladesh Navy up as a “three dimensional force”. In 2014, in the presence of visiting General Xu Qiliang, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of China, four military agreements were signed between the two countries. Under these, the Chinese military would support Bangladesh Armed Forces with training and equipment. Also they would help the setting up of a language laboratory at the Bangladesh University of professionals, run by the Armed Forces. There have been exchanges of military visits at high

levels. Cooperation is planned in the areas of anti-piracy, peace-keeping cooperation, and disaster-management. Recently a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) fleet arrived in Chittagong and participated in a maritime drill with the Bangladesh Navy.

This widening of military relations between Dhaka and Beijing could naturally raise some concern in New Delhi. This would be somewhat unfounded for a variety of reasons. First, the armed forces are undeniably an important element in the Bangladeshi governance system. Troops need weapons, and China is a willing, affordable and familiar source. It is incumbent upon all Bangladeshi governments to keep the forces equipped and national defence needs satisfied. There should, and perhaps is, a sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon in India. Second, apart from India, Bangladesh has another neighbour, this was more comparable and less affable. This is Myanmar. The issue of the Rohingya refugees (both sides have now agreed to call them 'Rakhine Muslims') divides them deeply. This group, given the circumstances it confronts in Myanmar, runs the risk of being radicalized. Indeed some current incidents point to the possibility that this fact already has come to pass. This is not the only combustible issue between the two countries. In 2008 they nearly came to blows over maritime boundaries, and China played a positive role in calming the situation. Bangladesh would require military preparedness with regard to these. Third, the Bangladeshi Army takes what is generally perceived as a well-earned pride in serving as a major peacekeeper on behalf of the United Nations. Both hardware and training are essential requirements for this purpose.

For Bangladesh as well as for Sheikh Hasina rolling out the red carpet for Xi Jinping had its rewards. First, it was of huge practical benefit in sheer material terms. Bangladesh is well on the way to becoming a 'middle income' country and needed the mega loans for its essential mega projects. Only China could be in a position to satisfy those requirements. Second, it gave the ordinary Bangladeshi a sense of psychological satisfaction that the importance of the country was being recognized, not just by India as has been the case to-date, but by a power that is now seen to rival the United States. Third for Hasina herself it was a great morale- and political-booster. Her relations with Washington have been somewhat frosty since the 2013 elections, and the recent visit of Secretary of State John Kerry to Dhaka provided no balm. In domestic political terms, being close to Narendra Modi, and now this proximity to a global leader of the stature of Xi Jinping could win her plaudits that would come very handy in the next general elections, and in her rivalry with Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

The success of Xi's visit to Dhaka brings certain features of regional politics to the fore. First, China is very much a regional power, and is deepening its interest in South Asia. Its influence is by no means confined to Pakistan, though Pakistan continues to be a major ally. Its footprint may be growing stronger elsewhere as well, such as in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Narendra Modi has been cautious and wise by reining in extreme points of view in terms of expanding the current issue with Pakistan, and in actually avoiding a serious conflict. Given that both India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed, neither side could by definition win a major war, the consequences of which would be too horrendous to contemplate. Second, the total demise of SAARC in favour of other kinds of sub-regionalism could in the end prove a Pyrrhic victory. This is because it is then quite possible that other weaker South Asian countries would want China to be a part of any such sub-regional organization in order to act as a counterpoise to the possible pre-dominance of India (they may be willing to accept Indian pre-eminence, however). A clear example is the grouping called BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) - an idea largely conceived in, where SAARC was, that is, in Bangladesh. Finally, the visit could have opened up possibilities, whereby China and India, because of sheer economic interests, could find it rewarding to cooperate between themselves, with Bangladesh as a partner. There could be several such mega-projects, including the development of the much-needed deep sea-port.

Bangladesh appears poised to use its linkages with both India and China to its advantage. This could render it possible that both India and China would perceive that the situation in the region is evolving in a way that both the Asian giants would gain enormously if they collaborate in assisting this vast region along the path of progress and prosperity. This would also be what in regional parlance has often been described as a 'win-win situation'. Both India and China would be able to claim ownership of the fruition of that expression, at long last.

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