



Bangladesh-India relations under the BNP regime

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Abstract

A significant part of the Indian and Bangladesh relations that were full of failures, misunderstandings and politically different views are the 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 of the rule of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. Since the formation of the BNP in 1978 by former President Ziaur Rahman, the political and ideological opposition to India by the BNP has been constant. The BNP has been perceived to have a pro-Pakistan stand, whereas the Awami League (AL) has been perceived to be a pro-India party. This article examines the intricacy of bilateral relations within the BNP regime as an aspect of the political processes, imbalance in the trading processes, as well as a subject of geopolitics in the region. It also explores the impact of the shift in the political landscape of Dhaka and New Delhi on the turn of events of the relationship between the two neighbouring nations, as far as the diplomatic relations are concerned.

Keywords: BNP, Awami League, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, border

Introduction

India and Bangladesh have a complicated bilateral relationship under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Having started in 1978 by the former President Ziaur Rahman, the BNP has always stood in an ideological and political opposition to India. However, despite these ideological differences, the India-Bangladesh relationship has been shaped by shared geography, history, and culture. As neighbours with a 4,096-kilometre-long shared border—the fifth longest in the world—the two countries have consistently addressed trade, security, water sharing, border management, and cultural cooperation issues and compared to the Awami League (AL) regimes, which have generally fostered closer ties with India, relations under the BNP had little waned under the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

Periods under the BNP regime (1991-1996 and 2001-2006) have been marked by political discord and limited bilateral cooperation. The BNP's alliance with religious parties that have little faith in good relations with India. They are the leading promoters and supporters of policies that are not good for the development of Bangladesh. This paper critically examines the state of India-Bangladesh relations during the BNP regime, focusing on political, economic, and strategic dimensions.

Political and Ideological Background of BNP

Politically, the BNP has always held a different view as compared to the Awami League particularly in its conduct with India. Although the AL can be said to be pro-India, the BNP has been known for its pro-Pakistan positions. BNP has never stopped to develop a nationalist discourse which makes India a hegemonic neighbour. This ideological difference has affected the foreign policy priorities of the BNP as far as India is concerned. In 2001, BNP assumed power in Dhaka courtesy of forming alliances with other parties which shared similar ideologies such as Jamaat and Oyikia Jote. The foreign policy of BNP that was led by Khaleda Zia frequently went against the interests of India in regional cooperation and other endeavours. India felt that Dhaka did not have the political will especially under Zia regime to consider some major concerns of India. The

inability of the regular bilateral dialogue and high-level visits only enlarged the diplomatic divide, which resulted in a large-scale worsening in the India-Bangladesh relationship.

BNP supported better trade with Islamabad than with New Delhi

BNP favoured better trade with Islamabad as compared to New Delhi. India and Bangladesh have an unequal trade relationship with high levels of differences. India is enjoying good trade surplus as it exports items totalling more than 1 billion dollars annually to Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh does not export much to India, which indicates their unequal economic interaction. This criticism is part of a wider view of frustration in terms of efforts that are seen by the BNP to be incapable in making Bangladesh access the New Delhi markets. During the rule of BNP, there has been a clear disposition of refusing to enhance more economic integration or enhanced transit connectivity between the two countries. Although the India-Bangladesh border has formal trade barriers, informal networks of trading and smuggling products have thrived across the border. These black markets tend to offer much needed commodities that are either difficult to get through official means or they carry very high customs, with the need to continue trade being a motivating factor to continue trade regardless of the obstacles involved. Moreover, the preferences of the BNP to the trade relations with Pakistan as compared to India has added to the tensions as well as deteriorated the overall economic relations between New Delhi and Dhaka.

Opposition to Water Sharing

Transboundary rivers have been in the past a controversial situation between India and Bangladesh, which has frequently caused disputes on water resources. Under the BNP development of important water sharing agreements has stalled especially on the critical Teesta and Feni rivers that are crucial in agriculture and livelihood in the two countries. Despite the fact that the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty, a historic agreement developed under the influence

of the Awami League remained legally binding, the BNP administration did very little to facilitate its framework and develop other rivers flowing across their common border. This negligence resulted in growing anger among local communities who were relying on this water as a source of livelihood. As part of mounting anxieties, BNP leaders attacked India publicly, claiming that the diversion of water to irrigate the land in West Bengal had a negative impact on the flows into Bangladesh. The dilemmas that lie in the issue of these river sharing are a testimony of a bilateral relationship that is complex between regional diplomacy, environmental requirements and national interests.

BNP's slow movement in the Regional Platforms

One of the issues that was of concern during the BNP rule was the growing proximity of Bangladesh with Pakistan and China, a fact that aroused worry in the region. The Chinese government became influential in Bangladesh as the BNP government sought to have closer relations with China. China heavily invested in military equipment in the country, supplying it with advanced machinery like tank and frigates. Moreover, Bangladesh wanted to gain Beijing experience and financial support in terms of developing different infrastructure and improving its connectivity and industrial potential. These advances helped to increase the apprehensions by India regarding the possibility of strategic encircling and especially through its Look East policy (now similar to the Act East policy). With India gaining momentum to improve its relationship with the neighbouring nations, regional blocs like the BIMSTEC and SAARC found only mild backing in the BNP regime which made indeed regional politics more complex and highlighted the balance of power shifting in the South Asian region.

BNP's opposition to India's Regional Initiatives

The BNP has always made its opposition to India a defining part of its foreign policy and its home politics. This point of view is firmly based on the ideology of Bangladeshi nationalism and it is often consolidated in strategic alliances with other political organizations. The consequences of the BNP skepticism on the Indian issue on the bilateral relationship between the two countries and the Bangladesh politics are noteworthy. Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which was instrumental in the struggle of Bangladesh to gain independence in 1971, enjoyed much military and diplomatic assistance of India in this crucial time. Contrarily, the BNP pursued a differing political discourse during its time in government and devoted itself to national sovereignty, non-alignment in foreign policy and a firm opposition to the perceived Indian domination in regional issues in the 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 government. Besides, the close association with Pakistan and China, which the BNP has had is almost always seen by analysts as attempts by the BNP to establish a strategic counter-balance to the Indian influence in the region. These partnerships are considered to be a method of the diversification of the international relations in Bangladesh as well as the method of affirmation of the sovereignty in the country and formation of its national identity that can be independently developed without references to the Indian influence.

Khaleda Zia's Political Links with Chinese and Pakistani

Khaleda Zia has had close diplomatic and political relationships with China and Pakistan in the past. These ties

can be said to reflect the strategic orientation of BNP and the vision of Khaleda Zia in general of having a balancing effect of the balance of power in the region by interacting with other key players in South Asia. Khaleda Zia has a strong connection with Pakistan which is based on the ideological ground of BNP. During her leadership, high level visits, diplomatic transactions and cultural exchange were common between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Khaleda Zia developed a relationship with China that was founded on strategic and economical collaboration. During their rule, Bangladesh became a major supplier of military equipment by China such as naval equipment, tanks and airplanes. Her government was proactive in trying to get Chinese to invest in her energy and transport infrastructure considering China as a neutral, reliable partner to her over India and the West. According to critics, however, the course taken by Khaleda Zia of becoming aligned with China at the expense of cooperation in the region especially with India, not mentioning that the foreign policy was put in danger of isolating Bangladesh by its immediate neighbours.

Conclusion

The relationship between India and Bangladesh under the BNP regime between 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 was characterized by deep-rooted suspicion, high levels of strategic disjuncture as well as few avenues of cooperation. The ideological orientation of the BNP and especially its alignment with other Islamists and its violent approach to foreign policy, limited the ability to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation with India to the point where their foreign policy was dominated by the ideological reasoning of these groups and the aggressive form of nationalism. This was a period that was especially troubling to India, as it brought a number of security issues, such as the borders security including illegal migrants, trafficking of human, narcotics and small arms, terrorism, cross-border river water management, etc.

On the contrary, there was a tremendous improvement in the bilateral relation due to the restoration of the AL to power in 2009. The period of BNP regime has been an important case study of the bilateral diplomacy in South Asia, which is delicate and hostile. It serves as a nice example of how regional geopolitics and domestic politics could be intertwined to determine the relationships between neighbours. This historical background plays a vital role in the review of the present relations between India and Bangladesh and anticipate the future trends in relations.

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