

Narendra Modi's Bangladesh Policy and India–Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses

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Abstract

The article investigates Narendra Modi's Bangladesh policy and India–Bangladesh relations under his regime. It challenges the conventional wisdom that when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Awami League (AL) regime are in power, India and Bangladesh do not enjoy warm relations and argues the opposite. It contends that water issue and dynamics of domestic politics work as major challenges in forging India–Bangladesh relations. On the contrary, it also identifies opportunities to further strengthen the bilateral relations. It finds that there are a number of untapped potentials that need to be explored and be exploited. It is of greater interest for both India and Bangladesh to foster the bilateral relations based on mutual understanding, respect and reciprocity.

Keywords

India–Bangladesh relations, Narendra Modi's Bangladesh policy, India, Bangladesh, BJP, Awami League.

Introduction

India–Bangladesh relations experienced ups and downs throughout history that has often been defined as an 'enigma' (Ghosh, 2011). If one looks at historical perspective, India–Bangladesh enjoyed warm relations while Indian National Congress (INC) and Awami League (AL) were in power (Hossain, 2015; Liton, 2015). In fact, the contribution of India during the liberation war of Bangladesh was well-recognized from AL side. And historically, Awami League–Congress shares old friendship which has also been reflected in their foreign policies towards each other to a large extent. When Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was in power in Bangladesh, Bangladesh–Pakistan enjoyed warm relations instead of Bangladesh–India relations.

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In Narendra Modi's 2014 election manifesto, the issue of illegal migrants from Bangladesh pronounced with caution and Modi denoted to undertake appropriate strategy to curb the volume. As Tahmima Anam writes in *New York Times* that 'During his election campaign, Mr. Modi vowed to deport illegal Bangladeshi immigrants pandering to Hindu anxiety about a Muslim onslaught' (Anam, 2014). Hence, once the victory of BJP, known as 'Hindu Nationalist' party, was confirmed in the last election concern grew, apparently among commoners, academicians and policy-makers of Bangladesh alike in the fact that India–Bangladesh might not enjoy deeper relations considering BJP's ideological predisposition towards 'the Hindutva' and the 'hawkish/extremist' nature of Narendra Modi towards the Muslims. The concern did not remain only in scholarly writings. In this respect, Mahendra Ved writes in *East Asia Forum* that 'At a conference in Dhaka in May 2014, when India's parliamentary election was underway, Bangladeshi participants had expressed deep fears about a Modi-led India' (Ved, 2015).

The extant scholarship seems sceptical and raises questions such as what is the Indian policy towards Bangladesh during Narendra Modi regime in power? Second, what might be the implications of ratifying 'Land Boundary Agreement' (LBA)? Finally, what are the major challenges and opportunities in further elevating India–Bangladesh relations? While dealing with the already raised questions, this article primarily aims to interrogate these pertinent questions. The ultimate objective is to portray the recent developments in India–Bangladesh relations during Narendra Modi regime in power. The contributions of the study would be both from theoretical and policy perspective. In theory, since there is no study on India–Bangladesh relations examining Narendra Modi's policy, the study will fill the gap. From policy perspective, the findings—that is, the identified challenges and opportunities—might provide insights to the policy-makers to foster India–Bangladesh relations in the days ahead. Notably, the study examines Narendra Modi's policy towards Bangladesh from 26 May 2014 to June 2015.

India—Bangladesh Relations: A Brief Account

India–Bangladesh shares historical, geographical and cultural proximity. Despite such geographical, cultural and historical proximity and their importance for each other, historically, India–Bangladesh relations experienced highs and lows at different times (Datta, 2010; Maini, 2015). In fact, India–Bangladesh relations 'have often been complicated, challenging, tense and crisis-ridden and overwhelmed by accusations and counter accusations' (Islam, 2011). It is an undeniable fact that India's contribution to the independence movement in Bangladesh was imperative for the emergence of the new nation, Bangladesh. In addition, India was the first country who recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign state. India and Bangladesh entered into a 'The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace' for a term of 25 years based on mutual respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while 'refraining from interfering in each other's internal affairs' (Pant, 2007, p. 232). It is often argued that during the Congress regime in power in Delhi led by Indira Gandhi and Awami League in power in Dhaka led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, India–Bangladesh relations reached a new height. From 1971 to 1975, Bangladesh became India's largest single recipient of aid (Singh, 2009, p. 149).

Indian policy in Bangladesh also needs to be analysed from the domestic politics of Bangladesh as the warmth or bitterness in India–Bangladesh relations has relied upon the domestic politics of the country. For instance, after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, military regime of Ziaur Rahman came to power. This has resulted bitterness in India–Bangladesh relations (Chakma, 2015). Notably, 'anti-India' stand was used as a trump card in the domestic politics of Bangladesh. Harsh V. Pant points out that 'Opposing India became the most effective way of burnishing one's nationalist credentials in Bangladesh, and political parties, with the possible exception of the Awami League, made full use of this tactic' (Pant, 2007, p. 233). Consequently, India was projected as

the 'hegemon' and 'big brother' in Bangladesh politics. Therefore, 'under the military rule of General Ziaur Rahman and General H. M. Ershad, India figured as the hegemon, and the bogey of Indian threat was used to rebuild the Islamic Bangladeshi identity viewing India not as a liberator but as a hegemonic "big brother"' (Majumdar, 2014, p. 333). Conversely, one must acknowledge the Indian realistic foreign policy, predicated solely in terms of national interests, is not inapplicable towards Bangladesh. For Chinmaya R. Gharekhan 'By and large, the governments in New Delhi since the end of the Cold War have followed realistic and pragmatic foreign policies' (Sikri, 2009, XVI).

Hence, mistrust and mutual suspicion continues in India–Bangladesh relations. Consequently, '... little change occurred in Bangladesh–India relations during the tenure of the BNP regime from 1991 to 1996' (Chakma, 2015, p. 34). The return of AL to power in 1996–2001 witnessed the signing of the Ganges water sharing treaty in 1996, valid for 30 years (Pant, 2011, p. 84). Even though India–Bangladesh was enjoying cooperative, friendly relations during Congress and AL in power, '[f]ollowing the installation of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India in 1998, the steady improvement of Bangladesh–India relations was halted' (Chakma, 2015, p. 34). Notably, the migration issue from Bangladesh was one of the critical issues in BJP's policy mentioned in 1998 election manifesto (Singh, 2009). In addition, BJP-led government linked 'cross border movement, the ISI and Al-Qaeda in its foreign policy approach towards Bangladesh' (Singh, 2009, p. 154). On the other hand, AL was elected to power after a very long gap and hence was also cautious enough about India–Bangladesh relations. BJP also played down the killing of 16 BSF soldiers in Pridiyah.¹ This demonstrates the policy of BJP towards Bangladesh which negatively impacted India–Bangladesh relations to a large extent. In addition, the internal dynamics of Bangladesh also played a role. And consequently, 'India–Bangladesh ties had reached their lowest ebb during the 2001–2006 tenure of the BNP Government' (Pant, 2015) as BNP historically followed the 'anti-Indian' politics.

During the tenure of Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, India–Bangladesh relations gained a new momentum. It was observed that Sheikh Hasina's state visit to Delhi in 2010 laid foundation of a comprehensive framework of cooperation. In the following year, the historic visit of Manmohan Singh to Dhaka in 2011 resulted in signing a series of protocols, but without agreement on two major issues, that is, Bangladesh–India water sharing issue on Teesta and Indian transit facilities across Bangladesh to its land-locked northeastern states (BBC, 2011, 6 September). At the 11th hour, Mamata Banerjee refused to accompany Manmohan Singh to visit Dhaka and sign Teesta water sharing treaty with Dhaka, with the objection that the agreement would be 'detrimental to the interests' of West Bengal which created a deadlock situation in Teesta water sharing treaty. *The Hindu* in its editorial termed Mamata Banerjee as a 'spoiler' in Indo-Bangladesh ties (*The Hindu*, 2011). Furthermore, LBA protocol, signed during the visit, was largely opposed in Indian parliament by BJP to ratify it based on their interest calculations. Thus, despite its best intentions Manmohan Singh government failed, mainly due to domestic politics of India to move Indo-Bangladesh ties forward.

Thus, one can claim that the level of consolidation of Indo-Bangladesh ties depends to a large extent on which regime is in power in Delhi and Dhaka. In this regard, Anindya Jyoti Majumdar contends that '[w]hile the warmth in relations has frequently fluctuated with the change of regimes, a sustained pattern of uneasiness and mistrust persists' (Majumdar, 2014, p. 327). Among the major issues, water and land boundary dispute remained as the prime difference in India–Bangladesh relations. Given the level of mistrust and 'selective foreign policy' choices in case of India–Bangladesh relations, '[s]olutions to a number of vexed problems remain elusive and irritants' (Majumdar, 2014, p. 327). For instance, even though LBA between India and Bangladesh was signed in 1974, it was ratified in 2015.² As described in the earlier section, the aim of this article is not to scrutinize the tumultuous historicity of India–Bangladesh relations rather to examine the policy of Narendra Modi towards Bangladesh. Hence,

the following section concentrates on the developments in India–Bangladesh relations under Narendra Modi’s regime.

India–Bangladesh Relations under Narendra Modi: A Reading

Narendra Modi’s Bangladesh policy needs to be framed within the larger framework of India’s foreign policy. Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. From policy and academic community it was predicted that Modi’s foreign policy would focus on more continuity rather than change (Madan, 2014; Ramachandran, 2014). Hence, in the agenda of Narendra Modi, ‘domestic priorities were expected to dominate’ (Madan, 2014). At the same time some argue the opposite. In this regard, Brahma Chellaney observes, ‘Mr. Modi has put his stamp on foreign policy faster than any predecessor, other than Jawaharlal Nehru’ (Chellaney, 2014). ‘Neighbourhood first policy’ was also manifested in Narendra Modi’s policy. According to Mr Modi ‘As I have said before, we will deepen regional connectivity and cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. There is a natural logic to this arrangement’ (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015, 6 June). In addition, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj contends that ‘[f]oreign policy begins on our borders and quite appropriately, we embarked on a “Neighbourhood First” policy from the very inception of our tenure’ (Bhattacharjee, 2015).

In fact, ‘neighbourhood first policy’ provided a fresh opportunity to strengthen India’s relations with her neighbours. Notably, the invitation of all SAARC leaders in his oath-taking ceremony clearly underscores the significance that Modi’s government attaches towards its neighbours. Subsequently, in his speech in the Parliament, the President of India also highlighted the importance of the neighbourhood (Madan, 2014).

In the radar of India’s ‘neighbourhood first policy’, Bangladesh also merits attention. In fact, Indian policy towards Bangladesh under Narendra Modi cannot be explained in isolation. It needs to be seen under the gamut of India’s ‘neighbourhood first policy’. ‘Neighbour first’ policy received serious attention in Narendra Modi’s foreign policy (Balakrishnana, 2014; Pattanaik, 2015). The ratification of LBA with Bangladesh after several decades, Indian lead in Nepal’s post-earthquake rescue efforts, Modi’s official visit to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka in the first year after he assumed office, demonstrates the significance that India attaches to its neighbours.

The importance of Bangladesh, however, has been identified by Indian analysts (Sikri, 2009; Pant, 2015). This has also been reflected in the foreign policy formulations of India under Narendra Modi. Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, in a seminar in New Delhi on India–Bangladesh relations identifies Bangladesh as ‘India’s most important neighbour’ (Haidar & Habib, 2015). Along with the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, the visit of Narendra Modi in June 2015 to Bangladesh laid down the milestone in India–Bangladesh relations. In this landmark visit, 22 deals were signed and renewed on a wider range of issue areas including connectivity, power, trade and investment and security. It was expected that the deals signed during the visit, would facilitate India–Bangladesh relations to a large extent. Regarding the outcome of the visit, Narendra Modi thought that not just Asia but the entire world ‘will do a detailed post-mortem’ on India–Bangladesh relations on what has been gained from the visit (Roy, 2015).

In addition, the official visit of the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs in August 2014 to Bangladesh was imperative to foster India–Bangladesh relations, since a number of bilateral issues were discussed to move forward the relationship. From Bangladesh side, the official visit paid by the President of Bangladesh in December 2014 to India, the first visit by a ceremonial head of state of Bangladesh since 1972, contributed to strengthen the bilateral relations in a larger way. Furthermore, the third

meeting of the India–Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) was held in New Delhi on 20 September 2014 where multifaceted issues were identified and discussed including ‘trade and investment, security, connectivity, border management, water, power, shipping, renewable energy, development cooperation, art and culture, people to people exchanges, and human resource development’ (Government of India, September 2014).

In fact, connectivity, commerce, infrastructure and development in Northeast India are priority areas of Narendra Modi’s foreign policy. Keeping this in mind, India attaches importance to improve her relations with Bangladesh as the latter can work as a catalyst to develop Northeast India. In this regard, Modi during his Bangladesh visit contends that

As our economies get more integrated and our people better connected, our nations will become more prosperous. It will also open new economic doors for India’s Northeast. And, it will enable our two countries to integrate South Asia and connect it with the dynamic East. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015)

With regard to Narendra Modi’s policy in Bangladesh, it is often argued that India accepted the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) verdict that has facilitated India–Bangladesh relations (Madan, 2014), though BNP government had decided to take it to the tribunal. In fact, during his visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, Narendra Modi pointed out that ‘[w]e accepted the settlement of the maritime boundary last year. It is evidence of the maturity of our ties and our shared commitment to international rules. So, we stand at a moment of huge opportunity in our relationship’ (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). It is also worth pointing out that Modi government reached out to West Bengal Chief Minister and convinced Mamata Banerjee, regarding LBA ratification and accompanying Modi’s visit to Bangladesh by providing several packages to the state which shows Modi’s keen interest to deepen India’s relations with Bangladesh. *The Hindu* rightly admires the initiative terming it as ‘a rarer than rare commodity in India on Bangladesh’ (*The Hindu*, 2015e, 8 June). It is also important to see how the LBA ratification impacts India–Bangladesh relations.

LBA Ratification and India–Bangladesh Relations

Non-implementation of LBA remained as a major challenge in India–Bangladesh relations. Historically, Bangladesh–India shares an approximately 4,096.7-km-long land boundary and the disputed area is approximately 6.1 km. If one looks at the historical developments of this land boundary dispute certain landmarks are noticeable. For instance, to resolve the dispute in 16 May 1974 India–Bangladesh signed the agreement. Though Bangladesh parliament ratified the LBA treaty within months, India did not ratify it considering a number of factors. LBA ratification involved cession of territory, which required a Constitutional Amendment, that remained as a major challenge. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the agreement has been implemented in its entirety, except three outstanding issues pertaining to (i) undemarcated land boundary of approximately 6.1 km in three sectors, namely, Daikhata-56 (West Bengal), Muhuri River–Belonia (Tripura) and Lathitila–Dumabari (Assam); (ii) exchange of enclaves; and (iii) adverse possessions remained as major challenges behind LBA ratification (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, n.d.).

During the visit of Sheikh Hasina the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India in January 2010, India and Bangladesh expressed the desire to reach a final resolution to the long-standing problem and agreed to comprehensively address all outstanding boundary issues keeping in view the spirit of the 1974 LBA (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, n.d.). Finally during the then Prime Minister

Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011 Bangladesh and India signed protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement, though the world did not witness its ratification.

Even though initially there were some discords regarding the passing of the LBA Bill in Parliament during Modi's regime, it was passed unanimously in Rajya Sabha which was repeated in Lok Sabha when all 331 members present, voted for the Bill that became the 100th Constitutional Amendment (Gupta, 2015). This historic ratification came up 41 years after the 1974 Indira Gandhi–Sheikh Mujibur Rahman pact. Due to the ratification of the LBA, primarily three complex and sensitive issues have been resolved between India–Bangladesh relations, that is, (i) the exchange of 162 enclaves between the countries; (ii) the exchange of adverse possessions of each other's territories; and (iii) the demarcation of 6.5 km of boundary (Ali, 2015).

It was expected that the LBA ratification and implementation will consolidate India–Bangladesh relations to a new height, since it was noted in one of the editorials of *The Indian Express* that 'LBA is, above all, a primary instrument of consolidating India's ties with Bangladesh' (2015, 6 May). *The Daily Star* also wrote several editorials on the LBA issue and after the passing of the LBA Bill in both the Houses, it observed that 'a new momentum in Bangladesh–India relations has been set in motion with the passage of the Bill' (2015a, 9 May). The Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina termed India's LBA ratification as 'a new milestone' in the long-standing Bangladesh–India relations. After the ratification of the LBA Bill, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Syed Muazzem Ali points out, 'Today is a very historic and landmark day (for Indo-Bangladesh ties) as the demarcation of the land boundary between the two country [sic] has completed after 41 years' (*The Hindu*, 2015c, 7 May).

In fact, the resolution of this long-standing old hurdle can bring benefits for both India and Bangladesh. In this context, on 11 December 2014 Alyssa Ayres writes in *The Indian Express* that '[b]y resolving this nearly 70-year-old border dispute, India will be able to advance its trade and security ties with Bangladesh. Doing so will position India and its Northeast states as a gateway to Southeast Asia'. Hence, it was expected that LBA's implementation will bring positive outcomes through effective border management, counter terrorism cooperation and preventing smuggling and other border-centric crimes. Furthermore, this territorial dispute resolution, however, can be an opportunity to increase connectivity and economic cooperation. For Mohan '[w]ith the territorial questions resolved, India and Bangladesh have an opportunity to turn their long land boundary of 4060 km and their vast maritime spaces into zones of expansive economic cooperation' (Mohan, 2015). This can also work as a catalyst to promote cooperation in other areas including energy.

Economic Relations

Economic, trade and investment dimension underscores as one of the prime dimensions in India–Bangladesh relations. As '3C Mantra', that is, Commerce, Culture and Connectivity are the major objectives of Narendra Modi's foreign policy and the economic dimension remains as a major area of cooperation in Indian policy towards Bangladesh. It is notable that a considerable amount of effort is being observed in promoting India–Bangladesh economic relations after Narendra Modi came to power. One prominent example is the renewal of India–Bangladesh trade deal, though there is question regarding the tariff and non-tariff barriers from Indian side. If one looks at trade relations, '[b]ilateral trade between India and Bangladesh stood at US\$ 6.6 billion in 2013-14 with India's exports at US\$ 6.1 billion and imports from Bangladesh at US\$ 462 million' (*The Economic Times*, 2014, 24 June). Thus, a huge trade imbalance remains. It can also be noted that the agreement between Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution and Bureau of Indian Standards on cooperation in standardization during Modi's visit

to Dhaka was expected to increase the volume of Bangladeshi trade to India. Another dimension of economic relations is the Indian declaration of US\$ 2 billion line of credit for Bangladesh. In addition, a growing interest is also manifested regarding Indian investments in Bangladesh in recent times which are explained in the following section.

Bilateral Investments

Due to a number of special advantages, Bangladesh emerges as an investment bonanza for the interested countries, companies and corporations. Although, Indian investment in Bangladesh remains as a minimal figure, a growing interest is observed both from Indian and Bangladesh side to accelerate bilateral investments. During Narendra Modi's regime, Indian investment in Bangladesh is also noticeable. In this respect, two Indian companies, namely, Reliance Power Limited and Adani Power Limited have signed an MoU with Bangladesh government to invest US\$ 5.5 billion to generate 4,600 MW of electricity during Modi's visit to Bangladesh. According to the MoU, Reliance Power Limited will invest US\$ 3 billion to generate 3,000 MW power plant based on imported liquefied natural gas, while Adani Power Limited will invest US\$ 2.5 billion to build a 1,600 MW coal-fired power plant (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2015, 6 June; *The Daily Star*, 2015e, 7 June). Notably, it will be the largest investment in Bangladesh. It can also be noted that an MoU on establishing two special economic zones in Mongla and Bheramara, Bangladesh for Indian companies during Modi's visit to Dhaka has been signed to promote Indian investments in Bangladesh. On the contrary, India announced 50 acres of land in Gujarat to Bangladeshi businessmen to build a warehouse from which 'apparel items can be shipped directly to retail shops across India' (*The Daily Star*, 2015f, 12 June). It is expected that the warehouse will contribute to US\$ 1 billion worth export products in India. In the days ahead, the economic zone will work as a catalyst to boost India–Bangladesh bilateral investments.

In addition, it can also be noted that on 27 November 2014 an MoU has been signed between Indian Footwear Components Manufacturers Association (IFCOMA) and Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Bangladesh (LFMEAB) to forge cooperation (Indian High Commission at Dhaka, 2014). According to the Indian High Commission at Dhaka, '[t]he MoU is expected to foster strategic alliances (joint ventures) and also explore possibilities of direct investments in the footwear and component sector with an aim of providing impetus to bilateral growth'. Hence, Indian investments have drawn considerable attention from Narendra Modi's policy in Bangladesh. Besides trade and investment other areas of economic cooperation, that is, cooperation over power, connectivity, maritime and coastal shipping also needs to be considered in the economic dimension of India–Bangladesh relations.

Cooperation over Power

India–Bangladesh cooperation over power has also manifested after Narendra Modi came to power. Notably, Bangladesh is currently importing around 500 MW of power from India. In May 2015, at the 9th meeting of Bangladesh–India joint steering committee on cooperation on power in Dhaka, it was decided that by 2017 Bangladesh will receive 500 MW of electricity from India, after their cooperation over power deepened, and 100 MW of electricity from Palatana power project in Tripura in 2015 (*The Daily Star*, 2015c, 15 May). The progress of setting up a new electricity network between Bangladesh

and Northeastern states of India was also discussed. Reportedly, ‘once set up, India will use Bangladesh’s soil to transmit 6,000 MW of power from Assam to Bihar via Dinajpur’ (*The Daily Star*, 2015c, 15 May). In addition, it was reported that India ‘has made a move to facilitate integrated power grid for SAARC member states to begin cross-border trading on the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX)’ (Karim, 2015). At the beginning stage, there will be short-term buying and selling of power with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, since India has grid connectivity with these countries. During his visit to Bangladesh, Narendra Modi promised that

Power supply from India to Bangladesh will grow from 500 MW to 1100 MW within two years. The 1320 MW Rampal power project is making progress in accordance with your [Bangladesh’s] laws and regulation. We can do more together in power sector, here and in India’. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015)

The former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Veena Sikri, views this power cooperation as a ‘unique example’ and expects that ‘power-grid connectivity and the resultant energy cooperation between Bangladesh and India is set scale new heights of success’ (Sikri, 2015).

Cooperation over Connectivity

Connectivity is a reality and a means to promote economic prosperity, people-to-people relations and so forth. In this respect, Veena Sikri writes, ‘mutually beneficial and forward looking collaborative programmes of connectivity are essential for transforming our four-thousand kilometre common land border from its present hubris of poverty and illegal activity into centres of shared prosperity and growth’ (Sikri, 2015). Establishing connectivity in rail, road and waterways between India and Bangladesh was manifested during Narendra Modi’s visit to Dhaka through signing a number of agreements. To deepen connectivity, launching direct bus services between Kolkata–Dhaka–Agartala and Dhaka–Guwahati–Shillong is noticeable. After opening a direct bus route between Tripura and Bangladesh, a direct rail link is going to be established between India and Bangladesh. Notably, the 15-km-long broad gauge rail line from Agartala to Akhaura will provide India’s northeastern states a key link to Chittagong ports and large markets in Sylhet and Dhaka. Notably, the Indian government has sanctioned around J 1000 crore in July 2015 to materialize the 15-km-long India–Bangladesh railway project. Of the 15 km, 5 km falls in Indian territory and the rest in Bangladesh. The 1,650 km distance between Agartala and Kolkata would be reduced to 515 km once the rail track is constructed through Bangladesh. Furthermore, it is expected that the direct rail connectivity will promote Indo-Bangladesh socio-economic ties to a large extent. In this regard, Tripura Transport Minister Manik Dey points out that ‘[t]he new railway connectivity between Tripura and Bangladesh will boost socio-economic, trade and business ties between the two countries’ (NDTV, 2015, 26 July). Thus, the direct road and rail connectivity was manifested. In the words of Modi, ‘[c]onnectivity is the catalyst for deeper engagement. Connectivity by road, rail, rivers, sea, transmission lines, petroleum pipelines and digital links will increase. Today, we have unveiled some of the pathways to this future’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015). Modi also hopes to deepen regional connectivity and cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, as he claims that ‘there is a natural logic to this arrangement’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015). And therefore, cooperation between India and Bangladesh over connectivity is also noticeable at regional level. Notably, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) signed the historic Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) on road connectivity to allow cross-border movement of people and

cargoes across their territories. The deal, if implemented, is likely to increase intra-regional trade within South Asia by approximately 60 per cent and 30 per cent with the rest of the world, as the joint statement argues (Azad, 2015).

Cooperation on Coastal Shipping

To reduce the costs of exports and imports, India–Bangladesh signed a draft agreement on coastal shipping on April 2015 in New Delhi for five years. And in June 2015, India–Bangladesh inked two separate pacts on coastal shipping on the use of Bangladesh’s Chittagong and Mongla ports. Reportedly, ‘Indian merchant vessels can now use the two ports to directly ship cargo to Bangladesh, instead of routing goods through ports such as Singapore. This will bring shipping time down to a week or less’ (*Hindustan Times*, 2015, 7 June). According to Narendra Modi, ‘[t]he coastal shipping agreement will boost bilateral trade. The Indian economic zone will promote Indian investments in Bangladesh’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015). It was assumed that the cost will be reduced by two-thirds through facilitating cargo vessels to travel directly to each other’s ports, by reducing time, which would require four to five days for a Bangladeshi cargo to reach India.³ It was also argued that the implementation of the agreement will be beneficial to both the countries, since there will be increased economic cooperation and connectivity through sea and river routes.

Maritime Cooperation

In this age of ‘blue economy’ exploration and utilization of marine and sea resources has emerged as a vital part of national development and security of the littoral and coastal states in one hand. On the other hand, there is a growing security challenge in the maritime zone which bounds the littoral and coastal states to think about its maritime security. It is also pertinent to note that the peaceful maritime boundary delimitation between India and Bangladesh made compulsion and created scope for the utilization of the marine resources for both India and Bangladesh. In this respect, Indian envoy in Bangladesh Pankaj Saran, rightly points out that ‘the time has come to reap the benefits of demarcation [of the maritime boundary]’ (*The Daily Star*, 2015d, 5 June). In this context, maritime cooperation has been a reality. The world also witnessed India–Bangladesh maritime cooperation during Modi’s visit to Dhaka. As India–Bangladesh signed a deal on maritime cooperation entitled ‘Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean’, an MoU between Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) of India and University of Dhaka for joint research on oceanography in the Bay of Bengal is expected to boost India–Bangladesh maritime cooperation through capacity building, training and joint research collaboration. In this regard, Narendra Modi hopes that ‘the agreement on blue economy and maritime cooperation opens a new area of economic opportunities’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2015).

Issue of Political Prisoners

The development regarding the issue of political prisoners has also been manifested during Modi’s regime. Notably, the extradition treaty between India–Bangladesh came into effect in October 2013. And it was noticed that there are a number of Bangladeshi political prisoners in Indian jails as well as a

number of Indians in Bangladesh jails for years. Hence, the extradition treaty will pave the way to transfer such political prisoners. For instance, Bangladesh has already transferred Indian separatist leader Anup Chetia to India on 11 November 2015 who has been in Bangladesh jail since 1997. On 12 November 2015 India also handed over to Dhaka the Narayanganj seven-murder prime accused Nur Hossain. It was expected that this extradition treaty will strengthen security relations between Bangladesh and India.

Socio-cultural Relations

Though India has strong cultural ties with Bangladesh (Datta, 2008), there is greater scope for enhanced collaboration in new avenues of cooperation. Hence, ‘cultural exchange programmes for the years 2015–2017’ have been adopted during Modi’s visit to Dhaka. As referred earlier, culture is one of the dimensions in Modi regime’s foreign policy; promotion of socio-cultural relations is noticeable between Delhi and Dhaka during Modi’s regime (Government of India, May 2015).

With effect from 4 January 2015 the Kolkata–Dhaka–Kolkata ‘Maitree Express’ has started running one additional round trip each week, which will now run thrice a week, the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh said. It was expected that this will be imperative in promoting people-to-people contacts. The opening of border haats in India–Bangladesh border is a new initiative taken by India and Bangladesh to deepen their bilateral relations through promoting people-to-people contacts. The first border haat was set up in 2012 at Kalaichar in West Garo hills of Meghalaya. With mutual consultations, India–Bangladesh approved three border haats while the third one is supposed to come up in Dharmanagar in north Tripura (*The Hindu*, 2015d, 28 May). It is expected that these ‘border haats’ will play vital role in the days ahead in promoting people-to-people contacts between India and Bangladesh.

Promotion of Educational Exchange, Training and Cooperation

In the ambit of socio-cultural relations, promotion of educational exchange, training and cooperation is one of the prime aspects. It is estimated that over 50,000 Bangladeshi students pursue higher studies in India, among those around 100 students come under various scholarship scheme (Datta, 2008, p. 769). The promotion of educational exchange, training and cooperation between India and Bangladesh is also noticeable under Modi’s regime. Notably, to promote educational exchange and cooperation, MoUs between Indian and Bangladeshi universities, that is, MoU between University of Dhaka and India’s CSIR for joint research on oceanography of the Bay of Bengal and MoU between University of Rajshahi and India’s Jamia Millia Islamia University for educational cooperation have been signed during Modi’s visit in June 2015 to Bangladesh. These MoUs will work as catalyst to promote educational cooperation between India and Bangladesh. In addition, a ‘statement of intent on Bangladesh–India education cooperation’ has also been adopted, which will be imperative to boost educational exchange and cooperation.

Providing training over human resource development is another area of development in India–Bangladesh relations. Although small in number, India has initiated a programme to provide training to Bangladeshi civil servant officers and police officers. Reportedly, India is going to provide training to 1500 Bangladeshi civil service officers over the next three years in different Indian institutions which is also another area of development in India–Bangladesh relations (*The Economic Times*, 2015, 7 May). These recent developments happened during Modi’s regime and laid down a strong foundation to forge

India–Bangladesh relations. But the challenges remain. Hence, the next section concentrates on the challenges of India–Bangladesh relations.

Challenges

The following section attempts to explore the prime challenges in India–Bangladesh relations. The article finds that water and dynamics of domestic politics, work as major challenges in forging India–Bangladesh relations which are explained below.

Water challenge

Indian envoy in Bangladesh Pankaj Saran, points out that ‘water is a major challenge for both of our countries...’ (*The Daily Star*, 2015b, 10 April). Consequently, of the issues that mainly disrupted India–Bangladesh relations, water was one of them. Water is an issue of discord between India–Bangladesh relations from the birth of Bangladesh. Even to resolve her water dispute with India, Bangladesh took the matter to the United Nations in the 1970s.

During Manmahan Singh’s visit in 2011 to Bangladesh, Mamata Banerjee opposed to accompany Manmohan Singh and the Teesta deal as the deal envisaged a 50–50 sharing of the water between the two countries. Following Mamata’s refusal to accompany Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Dhaka on 6 September 2011, where the Teesta accord was supposed to be signed, former Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dipu Moni had visited Kolkata and met Mamata. On that day, Mamata Banerjee set up Kalyan Rudra Commission on Teesta water sharing. In the words of Mamata, ‘I am a friend of Bangladesh and we are eager that they are not deprived of the water they deserve. We are setting up the commission and we will try to abide by the recommendations of the commission’ (Bandopadhyay, 2013). But unfortunately, Mamata did not ask for the report. During her visit to Dhaka in February 2015, in fact, Mamata Banerjee assured Hasina that she will resolve the Teesta issue.

After the ratification of LBA, there was a lot of media hype that Teesta water sharing treaty was on the card in the forthcoming Narendra Modi’s visit to Bangladesh. For instance, just a few days earlier to the visit, *The Hindu* reported that there might be Teesta water sharing treaty. But like the last time, in 2011 Manmahan Singh’s visit to Bangladesh, the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee opposed to the Teesta deal during Narendra Modi’s visit as well in 2015. Consequently, during the visit of Narendra Modi, the world did not witness any resolution in Teesta water sharing dispute.

In fact, unresolved Teesta water sharing dispute cannot be explained from Indian perspective alone. For stance, ‘political parties in Bangladesh particularly Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) use this dispute as a trump card to uphold their vested regime interests in case of Bangladesh–India relations’ (Islam, 2015). Besides, there is lack of scholarship, research, and initiatives from Bangladesh side to resolve the Teesta water sharing dispute for a reasonable solution.

Domestic Politics as a Determinant of Foreign Policy

Domestic politics has been an important factor in deepening or deteriorating India–Bangladesh relations. Some argue that ‘foreign policy is the extension of domestic politics’ is reflected in Indian

and Bangladeshi foreign policy towards each other. For instance, on the issues of LBA and Teesta water sharing it is seen that the role of Mamata Banerjee was pivotal one, which resulted in LBA ratification in one hand and no deal in Teesta water sharing on the other hand. But how did domestic politics work as a major challenge to LBA ratification needs to be mentioned here.

It is observed that after the signing of the protocol to the pact of LBA, in December 2013, the Constitution of India (119th Amendment) Bill, 2013 was introduced in Rajya Sabha. But BJP opposed the Bill. Then, in April 2015 the Cabinet clears the revised LBA delinking Assam. According to the report, 'the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh requires a change in India's boundaries, a Constitution amendment with two-thirds majority in both Houses of Parliament is required for the revised Bill' (*The Hindu*, 2015a, 2 May). Here the challenge remained in the domestic politics of India. For instance, earlier Trinamool Congress opposed to the Bill during the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), while it changed its position and supported the Bill after Mamata Banerjee's visit to Bangladesh in February 2015. But their stand changed when the BJP delinked Assam from the deal. Consequently, the Congress opposed the Bill and the Congress leaders argued that 'they will block the Bill in the Rajya Sabha, where the government is in minority, unless Assam is included' (*The Hindu*, 2015a, 2 May). Hence, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) opposed the LBA. BJP and Congress parties Assam unit also opposed the LBA.

How does domestic politics, sometimes, determine the foreign policy is clearly reflected in the editorial of *The Hindu*. As the editorial writes that '[t]he government, that had excluded Assam from the India–Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement Bill in order to appease its voters in that State' (2015b, 6 May). On the day before, the same daily wrote in its editorial about LBA that domestic politics is determining the fate of LBA which made Assam exclude from the LBA Bill, though, in the last hour BJP included Assam in the LBA Bill considering the protests in Bangladesh and in India, albeit, in varying degrees. Through the clearing of LBA Bill in Indian cabinet on 5 May and in Rajya Sabha on 6 May, the ratification of the LBA with Bangladesh was enabled (*The Hindu*, 2015c, 7 May). Even though Bangladesh ratified the LBA in 1974, it will not be wrong to claim that it was non-implemented due to the domestic politics of India.

From Bangladesh side, the domestic politics works as one of the major determinants in its foreign policy towards India as demonstrated in section two of this article. From the BNP a better and improved Bangladesh–India relation during AL regime has been termed as the 'selling out of the country' to India. In addition, India has been projected as a threat to Bangladesh's sovereignty by some political quarter in Bangladesh. Hence, domestic politics works as a determinant in case of Indian and Bangladeshi foreign policy towards their bilateral relations.

Against such challenges in India–Bangladesh relations, the following section concentrates on the policy implications that what can be done to facilitate deeper India–Bangladesh relations in the days to come.

Possible Policy Responses

Introducing a Comprehensive Approach to Sharing Water Resources

It can be noted that three major hurdles, that is, maritime border dispute, land boundary dispute and water sharing dispute obstructed in elevating India–Bangladesh relations for decades. The different political regimes even sustained those long-standing disputes for their vested regime interests. But in this twenty-first century, states are more concerned about shared prosperity based on interdependence and

cooperation rather than the nineteenth century notion of sovereignty and narrowly defined national interests. This is also observed in case of India–Bangladesh relations in recent years. The peaceful resolution of maritime disputes and land boundary disputes perfectly testifies this. Now, India–Bangladesh needs to move to resolve the last major dispute, water sharing dispute which has hindered Bangladesh–India relations for decades. It seems the best time to head for a win-win situation in resolving water sharing disputes. For the long-term interests of Bangladesh–India relations, a comprehensive approach to sharing water resources needs to be introduced to resolve the dispute at the earliest (Islam, 2015; Mohan, 2015).

Accelerating Bilateral Trade and Investment

There is enormous potential in boosting India–Bangladesh trade and investment. For instance, the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) estimates that the bilateral trade could be US\$ 10 billion by 2018, if the trading irritants like non-tariff barriers and infrastructure related issues are resolved (*The Economic Times*, 2014, 24 June). But the problem, that is, huge trade imbalance, remains in case of India–Bangladesh trade which is noted earlier. In fact, since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, ‘Bangladesh economy suffers from chronic trade deficit vis-a-vis India’ (Basu & Datta, 2007, p. 112). In addition, there is declining rate of Bangladeshi exports to Indian market which is a major concern. Though Bangladesh enjoys duty-free access to the Indian market, due to non-tariff barriers, Bangladesh cannot exploit the full advantage. Such huge trade imbalance might create a feeling of deprivation on Bangladesh side which might affect other aspects of bilateral ties. As Suparna Basu and Debabrata Datta notes ‘bilateral trade relations highly affect the political, economic relations of the countries concerned’ (Basu & Datta, 2007, p. 112). Thus, India needs to remove the non-tariff barriers to promote bilateral trade. In this context, India–Bangladesh needs to accept each other’s standards and certification arrangements. In addition simplifying Indian bureaucratic complexities regarding Indian import from Bangladesh and easing visa restrictions for Bangladeshi traders can facilitate Bangladesh–India trade to a large extent. Regarding bilateral investments, the special economic zones which are going to be set up for Indian and Bangladeshi businessman in each other’s country, needs to be utilized for the greater interests of the people of these countries.

Promoting BBIN and BCIM Economic Corridor

It is also important to look at how the two nations, that is, India and Bangladesh can enhance connectivity and ensure regional prosperity. In this context, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) as a new sub-regional entity and Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor can be a good opportunity to promote economic cooperation at sub-regional level, given the deadlock situation of SAARC. It is argued that if implemented, the present BBIN MVA will accelerate regional trade and especially Bangladesh–India bilateral trade to a larger extent. In addition, transportation time and cost will be reduced drastically in one hand and investment will be increased on the other hand. Besides, there are untapped Bangladeshi agricultural and industrial products in the markets of Nepal, Bhutan and Seven Sister states of India. Thus, there are ample economic potentials of BBIN MVA.

Alongside BBIN, BCIM corridor also needs to be promoted for shared prosperity. Notably, ‘China has been pressing for regional cooperation between its south western province of Yunnan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India’ (Mohan, 2015) that needs to be utilized. In addition, Pravakar Sahoo and Abhirup Bhunia reveal how member countries will be benefitted through promoting BCIM corridor which can be

a game changer for South Asian trade as well (Sahoo & Bhunia, 2014). Hence, for shared prosperity, India–Bangladesh needs to work together to promote BBIN and BCIM Economic Corridor.

Promoting Energy Cooperation

Energy is an essential ingredient for national development and security that can be another area of cooperation between India and Bangladesh. In this context, it is pertinent to look at the prospects of energy sector of both the countries. According to the CIA World Factbook, India has 1.427 trillion cu m (2014, January 1 est.) natural gas proved reserves, while Bangladesh has 264.6 billion cu m (2014, January 1 estimated). India ranks 23, while Bangladesh ranks 42 in the world, regarding proved natural gas reserves. As of 2013, India produced 31.7 billion cu m (2014 est.) and consumed 50.6 billion cu m (2014, est.), which makes India a natural gas shortage country in terms of production. On the other hand, Bangladesh produced 22.86 billion cu m (2013, est.), while consumed 22.86 billion cu m (2013, estimated) (CIA World Factbook, 2015a, 2015b). Thus, there are untapped potentials to foster Bangladesh–India energy cooperation which needs to be harnessed for the greater interests of both the countries.

Exploring and Exploiting New Avenues of Cooperation

Syed Muazzem Ali, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India writes that ‘[t]he opportunities before Bangladesh and India are vast and unlimited, and both the countries should move and grow together for the common benefit of their people, with a spirit of cooperation and understanding’ (Ali, 2015). India–Bangladesh cooperation on health, food and agriculture needs to be promoted. In fact, in this twenty-first century, infectious diseases like Ebola virus, swine flu, avian flu are major challenges not only at national but also at regional and global levels. In addition to the recent Ebola virus attack in West Africa that caused tens of thousands deaths, swine flu virus attack in India also caused hundreds of human losses. This underscores cooperation on health issues. Moreover, to ensure health security to all, there is no alternative to promote agricultural cooperation at state level. India–Bangladesh needs to play a strong role in SAARC food bank. Other avenues of cooperation need to be explored and exploited in the days ahead for the mutual interests.

Changing Perceptions and Maintaining Consistency

Perception matters. For a consolidated India–Bangladesh relationship, changing perception is important. It is argued, though, at the current moment after the LBA ratification, India–Bangladesh relations reached to a new height and the world witnessed better and cooperative bilateral relations between them, but the Indian perception towards Bangladesh still matters. In her speech in the parliament on 7 May 2015 after the unanimously passing of the LBA Bill, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj provided a positive message to Indian neighbours and refuted the India’s alleged ‘big brother’ attitude which symbolizes arrogance. Instead she identified India as ‘elder brother’ which symbolizes caring and points out that ‘[o]urs is a caring attitude towards our neighbours’ (Gupta, 2015). In future, India–Bangladesh relations should be based neither on ‘big’ nor ‘elder brother’ attitude rather a cooperative and friendly neighbour.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide an overview of the recent developments in India–Bangladesh relations under Narendra Modi’s regime and, thus, challenges the conventional wisdom asserting that India–Bangladesh relationship is enjoying ‘excellent moments’ even though BJP is in power in India. In fact, the peaceful resolution of long-standing maritime dispute has been resolved in July 2014 through Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration and the ratification of the historic LBA is expected to work as a catalyst to deepen and broaden India–Bangladesh relations. Moreover, the paper demonstrates that to sustain win-win situation between two countries, there are challenges too which need to be addressed. The major challenges include: the long unresolved, but, decisive water dispute, trade imbalance, domestic political determinants, paucity of research and above all, the absence of political commitment. But, it found that water challenge is the prime one in uplifting India–Bangladesh relations. Hence, India–Bangladesh needs to resolve the water sharing disputes at the earliest ‘to remove irritants in relations’ (Balakrishnan, 2014, p. 208).

The article further argues that pending issues between India and Bangladesh needs to be resolved peacefully at the earliest that requires adequate political will, mutual understanding and confidence. It maintains that scholars, from both sides, must undertake collaborative research projects to innovate possible way out that would engage politicians, bureaucrats and largely common citizens in realizing mutual benefits in proportionate bilateral policy set up.

Finally, in this age of growing interdependence, shared priorities, prosperities, challenges and opportunities, it is argued that there is no alternative but to elevate Bangladesh–India relations in the days to come for mutual interests based on mutual understanding, respect, reciprocity and trust. Thus, a consistency in India–Bangladesh relations needs to be maintained no matter which regime comes to power whether in Delhi or Dhaka.

Notes

1. The point was raised by the anonymous reviewer.
2. While the pact was ratified by Bangladesh government in 1974, the pact was not ratified by India as it involved cession of territory. A modest demographic change in both the countries is expected to take place after the pact comes into force, the Standing Committee on LBA notes at Lok Sabha. (*The Indian Express*, 2014, 2 December).
3. War ships and vessels of research, scientific or oceanographic and of paramilitary forces will remain outside of the purview of the agreement.

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