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Waiting for Hasina: Gains, Bargains and Expectations

Whenever it happens, the much awaited visit of Sheikh Hasina to India is going to affect south Asia's security architecture, and have an impact on the future of India-Bangladesh relationships. In the recent past this much-awaited visit has been postponed a few times due to political differences between the Union government and the Chief Minister of West Bengal over demonetization of Indian currency.

Amit Ranjan¹

There are two inextricably intertwined questions: why is India eagerly waiting for the visit of Sheikh Hasina - the Prime Minister of Bangladesh - to New Delhi? And why is she delaying her much awaited visit? Earlier it was expected that she would visit to India in the first week of December 2016, but it was postponed. The new tentative dates worked out between the officials from the two countries were from 18-20 December. But again, it did not happen. According to a news report appeared in *Daily Star* she was to be the Chief Guest for the Republic Day parade of India.² This was published without any research because in October 2016 itself, India had invited the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to be the Chief Guest for the Republic Day parade in 2017.

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² 'PM's India Visit end of January' (2016, 9 December) *Daily Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/pms-india-visit-end-january-1327438>. Accessed on 20 January 2017.

One of the reasons for stalling her visit could be the status of current political relationship between the Chief Minister of West Bengal Ms Mamta Banerjee and the Union government over the issue of demonetization policy announced by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 9 November 2016. In January 2017, Ms Mamta Banerjee's party- Trinamool Congress- spokesperson and Member of Parliament Derek O'Brien termed the post-demonetization period as a "super emergency" situation.³ The relationship between the West Bengal government and the Union government has been further deteriorated after the arrest of the Member of Parliament from Trinamool Congress, Sudip Bandyopadhyay, by the Central Bureau of Investigation on 2 January 2017. In such political environment Hasina knows that stalemate over water sharing from the transboundary river Teesta could not be brokered, so she may be waiting for the right time to make her bilateral visit to India happen.

In two and a half years tenure of the present Indian government, Hasina has visited twice to India: in August 2015 she was in New Delhi to attend funeral of Surva Mukherjee, wife of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee; and in October 2016 she was in Goa to attend BRICS-BIMSTEC⁴ Outreach Summit. On both the occasions she had a chance to interact with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Engaging Hasina

Growing interactions between Bangladesh and China concerns India. Almost all Indian defence officials with whom the author has discussed the issue were of view that through Bangladesh, China is trying to set its foothold in the Bay of Bengal region.⁵ The visit by the Chinese President Xi Jinping to Dhaka on 14 October 2016 is being largely seen by India as a significant move by China to ensconce Bangladesh in its sphere of influence. During the visit Bangladesh and China signed 27 agreements and Memorandum of Understandings involving the two governments. Out of 27, 15 were agreements and MoUs and 12 were for

³ 'Demonetisation: TMC MPs Meet President, Says India Under 'Super Emergency' (2017, 11 January) *News 18* Retrieved from <http://www.news18.com/news/politics/demonetisation-tmc-mps-met-president-says-india-under-super-emergency-1334411.html> Accessed on 20 January 2017

⁴ The acronyms stand for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS)- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

⁵ The author has discussed this issue with a few retired defence officials who indirectly influence policy making process through participation in media debates, writing articles in newspaper or by being a member of a political party.

loan and mutual agreements.⁶ Besides, Chinese state-owned and private entities also signed 13 agreements mostly with Bangladeshi private enterprises. In total the two countries signed 40 agreements and Memorandum of Understandings worth more than USD\$25 billion.⁷ Although some of the projects are fresh, financial grants for others is a part of phase wise assistance agreed between the two countries during Sheikh Hasina's visit to China in 2014.

To meet this challenge and counter the effects of Chinese economic diplomacy, India is, according to the media reports in Bangladesh, ready to offer more to Bangladesh. Once it happens, during Hasina's visit, Dhaka and New Delhi are expected to sign 30 to 35 primary and final agreements, including that for the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports by India and its fresh commitment for project loans.⁸ Initially, 20 to 25 projects have been identified for which India may offer over \$10 billion USD in credit. The Memorandum of Understandings are likely to be project-based, similar to those signed between Bangladesh and China in October 2016 during the Chinese President Xi Jinping's Dhaka visit.⁹ At the moment, various projects in Bangladesh worth \$3 billion are being implemented with Indian soft loan.¹⁰ The expected agreements and Memorandum of Understandings are many times more than what India and Bangladesh agreed on in 2011 and 2015 respectively. In 2011, India provided \$ 1 billion USD of Line of Credit (LoC) to Bangladesh which was increased to \$ 2 billion USD in 2015 during the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka.

Bangladesh and China are deepening their defence ties. Since 2010, Beijing has supplied Dhaka with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets, as well as surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.¹¹ That is in addition to Ming-class submarines which joined the Bangladeshi fleet in November 2016.¹² In January 2016, for the first time, three Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy vessels, including two missile frigates, sailed through

⁶ 'Bangladesh China sign 27 deals as Xi visits Dhaka' (2016, 14 October) *BDNews 24* Retrieved from <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/10/14/bangladesh-china-sign-27-deals-as-president-xi-visits-dhaka>. Accessed on 16 October 2016.

⁷ 'BD, China set to sign over 25 MoUs, Deals' (2016, 13 October) *Financial Express* Retrieved from <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2016/10/13/49214/BD,-China-set-to-sign-over-25-MoUs,-deals>. Accessed on 15 October 2016.

⁸ Byron, Rejaul Karim (2016, 8 December), *Daily Star* Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/pms-upcoming-visit-delhi-deal-likely-use-ctg-mongla-ports-india-1326844>. Accessed on 9 December 2016.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Tiezzi, Shannon (2015, 4 December) "China, Bangladesh Pledge Deeper Military Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-bangladesh-pledge-deeper-military-cooperation/> on 18 April 2016.

¹² *Ibid*.

the Bay of Bengal before they docked at Chittagong port in Bangladesh. It included the PLA Navy's 21st fleet, comprising of the guided-missile frigates Liuzhou and Sanya, and a comprehensive supply ship Qinghaihu.¹³ Also, Bangladesh features in the China's Belt and Road project both as a part of the overland component – via the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor – and as a port hub for the Maritime Silk Road.¹⁴ Their closeness can be further assessed from the words used in the joint statement released after the visit of Xi Jinping to Dhaka in October 2016; it uses the phrase 'Strategic Partnership of Cooperation' in the title. This shows graduation in their bilateral relationship since 2014 when Sheikh Hasina visited China. At that time the title of joint statement was 'Deepening the Closer Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation'.¹⁵

The presence of Chinese ships or submarines in Bay of Bengal is being considered as a portent of strategic encirclement of India. In this competition of attrition, to take a stock of the situation and other security concerns Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar paid a visit to Bangladesh from 30 November to 1 December 2016. This was the first visit by an Indian Defence Minister to Bangladesh in last forty-five years. His delegation included Vice Chiefs of Army, Air Force, and Navy along with the Director General of the Coast Guard. In Dhaka the delegation met the President of Bangladesh Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and other government officials. During the visit, Parrikar offered India's expertise to train Bangladesh Coast Guards for enhanced capacity building to guard the country's southern coastlines along the Bay of Bengal.¹⁶

Gradually, Bangladesh has turned into a hub of militancy. The country's tilt towards religious radicalism began soon after its liberation in 1971. Religion was inserted in the constitution to placate the groups opposing General Ziaur Rahman whose regime faced more than three well organized coup attempts and many other sporadic rebellions between 1975 and 1980. These coup attempts were organized by the political forces-both from left and right. To secure his

¹³ Anant Krishnan, "In first Chinese Frigates dock in Bangladesh," Retrieved from <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/in-a-first-chinese-navy-frigates-dock-in-bangladesh/1/582133.html> on 25 April 2016.

¹⁴ 'Full text: Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative' The State Council of People's Republic of China Retrieved from http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm. Accessed on 21 December 2016.

¹⁵ 'Joint Statement between the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the People's Republic of China on Deepening the Closer Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. Retrieved from <http://mofa.gov.bd/media/joint-statement-between-peoples-republic-bangladesh-and-peoples-republic-china-deepening>. Accessed on 21 December 2016.

¹⁶ 'Won't Allow Bangladesh Soil to be Used for Terror: Sheikh Hasina' (2016, 2 December) *News 18* Retrieved from <http://www.news18.com/news/world/wont-allow-bangladesh-soil-to-be-used-for-terror-sheikh-hasina-1318424.html> Accessed on 3 December 2016.

rule, political amendment (2nd Proclamation Order No. 1, 23 April 1977) was included which redefines the State principles and identify the citizens as “Bangladeshi” as opposed to Bangalee (Bengali). The word secularism was substituted with “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” should be the basis of all actions”. Additionally, the words “Bismillah –ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) were inserted above the Preamble.¹⁷

Since then many violent acts have been carried out by the militants in Bangladesh. The last one was in July 2016 when militants belonging to Ansar-al-Islam and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh carried out an attack in Dhaka’s Gulshan area killing more than twenty people. This was the first case of hostage taking by the militants in Bangladesh. As a neighbour, with a contiguous border, India also gets affected by such developments in Bangladesh. During his visit to Dhaka in May 2016, the Indian foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar conveyed India’s support to Bangladesh in its fight against extremism and terrorism, particularly in response to attacks against vulnerable sections of society.¹⁸ After meeting his counterpart Bangladeshi Shahidul Haque, he said “I told the foreign secretary that I am here to convey the government of India’s strong support to the government of Bangladesh as it battles terrorism and extremism”.¹⁹ “This is an issue which is of direct concern to us as neighbors,” he added.²⁰ To fight against extremism and militancy, the two countries are also carrying out joint military exercise since 2010. The Sixth edition of the fourteen day India-Bangladesh Joint Military Exercise “SAMPRITI-2016” commenced at Bangabandhu Senanibas, Tangail on 18 November 2016. Main focus of this edition was on Counter-Terrorism Operations in mountainous and jungle terrain under the United Nations Mandate.²¹

Hasina’s Expectations from India

Conclusion of an agreement, accepted in principal in 2011, over the sharing of waters from river Teesta has been one of the major demands of the Sheikh Hasina government. According

¹⁷ Riaz, Ali (2010) ‘The Politics of Islamization in Bangladesh’. In Riaz, Ali (edited) *Religion and politics in South Asia* Routledge & Taylor and Francis p 45-70.

¹⁸ ‘Visit of foreign secretary to Bangladesh (11-12 May 2016)’ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India Retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/press-Accessed on 15 December 2016releases.htm?dt1/26819/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_May_1112_2016](http://www.mea.gov.in/press-Accessed%20on%2015%20December%202016releases.htm?dt1/26819/Visit_of_Foreign_Secretary_to_Bangladesh_May_1112_2016)

¹⁹ ‘Together against all terrorism’ (2016, 13 May) ,*Daily Star* Retrieved <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/together-against-all-terrorism-1222996>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Retrieved from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=153334>.

to the provisions in the Indian constitution the Union government under article 253 can sign a treaty with neighbouring countries on Transboundary Rivers water. In past this provision had never been questioned by the state governments but with the strengthening of regional political parties and emergence of coalition politics in India, the state government which are a part of the catchment area of transboundary rivers cannot be politically ignored. In 2011 when then Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh agreed on the new formula to share waters from river Teesta Ms Mamata Banerjee's party Trinamool Congress was a part of the coalition government at the centre and she was the Chief Minister of West Bengal. At present Ms Banerjee is Chief Minister while her party is an effective opposition at the Centre. In democracy political institutions have to be respected. Hence, it is difficult for the Indian Prime Minister to take any decision over Teesta river water without taking the Chief Minister of West Bengal into confidence.

Water sharing from 414 kilometres long Teesta river (123 KM flow in West Bengal, 121 KM in Bangladesh, and rest is in Indian state of Sikkim) is a cause of tension between India and Bangladesh since 1972. Bangladesh has been insisting on an increase in its share to fifty percent to fulfil its water requirements. In 1983 an ad hoc arrangement ²² was made by the Joint River Commission (JRC) because it needed more time to study details of the water flow. According to that arrangement Bangladesh would get a share of 36 percent and India 39 percent, while the remaining 25 percent would remain unallocated. In 2011 Dr Manmohan Singh agreed to sign an agreement on Teesta waters, which would have increased the water share of Bangladesh from 36 percent to 50 percent but he was stopped from doing so by his coalition partner Ms Mamata Banerjee.

Like 2011, in 2015 also a deal over the Teesta river water could not be agreed because Ms Mamta Banerjee has, though vacillated, not relented on her position on the issue. On tangle over the Teesta waters in March 2015, after her visit to Dhaka, Ms Banerjee in a letter to the Prime Minister wrote that the issue can only be resolved through talks. She also joined the Prime Minister at Dhaka but remained silent over the issue of Teesta.

These political developments are also because of economic constraints which stop West Bengal to share water with Bangladesh according to the new sharing formula. Waters from Teesta are important for the irrigation in the five districts of the north Bengal-Coochbehar,

²² Bhasin ,Avtar Singh (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations Documents -1971-2002. Volume II*. New Delhi Geetika Publishers p. 682.& MA Salman & Kishore Uprety (2002) *Conflicts and Cooperation on south Asia's International Rivers; A Legal Perspective* Washington D.C.; The World Bank p.163.

Jalpaiguri, South and North Dinajpur, Darjeeling- which constitute some of the poorest blocks in the state. With viable irrigation system these areas have capability to produce three crops in a season. The demand for water has further increased in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts because of the proliferation of tea plantation industry.²³ Defending the state's position, the irrigation minister of West Bengal Rajib Banerjee said "We need to irrigate around 1.20 lakh hectares during the lean period, between October and May. The Chief Minister wants to protect the interest of the farmers in the area".²⁴ In 2015 the West Bengal government demanded for about Rs 10,000 crore along with decentralisation of the rain water harvesting system in North Bengal to rejuvenate the riverines in the area²⁵ by decreasing load of the rivers flowing in this region or through desiltation of the river bed.

Conclusion

Whenever it happens, the visit of Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi will define the future course of India-Bangladesh relationship. It will be interesting to see what India offers to Bangladesh, what it gets in return, and vice-versa.

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²³ ibid

²⁴ Das, Madhuparna (June 13, 2015) ' Teesta Accord : West Bengal CM Mamta Banerjee may be eyeing bigger compensation' *The Economic Times* . Retrieved from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/teesta-accord-west-bengal-cm-mamata->

²⁵ ibid