

Understanding the Nature of Bilateral Relations between Bangladesh and India: Critical Review of Intermediate Regime (2006-2008)

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Abstract: Many of the domestic political inputs specially the changes in the government, distinguished ideology of political parties and military governments, natural disaster etc. play a very significant role in influencing the foreign policy formulation process. In line with this realist neoclassical perspective this article has examined the foreign relations of Bangladesh with India and argues that the domestic politics in Bangladesh create enough spaces for ups and downs within that relationship. The Caretaker Government (CTG), a unique form of government put forward especially by the Awami League entered into the helms of the affairs of the state thrice in this country and finally backed directly by army, ruled this country during the period from 2006 to 2008. Mapping of foreign relations between India and Bangladesh of this particular period is the main focus of this study. The study follows an analytical and historical approach in the methodology. Both primary and secondary data and information were used: primary data through KII (Key Informant Interview) and secondary data and information through documentary review and content analysis. The study reveals that the aforesaid CTG took several policy decisions bearing national importance including those of great security concerns, signed huge number of international treaties and contracts and made 90 laws touching upon vital areas of governance outside the mandate of the Constitution obligating the future governments. The most remarkable success the CTG could achieve in establishing a very cordial relationship with India. As a whole a relation synergy was developed with India during this period because both the countries- Bangladesh and India were able to reap diplomatic, economic and strategic benefits out of this cordial relationship.

Keywords: Foreign Relations, Bangladesh, India, Military Intervention, Interim Caretaker Government, Domestic Politics.

Introduction

Since 1971, bilateral relations between Bangladesh–India have experienced ups and downs, but the ‘India factor’ has remained constant and continued to affect Bangladesh’s foreign policy behavior. Indeed, bilateral relations between Bangladesh–India can be seen in a binary fashion: ‘pro-India’ or ‘anti-India’. Bangladesh pursued a strong India-positive foreign policy during the time of the first post-independence government (1971–1975); consequently the two countries developed a close relationship. After that, barring the tenure of the AL government from 1996 to 2001, mistrust and suspicion were the hallmarks of Bangladesh–India relations from the mid-1970s to the end of 2006. After the hostile phase (2001-2006), when the Bangladesh Army (BA) took power in January 11, 2007,

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ostensibly to save the country from political turmoil. During these years more specially 2007-08 the intermediate regime has pursued an India-positive foreign policy and the two countries consequently have built a close relationship that was not evident in the previous regime. The relationship is all-encompassing, stretching from closer trade and economic ties to unprecedented security cooperation.

Bilateral relations between India-Bangladesh and sources of state foreign policy behavior can be examined by three theoretical perspectives (Innenpolitik, Aussenpolitik and Inclusivity school of thought). Bilateral Relations dominated by a number of domestic factors play a very influential role in shaping the country's foreign policy directions (Masud, 2016). Bangladesh cannot escape the influence of the neighboring country-India's influence. At the very beginning the intermediate CG used the anticorruption drive as a tool for depoliticizing the state and civil society and thereafter made drives to gain the support of the international communities like India, China, USA and European Union and got it. Against this backdrop, the study is attempted to see what the nature of foreign relations of Bangladesh with India was during that time and how both the countries benefitted through establishing this relations and what were the reasons behind doing so. In order to find out all these answers this study set the following objectives:

1. To flesh out the nature of Bilateral Relations of Bangladesh with India under Care-Taker regime of 2006-2008; and
2. To examine whether there remained any compulsions used as political tool in stabilizing the domestic affairs of Bangladesh.

Bilateral Relations: Conceptual Clarity

This paper engages foreign policy theoretical debates to evaluate Bangladesh's foreign policy behavior toward India during 2006-2008. Why do both the states behave in the way they do in bilateral relations? In order to answer this question three broad schools of thought could be analyzed. First, the Innenpolitik School argues that domestic factors are primarily responsible for states' foreign policy behavior (Keukeleire and Schunz, 2008). In contrast, the Aussenpolitik School emphasizes the external factors that influence foreign policy of a country. Third, the Integrative perspective attempts to synthesize the opposing perspectives of the two schools. Then reasonably the question arises which school is the best in capturing the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India during the Intermediate Regime (2006-2008).

It is to be noted that, the Intermediate Regime in the form of Caretaker Government (CG) could continue its tenure for two years keeping a synergic relation with India on the ground that domestic situation is not enough satisfactory to hold a general election. By highlighting internal disturbance (Innenpolitik approach), the regime got support from international communities especially from India. This kind of stand taken by the CG backed by army can be articulated by "Vicious Circle of the Advent of Military Rule" a model developed by the author herself. Here it is strongly argued that military took over

power from the political leadership because they wanted to protect people from misrule and tyranny. They never conceded that they seized power for their own sake rather they did so because somebody had to rescue the country from abuse of state powers. This political culture precisely affects the foreign countries in many ways. The whole scenario has been presented in the form of conceptual framework presented in Fig-1

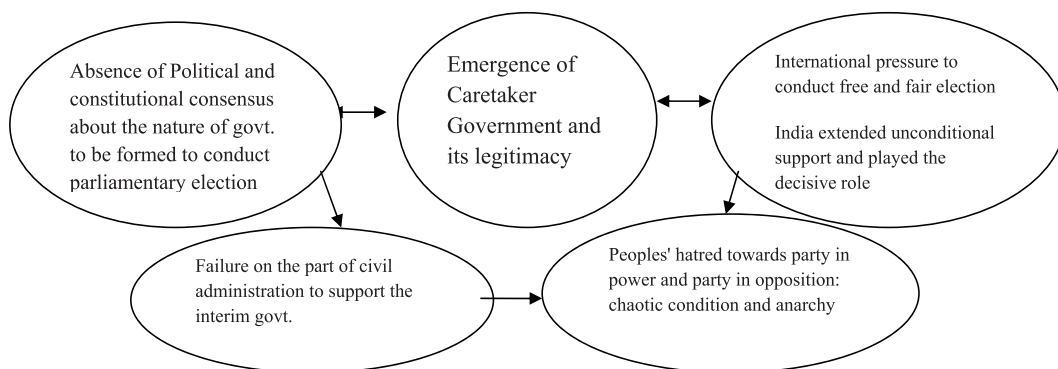


Fig. 1: Vicious circle of the Advent of Military Rule

Methodology

The study follows an analytical and historical approach. Both primary and secondary data and information were used. Primary data were collected through conducting KII (Key Informant Interview) of 23 persons consisting of civil society members, bureaucrats, academicians, diplomats, including 3 Advisers served under CTG. Secondary data and information were collected and collated through intensive documentary review and content analysis from a huge number of documents such as the constitution of the country, relevant laws, gazette notifications, relevant orders and ordinance, various news items, books, research articles, etc. published on activities of the 1/11 caretaker government rule during 2007-2008. Online sources and talk shows telecast in different television channels were also vigorously consulted.

Nature of Bilateral Relations between Bangladesh and India (2007-2008)

“National interest” is the core value on the basis of which states interact with each other. It is national interest that determines the nature of relationship between states. There can be four kinds of relationships in the international system.

Relationships based on politics and diplomacy	Relationships based on economic interdependence
International system of states with core value of interest	
Relationships based on security-related concerns	Compulsive relationships

Source: Mastoor, 2011, p. 3.

Bangladesh and India have two-dimensional relationship; it is based on both security-related concerns as well as compulsions of geographical dependence (Mastoor, 2011). At the same time the relationship based on economic interdependence between India and Bangladesh is also a very dominating factor. Thus security-related concerns, geographical dependence and the economic interdependence provide ample space and specificities for close, cordial and co-operative relations between the two countries. And the domestic politics or change of the government played a vital role in reshaping bilateral relations. In the aftermath of BNP regime led by Khaleda Zia (2001-2006), the intermediate regime (2007-2008) made unprecedented progress in furthering bilateral ties and established a multifaceted relationship in different fronts including security and border management; trade, commerce and investment ,connectivity; energy, power, space; developmental projects; culture; and in people-to-people exchange. Most importantly, several high level visits took place between the two countries which is the testimony of the deep friendship relation that proliferated during this particular period. The CG mobilized relatively neutral personalities like Dr. Yunus and Dr. Kamal to gain support from India. Although this kind of initiative was disliked by Bangladesh Awami League yet the CG's mission came to a success. Finally India told the then army chief of staff to make America agreeing to what he wants to do. In addition to this, Sheikh Hasina's derogatory comment affects India in the month of December 2006, prompted Indian authority to support Gen. Moeen (Chowdhury, 2014). Although UN and USA i.e. international community was in favor of democracy and anti-military takeover, India was supporting the Chief of Army of Bangladesh. Why India did so deserves a little bit elaboration.

A contradiction is visible that India practices democracy within the country and supports undemocratic regime outside the country. India knows how to do business with even military dictators. For example, Ershad regime in Bangladesh and coup of Musharraf of Pakistan in 1999 was supported by India. Thus it can be argued that India always plays proactive role in neighboring countries to consolidate power by the military rulers (Datta, 2009). Datta aptly discussed the nature of the relations of Bangladesh with India in the stipulated time as "Synergy with India". Like all other countries, India appreciates the relevance of the armed forces in that current political situation. In which process and strategy, a synergetic relationship was developed can be delineated in the following narratives.

The Army Chief's Trip to India

The then Army Chief of Bangladesh visited India for six days on the invitation of India Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. D Kapoor. And he was given VVIP reception of President with gift of six horses. Gen. Moeen visited the Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun, defense establishments in Bangalore and Kolkata, from where he made a flying visit to the border to see the route of the proposed railway link between Kolkata and Dhaka. General Moeen's visit was not like any other Army Chief's visit. That time, the CAS (Chief

of Army Staff) met several Indian ministers not quite related to the military. He met India's top political and military leaders to find specific ways to boost defense, transport and trade ties between the two states. The Indian government accorded the visit a very high status (Bammi, 2010).

The then COAS of Bangladesh discussed with Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to take bilateral relations forward for mutual benefit. He also held discussions with the Indian Minister of State for Defense MM Pallam Raju where training of armed forces personnel at each other's training institutions, capacity building in the area of specialized treatment at medical institutions, sharing of experience on disaster management and greater interaction on matters relating to participation of the troops of the two countries in UN Peacekeeping Operations came up. These frequent top level visits made them come closer and opened a new door for discussion. Previous BNP government's anti-India sentiment retained both party to come closer. And India applied best ways to gain maximum interest from Bangladesh. Thus domestic politics of Bangladesh determined the foreign relations of both countries and India's positive attitude towards the interim government molded internal politics of Bangladesh.

As batch of ten war veterans accompanied by their wives visited Bangladesh as state guests for a period of one week, from 25 March 2008. They attended the ceremonial parade on 26 March at Dhaka. Reciprocating the invitation from his counterpart, COAS of India visited Bangladesh for four days and he was very warmly received in Bangladesh. He found COAS of Bangladesh to be a powerful person, dealing effectively with political parties and was very serious about removing corruption such as the involvement of the army in preparing new electoral rolls by deleting bogus names, supporting the police in maintaining law and order and backing the Caretaker Government in running the country. These activities and their (Bangladesh Army) participation behind the scene in running the country were well appreciated by the masses and the government of India. The army chief of India praised the BAF for playing significance role both in internal and external affairs.

Other Facets and dimensions of diplomacy: Economic, political, cultural, national and international

When cyclone 'Sidr' hit Bangladesh on November 2007, the then External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee visited Bangladesh in December 2007. He also visited the cyclone-hit areas and expressed India's sympathy to the affected people of Bangladesh in their hour of need. Aid worth over Taka 250 crore (over US \$ 37 million), including supply of relief materials consisting of medicines, tents, blankets, ready-to-eat meals, portable water-purifiers, 1,000 MT of skimmed milk powder and 40,000 MT of rice was handed over to Bangladesh (The Daily Star, 2008). This huge amount aid was given to liquidate and strengthen both countries bilateral relations using COA of Bangladesh as Indian agent which comfort zone India did not enjoy during (2001-2006).

Another bilateral achievements came out through the 14th SAARC Summit held in New Delhi in 2007, India announced its decision to grant duty-free access to all imports from Bangladesh that were not in the negative list of India under the SAFTA. At the time of the operationalization of the SAFTA in 2006, India's negative list for imports from Bangladesh consisted of 763 items. In 2007, it was reduced to 744 and in 2008 to 480.

During the 15th SAARC Summit, Fakhruddin Ahmed (Chief Advisor) and the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh again met in Colomb (2008). As committed by the Prime Minister India granted duty-free access for 8 million Bangladesh apparel products to its market, as part of measures to bridge the trade gap. PM Manmohan said "Many things can be solved not only regionally but bilaterally." He appreciated the existing good relations between Bangladesh and India which has got momentum in recent months.

Many observers and analysts opined that since April 2007, the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been productive and achievements were the start of the Maitri Express between Kolkata and Dhaka in April 2007. Bangladesh Foreign Secretary M. Tauhid Hossain reportedly said: "We did not shy away from discussing all issues which we considered important for the present and the future of the robust, friendly relations between Bangladesh and India.....which would enable us to continue to work constructively in the days and years ahead to enrich our already close bilateral relationship." India's Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon expressed to india.com that the year 2009 should be a year of India and Bangladesh and India's foreign policy with Bangladesh is likely to see a drift after the parliamentary elections in that country. It can be assumed that India had no pressure to the military backed interim government to handover the power to the elected government and recover democracy within the country.

The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Border Security Force (BSF) of India exchanged lists of criminals of the two countries operating from across the common border in a four-day biannual meeting held during 21-24 July, 2008. Bangladesh handed over 1,497 Bangladeshi miscreants and a list of 1,761 Indian smugglers, criminals, robbers and rustlers to the BSF. Bangladesh also handed over a list containing the details of five anti-Bangladeshi organizations activated in India. Bangladesh and India have agreed to find out the elements engaged in such illegal activities and bring them to justice. The neighbors have agreed on sharing information about trafficking in women and children, and fighting illicit drug-smuggling. In addition to this, Bangladesh and India signed an air service agreement raising the number of weekly flights from 30 to 61. Civil aviation authorities of the two countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding to allow the designated airlines of both the sides to operate seven all-cargo flights per week within their territories by any type of aircraft. Besides these, several understandings and agreements were signed:

- In March 2007, India accepted to setup a testing facility at Petrapole in West Bengal. Towards the same end, the Bureau of Indian Standards signed an MoU with Bangladesh

Standards and Testing Institution to set up a Land Custom Station at Petrapole at a cost of Rs. 800 million.

- India agreed to build a two lane bridge of higher capacity on the Umngot River in Dwaki that would be an important trade corridor between Bangladesh and the states of Assam and Meghalaya.
- India agreed to upgrade five customs stations where Bangladesh has corresponding inland ports.
- Ispat Industries signed an MoU to conduct a one-year feasibility study for an investment proposal in energy and petrochemical sectors. This US\$ 2.8 billion proposal included \$300 million for mine developments, \$100 million for oil exploration and production, \$500 million for power plants, \$1.5 billion for petrochemicals and \$500 million for liquefied natural gas (LNG) and related projects.
- India recognized six laboratories in Bangladesh to test and certify its textiles and consumer products.

Besides these initiatives the intermediate regime tried to keep trade balance between India and Bangladesh.

Table 2: Trade between India and Bangladesh

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
BD'S exports to India	77.63	59.37	127.03	228.31	257.12
BD'S Import from India	1740.70	1631.12	1664.36	1626.58	2918.20
Total Trade	1818.33	1690.49	1791.39	1654.89	3175.32

Source: Website- Department of Commerce, Government of India, 19 January, 2010.

From the above table it can be seen that there is a big trade gap between India and Bangladesh. BD'S export to India is lower than BD'S Import from India. On the other hand, it can be said that BD'S export to India is increasing after every year. This can be assessed as the continuity of the foreign relations of the previous government. But during 2006-2008 (interim government) Bangladesh's export to India increased remarkably. It is true that while India accounts for nearly 15 percent of Bangladesh's imports, Bangladesh exports amount to only 1 percent of India's total imports. This is mainly because Bangladesh does not produce items required by India. Thus, the Trade Balance is in India's favor by 1:12.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be said that a relation synergy was developed with India during the military backed caretaker government (2007-2008). India benefited from the CG, more so as it came after an unfriendly Khaleda phase. Because of BNP's (2001-2006) anti-India sentiments, the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited nearest neighbor, India at the eve of her tenure. To take off previous government's gap, India engaged with the CG and appreciated its professionalism. The intermediate government's economic achievements, security concerns and mutual understandings were quite significant compared to the previous BNP led government. Several air routes, roads, bridges communication came out successful and possible by their (two country's) good diplomatic strategies. The CG took major decisions, policy, signed agreements, treaties MoU etc. out of its mandate. The CG could make remarkable achievements and prolonged their regime by influencing India. Undoubtedly, both the countries have a few real and other perceived differences, which dictate their foreign policy and bi-lateral relations. It is worth mentioned that after cyclone (Sidr) in 2007, Mukherjee undertook his second visit to Bangladesh to express India's support and sympathy. These frequent visits are rare even under a democratic government and after a long interregnum, the Director Generals of the BSF and BDR revived the Joint Working Group. In addition to these, Innenpolitik and Aussenpolitik theoretical perspectives are the best in capturing the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India during the Intermediate Regime (2006-2008). Nevertheless the psychological make-up of a weak country like Bangladesh in comparison to India is suited in this regard. The former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said: "It is the like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how friendly and even tempered the beast is, one is affected by every twitch and grunt". This means that India has to appreciate this psychological syndrome of people of small neighbors and be extra careful in doing things in the region as to avoid this perception by others. While the interim government was dealing its interaction with India was prominent.

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