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India's Bangladesh challenge

Until recently, the South Asian countries' bilateral ties were going through a 'golden phase'. But they are increasingly strained

India-Bangladesh relations are presently at an important juncture. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to Dhaka on 17 March, subsequently cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak, had provoked protests in Bangladesh. This reflects the emerging strains in bilateral ties that, until very recently, were said to be going through a 'golden phase'.

The recent tensions over India's citizenship laws threaten to unravel what has undoubtedly been one of India's most successful relationships in its neighbourhood; and pose more long-term challenges for India's relations with Bangladesh.

They also create a set of domestic problems for Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Hasina, in office since 2008, has been an ardent champion of India. India-Bangladesh relations have traditionally flourished whenever Hasina's Awami League has been in power. How Hasina handles these challenges will also determine the political space she has to manoeuvre vis-à-vis India, impacting the future course of bilateral relations.

Spillover of India's citizenship legislation

India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) pose the most immediate and pressing challenges. The CAA is meant to fast track Indian citizenship for non-Muslim minorities facing state-sponsored religious persecution in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The NRC is India's attempt to create a register of Indian citizens and identify illegal immigrants in the process.

While both CAA and NRC have provoked nationwide protests in India, they have also strained ties with Bangladesh. Dhaka has strongly rejected

the idea of the state persecution of its religious minorities. It has called off four high-level visits to India in the past three months and Hasina was publicly critical in an interview when she called the CAA 'unnecessary.'

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Bangladesh also resents the political and public discourse in India that tends to often equate illegal immigrants with Bangladeshis. Dhaka has consistently claimed that no illegal Bangladeshi is present in India. However, the possibility of the NRC leading to a massive influx of people from India is perhaps Bangladesh's biggest concern. It already hosts around a million Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, with very little prospect of them being repatriated to their home country. Dhaka has already incurred a huge economic and political cost hosting such a large refugee population. It may not be viable for it to do something similar with another set of stateless refugees.

Hasina in a tough spot

India and Bangladesh have sought to manage these tensions. Both the Indian Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary have travelled to Dhaka to reassure the government that the NRC would remain an internal issue. India has also tried to assuage its neighbour by clarifying that it perceives the state persecution of religious minorities to have occurred under a non-Awami League government.

Bangladesh as well, despite the cancellation of high-level meetings, has gone ahead with trade discussions, inauguration of infrastructure projects and joint military exercises with India during this period. This reflects Dhaka's desire to ensure business as usual and prevent the relations from deteriorating further.

The recent developments have, however, placed Hasina in a tough spot. She is reviled by Bangladesh's religious right and the political opposition for her brand of secularism and open championing of India. Both these domestic constituencies are extremely anti-India, a sentiment that has strengthened in recent years given the sharpening of communal politics under the present Indian government. The reported treatment of the alleged illegal immigrants, mostly Muslims, in detention camps in India have especially antagonised opinions in Bangladesh. The Awami League is aware that the domestic political opposition is likely to use these developments in India to fuel both anti-India and anti-Hasina

sentiments in the country. The recent protests in the run up to Modi's visit is a partial confirmation of Dhaka's concerns.

Water woes

Increasing domestic pressure that questions the credibility of Hasina's pro-India policy could compel a rethink on her part and impact other aspects of the bilateral relations. The sharing of the Teesta River Water is one possible area.

Dhaka has been demanding an equitable share of the Teesta River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra River, which flows from India into Bangladesh. A combination of climate change and India's unilateral dam construction in the upper reaches of the Teesta has significantly reduced the flow of water into Bangladesh, especially during the dry seasons, impairing its agricultural and fishery sectors.

This issue has been on the agenda of every India-Bangladesh Summit for the past decade but there has been no progress. Hasina has faced significant domestic backlash because of her failure to resolve this issue. Her pro-India stance has been brought up repeatedly as the reason for her inability to push New Delhi on this issue. It has also strengthened perceptions of India as an overbearing, larger neighbour. The backlash increased following an agreement in October 2019, during Hasina's visit to New Delhi, that allows India to draw water from Bangladesh's Feni River.

Given the present context, Hasina's expressed willingness to remain patient on the issue is likely to be severely tested. She may push India harder on resolving this issue faster and negotiate more aggressively for more favourable terms for Bangladesh.

India's future in Bangladesh is closely intertwined with Hasina's political fortunes.

However, any progress in the short-term is unlikely. As water remains under the jurisdiction of state governments in India, West Bengal's Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, remains the biggest roadblock to this issue. She has already blocked one proposal in 2011. As she is seeking another term in 2021, and will be locked in a close electoral fight with Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), she will not relent on this issue given the importance of the Teesta water for a number of districts in northern West Bengal.

A BJP victory in 2021 may enable some progress, but in the next two, three years this will remain a thorn in Hasina's side and, by extension, for the bilateral ties.

A lurking China

Inadequate management of these existing challenges could pose a more long-term geopolitical challenge for India. Any deterioration in bilateral relations is likely to benefit China.

China already enjoys strong ties with Bangladesh. It has pledged USD 38bn towards infrastructure development in Bangladesh as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. China is also Bangladesh's biggest supplier of military hardware and largest trading partner.

India has closely monitored China's growing footprint in Bangladesh with some concern, but Hasina has shown great skill in balancing relations with both the regional powers so far. It has repeatedly given India assurances that it would not allow China use of its ports for military purposes. Moreover, given Bangladesh's economic growth during her rule, Hasina will rightly be wary of opening up the country to massive Chinese investments given the past experience of other South Asian countries.

It is unlikely that Hasina will suddenly abandon New Delhi and tilt towards Beijing. However, China enjoys strong ties with Bangladesh's powerful military and business elites, who may already be pushing Hasina for closer ties with it even at the expense of relations with India. It is plausible that if relations with India become an issue in the run up to the 2024 elections, a vulnerable Hasina may feel compelled to pay heed to such advice in the future.

India's future in Bangladesh is closely intertwined with Hasina's political fortunes. India not only needs to properly address the current fallout in India-Bangladesh relations but also ensure that it remains mindful of Bangladesh's domestic compulsions that could compel Hasina's support for India to waver.



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