

The Political Dimension of Bangladesh-China Bilateral Relations

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Introduction

Bangladesh-China friendship has not only endured for the last 36 years, it has also significantly contributed to the larger South Asian landscape. It has weathered the vicissitudes of both domestic and international political changes, and it is to be hoped that it would successfully continue to do so in the future. On the Dhaka-Beijing bilateral relations, the Chinese Ambassador Mr. Zhang Xianyi said in October 2009, 'We're tested friends, tested by time...we are all-weather friends and we trust each other and we've cooperation in every field.'¹

It is assumed in certain Western academic and policy-making circles that: i) China is rapidly emerging as not only an economic power, but as a hegemonic power as well; ii) it is poised to challenge the existing regional order; and as such, iii)is a malevolent force that has be contained. In other words, a powerful China would necessarily play a disruptive role and be a threat to peace. The premise of this paper is that, China is a benign state, as well as a positively benevolent entity for not only Bangladesh or South Asia, but for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, and as such amicable relations with it should be fostered. According to Bin Yu, "China's steady rise has so far engendered regional stability, mutual prosperity, and greater cooperation."² David C. Kang has opined that, "...a strong China has not historically been associated with aggression or expansionism. The number and boundaries of countries in East Asia have remained essentially the same since AD 1200."³

¹ <http://www.bdsdf.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=1920&st=225>

² Bin Yu, "China's Rise and West's Bias," *Asia Policy*, Number 6, July 2008, p.166

³ *Ibid.*

Assessment of Bangladesh-China bilateral relations

Bangladesh's relations with China is not occurring in a vacuum—it is taking place in an international strategic context, where the interests of foreign powers set the parameters within which it has to maneuver. Under such circumstances, it would indeed be difficult, but not impossible, for Bangladesh to craft a course whereby it is effectively able to overcome such externally imposed constraints to pursue a proactive, prudent and productive China policy by balancing all the relevant actors. The vital question is, whether Bangladesh can achieve that goal, or would it be compelled to subordinate it to other factors that may be detrimental to its national interests in the long run.

China as a development partner of Bangladesh is devoted to the goal of economic upliftment of the country, and has contributed substantially to its defence sector, as well as in its vital infrastructure modernization efforts. In the energy sector too, China's role has been significant, and there is much scope for its further expansion. For instance, Chinese technical assistance in gas exploration and transportation would be of tremendous value. China currently is the largest regional trading partner of Bangladesh, having surpassed India in terms of trade volume. Although there is a huge imbalance in this regard, the Chinese government is keen about narrowing it down by absorbing greater amount of imports from Bangladesh, and also by enhancing the level of investments there. In short, there is a genuine willingness to promote the overall economic well-being of Bangladesh, which is a reflection of China's goodwill toward it.

Bangladesh so far has benefited much from Chinese assistance in a number of areas, and could yet gain further from sustained economic engagement with China, which could become a “force multiplier” by bolstering strategic goals.

Per se, the bilateral relations of Bangladesh and China are harmonious, but is being rendered complicated by extraneous factors, and there's the rub. Although at the official level, there is the rhetorical reaffirmation of Bangladesh's commitment to uphold the time-tested friendship with China, at the operational level a subtle shift is discernable. It can forge security relations with other country but, not at China's expense. It goes without saying that a lack of sincerity in Bangladesh's profession of friendship toward China may not augur well for it. In John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang's insightful analysis,

China's logic is that states that profess a desire for "friendship" with China but who align with hostile powers and with one another against China must be taught that such an "insincere" approach is unacceptable to China. If China's neighbors want friendship with China, they must be prepared to reciprocate China's expressions of friendship. Transgressions against China's core interests will be met with Chinese hostility; to drive this point home, China must be prepared to inflict costs on the other state. At the same time, China must be prepared to demonstrate its capacity for "friendship" with neighbors who respect China's core interests. This seems to be China's calculus.⁴ Suffice it say that there a number of areas where Bangladesh could be subjected to "infliction of costs."

The geo-political context of Bangladesh-China relations

As alluded to earlier, Bangladesh–China relations are evolving in the shadow of international political compulsions. As a result of which, Bangladesh's interaction with China related to trade and investments are being unduly politicized and it is becoming increasingly difficult for Bangladesh to pursue a truly independent policy toward China which may adversely affect its long- term economic development.

Although, China seeks to cultivate friendly relations with *all* the South Asian countries, some Indian analysts impute that its ulterior motive is encirclement of India. Notwithstanding the fact that the Sino-Indian trade volume currently stands at more than US\$ 60 billion, and is expected to increase to US\$100 billion by 2015 ⁵, there is a relentless but disingenuous effort to project China as *the* most serious security concern of India, when in reality they stand to gain much from economic cooperation and interdependence. In fact, India's future is deemed to be becoming increasingly linked to, to China's and East Asia's because of their economic might in the international arena.⁶

Historically speaking, between themselves, India and China contributed roughly half of world's GDP in the mid-nineteenth century, and, if they move in the right direction, they may succeed in reclaiming this share. In the 1950s such a future was envisioned by the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru through his active promotion of the concept of "*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*" The late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping is said to have once commented that,

⁴ John W. Garver & Fei-Ling Wang (2010): "China's Anti-encirclement Struggle," *Asian Security*, 6:3, 238-261

⁵ <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/08/29/the-strategic-implications-of-the-economic-rise-of-china-and-india/>

⁶ Ibid.

Only when China and India develop well, can one claim that the century of Asia has come. If China and India strengthen cooperation, Asian unity, stability and prosperity will be very hopeful, the world will be in peace and make more progress.⁷

If today these two Asian giants seem to be destined to be adversaries, it is largely contrived, and this perception is instrumental in involving India in dubious schemes to contain China, albeit in an indirect manner. Though denied by the United States, the Chinese are very much concerned that the American policy is beginning to look like, walk like and quack like containment, though rather than employ the term containment, the United States refers to “pre-empting China’s monopoly status.” Strategically speaking, currently all roads seem to lead to Beijing.

It must reiterated that a friendly Sino-Indian relations would have a positive impact on Bangladesh-China relations. Unfortunately Bangladesh is being subjected to confront a dichotomous situation: to choose either India or China as a friend, and is under pressure to adopt policies that run counter to its bests interests. For instance, the planned construction of the deep-water port in Chittagong by China is believed, in some quarters, to be a step in the latter’s containment of India, as a part of the so-called string-of-pearls strategy. Such a port could become a regional hub, and serve the interests of not only Bangladesh and China, but also India, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan.

In the area of water resources and river management, China, too should be included, since some major rivers, e.g., the Brahmaputra, have their origins there. Any regional initiative in this regard which excludes China would only be ineffective, irresponsible and impractical, ignoring the fact that it is the next-door neighbour of South Asia.

As for the much talked-about transit issue, it should be designed in such a manner that all the above-mentioned countries benefit from it. Most importantly, Bangladesh needs to ensure that an extension of such facilities to any country does not endanger China’s security, about which it is so sensitive. To quote, Garver and Wang, “Stated in Beijing’s diplomatic parlance, China’s neighbors should not join an anti-China coalition or allow their territory to be used for purposes hostile to China.”⁸

⁷ As quoted by Chinese ambassador to India Sun Yuxi on March 31, 2006. Accessible via <http://english.people.com.cn/200603/31/eng20060331-255013.html>

⁸ Garver and Wang, *op.cit.*, p.238

In particular, China has expressed dismay over India's conducting naval exercises with Japan, Australia and the United States as a part of the values-based "alliance of democracies."⁹ For the understandable reason, China feels disturbed about the intent of such exercises which exclude it. Bangladesh should, therefore be mindful of the sensitivities of China before participating in such exercises in the Bay of Bengal, the underlying even if unstated purpose could only be to deny it access there. It would indeed be imprudent for it to undertake any ill-conceived steps to keep legitimate Chinese naval presence out of the Bay, where it could not only enhance Bangladesh's maritime security, but also play a constructive role in energy exploration, as well provide vital humanitarian assistance / disaster relief assistance in times of natural calamities.

In the recent years, China's security perspective has moved from a land-based and northern orientation to one that faces the south and toward maritime security.¹⁰ This is not surprising, given the fact that bulk of China's imported petroleum is transported through the sea lanes, and 80% of it has to pass through the Malacca Straits, over which China has little control, which for the obvious reason has implications for its economic development and security. Bangladesh, therefore should provide it access to its ports so energy transportation to its south-west region is facilitated by overcoming what is known China's "Malacca Dilemma"

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be reiterated, that the vital political dimension of Bangladesh-China bilateral relations cannot be over-emphasized. The existing cooperation between the two countries should be further developed and taken to a higher level, whereby mutual security needs, and the common threats of extremism, terrorism and separatism addressed are effectively addressed and satisfactorily solved.

⁹ See, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/08/29/the-strategic-implications-of-the-economic-rise-of-china-and-india/>

¹⁰ Wayne Bert, "Burma, China and the U.S.A.," *PacificAffairs*, Volume 77, No.2, Summer 2004, p.270