

India and Bangladesh make moves toward a new beginning

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The announcement by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, that she stands by her decision to link Bangladesh with the Asian Highway in Myanmar (Burma), through India's northeast, points to the distinct possibility of an improvement in the security environment and economic conditions in a highly volatile region. She was speaking to the central working committee members of the ruling Awami League party on Oct. 12.

Sheikh Hasina's feisty defense followed a barrage of criticism by the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and the orthodox religious-political group, the Jamaat-e-Islami, accusing the prime minister of endangering Bangladesh's security by allowing the Indian government overland facilities to transfer troops and military hardware to India's northeastern region, where a number of ethnic and tribal secessionist forces have been waging war against New Delhi for decades.

A fresh wind

The Bangladesh prime minister's decision to allow New Delhi to have access to its northeast region, and beyond that, to southeast Asia, through Bangladesh, and her willingness to participate in ensuring regional security through the broadening of trade and economic linkages, is the first fruit of a noticeable change of attitude on the part of the two recently installed governments in New Delhi and Dhaka.

Indo-Bangladesh bonhomie, which followed the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 and evaporated with the assassination of Bangladesh President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, is once again in the air.

The most important development in this context was the victory of the Awami League in the general elections in August, and the appointment of Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the prime minister of Bangladesh. After two decades of military-civilian regimes, which drew succor from anti-India campaigns under the pretext of promoting nationalism, the new civilian government seems willing to break with the past and make a fresh beginning with its weighty neighbor.

Across the border in India, the newly installed United Front government, with no axe to grind against the Bangladesh government in Dhaka, has shown eagerness to give up an attitude which the elites of Bangladesh consider as "big

brotherly" and "hegemonistic." There is no question that since the brutal assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and a large number of his family members and close associates, by a posse of Army officers with anti-India leanings, New Delhi has been deeply suspicious of all the military leaders who donned civilian garb and ruled Bangladesh. Even the duly elected BNP leader and former prime minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of slain former President and Chief of Army Staff Gen. Ziaur Rahman, was considered in New Delhi as no more than a civilian front for the anti-India military faction within Bangladesh.

Dispute over water

At the same time, credit must be given to both Dhaka and New Delhi for not allowing the differences in the perceptions of their roles in the region to cause permanent damage to the two nations' relationship. In most of the international fora, the two nations have been sensitive enough not to hurt each other's interests.

However, despite the "civil relationship" maintained during these two decades by both governments, two issues had become bones of contention, which neither could address without acrimony.

The most widely recognized, and publicized, of all the differences between the two, is the issue of sharing of the waters of the Ganga (Ganges) River. In fact, the issue has been so thoroughly politicized in Bangladesh, that it is now a top priority on the national agenda and is often used by tendentious politicians to attack India in any given forum, domestic or international.

Briefly, in 1971, India constructed the Farakka Barrage, to augment the flow of the Hooghly River, with the purpose of lessening the siltation of the Calcutta Port. This led to Bangladesh's complaint that India is not only not supplying the promised volume of water to Bangladesh, particularly during the dry season, but is the culprit behind the drying up of the Ganga basin in Bangladesh, which supports 40 million people by providing them the water for irrigation and industrial consumption. Expert panels have been set up from time to time, but the issue remains unresolved. The differences are simple: While the Indians claim that an adequate amount of water is being released from the barrage, Bangladesh insists that the volume flow measured indicates that the amount re-

leased is not what was promised.

The problem is clearly political, and no engineering or technological measure can provide what Bangladesh needs. More importantly, New Delhi has consistently been bull-headed about the issue, paying scant attention to the misery that the lack of water causes. Much too often, "tough" Indian politicians have talked about "reciprocity" as the key to the resolution of the problem. They have failed to notice the damage the non-resolution of the problem has done to a large part of Bangladesh and an even larger part of India.

Since India's entire northeast, which consists of seven states with about 37 million people spread over 254,000 square kilometers, is connected to the mainland through a narrow land-corridor running east to west, north of Bangladesh, the linkage between the northeast and the rest of India is frail. In addition, the hilly terrain of the northeast poses serious challenges to building railroads. The obvious solution is to emphasize rivers and highways.

Drugs and terrorism

The second contentious issue is the growing infiltration of Bangladeshis into India. Leaving the most densely populated country in the world, poor Bangladeshis are moving into the wide open spaces of northeast India, dominated by tribals and people with strong ethnic identities. Since more than 90% of Bangladeshis are Muslims, and very few in India's northeast have embraced Islam, this infiltration has caused serious problems, leading often to widespread violence. It is also evident from the lay of the land, that neither Dhaka nor New Delhi can stop such infiltration alone. A joint effort is required.

The infiltration is not one-sided: During the Liberation War of 1971, India was the haven of Bangladeshi freedom fighters, and top political leaders, who took shelter along the Indian borders to make forays against the Pakistani Army. The scene has reversed since.

Now, the ethnic and tribal terrorists of northeast India, such as the members of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Mujib faction), have found shelter in Bangladesh from the stalking Indian Army personnel. In fact, a major Indian Army operation is in full swing now, along the banks of the Brahmaputra River, to subdue the terrorists belonging to the ULFA and Bodo secessionists. There are reports that Army personnel have come across Muslim militia of Bangladeshi origin during the operation.

Although the Bangladesh government denies the existence of the terrorist camps, they were set up during the previous regime of Begum Khaleda Zia. While it is likely that Dhaka could not control the rogue anti-India elements within its Army, which continue to maintain a confrontational posture toward New Delhi for whatever reasons, still, New Delhi's less-than-generous attitude toward Bangladesh, a nation with myriad problems, may in fact have encouraged Dhaka to allow the terrorists to camp along the border areas

and harass the Indian authorities.

In addition, the troubled northeast and the impoverished population of Bangladesh have become the carriers, and users, of opium derivatives flowing in from adjacent Myanmar, and the arms brought in by the terrorists of various origins from the arms bazaar in Cambodia. The heroin and arms find their way into the subcontinent, and even to the Persian Gulf, nurturing the terrorists in northeast India, the Naxalites in the southern Indian province of Andhra Pradesh, and the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka.

Diplomatic efforts

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed's announcement, which has already enhanced the danger to her security, is the result of a positive approach of New Delhi toward Dhaka, which came in the form of a successful visit to Dhaka by Indian External Affairs Minister Inder K. Gujral. Gujral, a very able diplomat, promised that New Delhi would settle the water issue to Dhaka's satisfaction before the next lean season sets in.

If the forces that cause acrimony and confrontation, which are plentiful in this subcontinent and elsewhere, can be contained through political determination, India and Bangladesh may succeed in stabilizing a highly volatile area and reap the benefit from it in the form of trade and commerce.

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- that Washington and Franklin championed Big Government?
- that the Founding Fathers promoted partnership between private industry and central government?

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