

**Comments
on
Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations**

By

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Bangladesh and Myanmar are the two geographically contiguous Third World developing countries. These two countries share a good deal of history, geography, culture, politics of both colonial and post-colonial perspectives. Both also share the queer heritage of post-independence slipped democracy alternated by spells of praetorian army rule. Of course, Myanmar shares more of this heritage than Bangladesh. Despite so much of commonalities it is indeed unpleasantly surprising that these two neighbours are not as close and as interactive as they should have been. What is amiss or remiss.

We have under consideration the two relevant presentations by two very erudite professionals: one diplomatic and the other military, which seek to answer these queries bearing on the bilateral relations. Moreover, both the presentations enlighten the concerned quarters on how to craft a better future of relations between these two countries. Both have done their assigned jobs exceedingly well.

Relations and interactions of states, big and small, assume as K.J. Holsti suggests, three forms: conflictual; collaborative; and competitive. Conflict arises from dispute, discord and antagonism. Collaboration means engagement with each other for achieving common objectives. In competition a struggle ensues for protecting fundamental interests of the states involved. But David Edwards limits state interactions to either cooperation and conflict. Be that as it may, it is observed that Bangladesh-Myanmar relations have meandered through phases of cooperation and conflict. Conflict in this case is not meant in the sense of confrontation, but only in the sense of conflict of interests and resultant diplomatic face-off.

At present these two countries have an apparent regime incompatibility; but this is a factor that hardly comes into play when *reapolik* is the mutual imperative. This was exactly the message driven across through a statement made on the floor of the House of Commons in 1924 by the first Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald. By countering the conservative attack that his government had struck up relations with such a pariah state as the Communist Soviet Union he said, "We deal with cannibals too". These were the words of realist diplomacy. Such a realist diplomacy inherent in which are considerations of geo-economics and geo-politics impels Singapore, China and India to get close to Myanmar, and reap the benefits there from.

On 13 January 1972, both these countries had a euphoric beginning of their bilateral relationship. On this date Myanmar became the sixth nation to accord diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh. The negative spin-off of this act was that Myanmar lost its ties with Pakistan, which were snapped by the latter country. But as it was, both politics and economics dictated Myanmar's policy of preferring a close neighbour with which it had deep rooted historic linkages snapped artificially in 1947 as a sequel to decolonisation.

But over the years the scenario has undergone an unwelcome change and the relations between these two neighbours have at times not been as friendly as expected. The present state of relations is perfectly described when Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman writes towards the close of his paper, "We think of Myanmar as a distant neighbo[u]r of Bangladesh". He makes a plea for a fresh start with ideas. Brig. Gen (Retd.) Salim Akhtar holds with the same view by saying such explanatory words as "I guess our policy makers did not find Myanmar of sufficient interest which resulted in cooling-off of our relations". Ambassador Rahman's 'distant neighbour' typology is perceptual and /or psychological, not real; and the explanation for which occurs in the quote from Brig. General's presentation.

The job that awaits the present new administration of Dhaka is to transform this 'distant neighbour' in perception into a close neighbour in reality. As both the distinguished presenters will have us believe, the onus of recrafting Bangladesh-Myanmar relations is mostly on Bangladesh. But I personally believe that mutual relations mean diplomatic *quid pro quo* and thus Yangon ought to respond with reciprocity to whatever future overtures Dhaka would be making. A promising start should be made for sorting out the residues of the Rohingya issue- the major irritant between these two neighbours.

The demarcation of the maritime boundary, as the recent experience suggests, is going to be a good deal ticklish. A short term imperative for both the stakeholders, as Brig. Gen Salim Akhtar rightly suggests, is to work out a bilateral deal, and then to pave the way for transforming the same into the trilateral one by inducting India in future. Both Dhaka and Yangon need to gear up their diplomatic demarches to get India into the deal.

A lot has to be done to revitalize this bilateral relationship. Ambassador Rahman has clearly laid out what has to be done. The impediments to close economic relations are absence of infrastructural facilities; non-implementation of coastal shipping agreement; insufficient banking arrangement and services and visa related problems. The last impediment blocks Track II cooperation, that is, people-to-people contact, and without which, the relations are bound to remain superficial and perfunctory.

The following trade figures drawn from the Export Promotion Bureau and Bangladesh Bank sources are illustrative of the state of economic relations:

(in million US \$)

FY	Export	Import	Balance
2003-04	3.93	26.53	(-) 23.00
2004-05	4.07	32.59	(-) 28.52
2005-06	5.19	29.57	(-) 24.38

These figures are enough indicators on what and how much Bangladesh has to do to revamp its economic diplomacy *vis-à-vis* Myanmar.

Connectivity is for good economics, and not for bad politics as a strategy. A good news bearing on Bangladesh-Myanmar connectivity is that in July 2007, the two year long intense negotiation bore fruit as Dhaka and Yangon were able to seal a deal to construct 25 Km road linking the two countries for promoting trade, tourism and Track-II contact.

On 1 February 1972, the then government of Burma used quite eloquent rhetorics to rationalize its decision to recognize Bangladesh. “The government of Burma does not accept as principle, the solution of a country’s internal problems by direct help and intervention of a foreign country’s armed organization. However, due to the existence of questions requiring immediate comment inactions and actions, and also due to a desire to live fraternally as neighbours, the government of Burma has recognized the state of Bangladesh. The earlier part revealed Burma’s unease about the role of the Indian Allied Forces during the close of our Liberation war; but the latter part demonstrated pragmatic diplomacy. Geography and history, geo-economics and geopolitics demand that both Bangladesh and Myanmar “live fraternally as neighbors by sorting out all bilateral irritatants. Profit of cooperation is enormous, but cost of conflict is stupendous.