

Bangladesh Prime Minister Brings Hope For Regional Cooperation, Development

by Ramtanu Maitra

The emergence of the three major powers—Russia, China, and India—on the Eurasian landmass, agreeing to cooperate to seek economic growth and regional security, while not allowing bilateral differences to come to the fore, has already begun to bear fruit. Both Japan and South Korea have begun to enhance their investments in this vast area; and Russia, in particular, is already planning to shift a large part of its energy supply from the west to the Asia-Pacific in the not-so-distant future.

However, all three nations, particularly Russia and India, are flanked by smaller, weaker nations, which are kept unstable and isolated by the old British colonial forces, often using Islamic fundamentalism as a battering ram against the larger nations. One of the worst victims is India, which was broken up by the British colonials, prior to their departure in 1947. The partition instigated massive violence in the affected areas, and despite the decades that went by, the Indian subcontinent has remained a hostile landmass, where even the infrastructural integration could not be achieved. This in turn, retarded economic development, and has brought untold misery to the hundreds of millions of citizens of the South Asian countries.

While that process is nowhere near coming to an end, the four-day (Jan. 10-13) visit to India by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, brought a ray of sunshine for India and Bangladesh, and the region as a whole. It is a necessary and important step toward integration of the smaller nations, by providing them the fruit of what the three great Eurasian nations have to offer, and in the process, building a stable and secure



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The meeting in mid-January of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Premier Manmohan Singh in New Delhi, in which a number of mutual economic development projects were agreed on, was an important step in ending the decades-long British-orchestrated divisions on the Subcontinent.

region. There is no doubt that the credit lies with Sheikh Hasina, who is facing a hostile, if not murderous opposition in her country, to take the bold step toward economic integration with India and beyond.

Upon her return to Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city, she responded to journalists' queries on the issue, saying: "We signed the agreements so the poor people of this region, not only of Bangladesh and India, may overcome poverty."

Mutually Beneficial Agreements

Hosting a banquet in honor of the visiting Bangladeshi premier, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: "We meet today as two vibrant and equal democracies that share common values and common goals. The links between us extend to every aspect of human life, be it social, economic, cultural, intellectual, or political." He added: "India stands ready to be a full and equal partner in the realization of your vision of social

change and economic development for Bangladesh.”

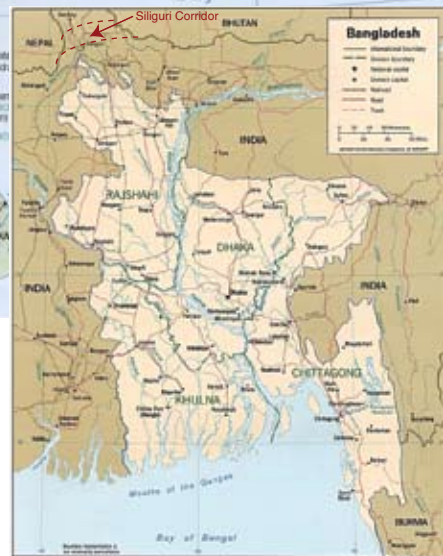
Matching their aim to create a new geometry between the two, and throughout the region as a whole, the two leaders signed a number of agreements which will promote mutual economic development. The most important of these are: India’s extension to Bangladesh of a \$1 billion credit line—the largest financial assistance from India to any country—intended for construction of railway bridges and railroads, and manufacturing of rail cars; the export of 250 mw of electricity from India’s central grid; and providing Bangladesh with a land-corridor through India to Nepal and Bhutan. Reciprocating, Bangladesh agreed to allow India set up a 14-km meter gauge railroad linkage between Akhaura, on the India-Bangladesh border, and Agartala, the capital of the Indian state of Tripura. In addition, Sheikh Hasina also provided India access to two ports, Chittagong and Mongla, through which Northeast India can access the Bay of Bengal, the waterway that leads to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

Over the coming years, an adequate utilization of this agreement, which could be labeled as a bill of faith, would open up immense possibilities, physically linking Bangladesh, not only with India, Nepal, and Bhutan, but also with the huge economic growth centers of southeast and far east Asia. India has now emerged as major economic power with abundant capabilities in the technological areas such as space, nuclear, manufacturing of heavy industrial goods, and information technology. Moving Bangladesh from a primarily agricultural nation to an agro-industrial nation is not only a necessity for this 155 million-person nation, but would make it an economic powerhouse, providing security to the Asia-Pacific region.

To begin with, as pointed out by the Indian news daily *Indian Express* on Jan. 12, a rail corridor through Bangladesh, via Dhaka, will see the Kolkata-Agartala



A rail corridor through Bangladesh, via Dhaka, will see the Kolkata-Agartala distance shrink to approximately 350 miles from the current 1,060 miles. Currently, the only link between mainland India and its eastern portion, is through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, sandwiched between Bangladesh and Nepal (see inset map).



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That, in brief, is the significance of Bangladesh’s geopolitical location, and of the hazard of India’s narrow Siliguri Corridor, sandwiched between Bangladesh and Nepal, that links India’s Northeast to the mainland. “Little wonder then that India has long sought rail transit rights through its eastern neighbor’s territory,” *Indian Express* noted.

No doubt, these agreements will kick-start a process of various economic activities. The two-way trade will improve now that India has removed tariffs from a

number of Bangladeshi products. One area where the two countries will have to work hard to make the outcome mutually beneficial is the sharing of water that comes down from the Himalayas. Sheikh Hasina called for concluding treaties on water-sharing of the River Teesta and other common rivers between Bangladesh and India: “A vital factor for economic development is normal flow of water. Bangladesh, an agrarian country, needs a guaranteed flow of water throughout the year,” she said while addressing the banquet hosted by Manmohan Singh at Hyderabad House in New Delhi.

Sheikh Hasina also assured the Indian government that Bangladesh “shall not allow” its territory to be used for launching terrorist activities against any country in the neighborhood, or around the world. “Bangladesh is committed to eliminating all forms of terrorism from within its territory,” she said. She noted that to ensure sustained commitment to peace, serious collaboration is essential in countering terrorism. She also invited the Indian Prime Minister to visit Bangladesh at the earliest possible time, in order to give a nudge to the process of change on the diplomatic front. “It is now important for you to visit Bangladesh at the soonest to consolidate our mutual gains, and to facilitate attainment of our remaining targets. Therefore, I extend to you, on behalf of our people, government, and myself, the warmest invitation to visit Bangladesh,” she said in her speech.

The Necessity of a Nuclear Power Link-Up

The most immediate task that lies before New Delhi and Dhaka is to reduce Bangladesh’s acute and chronic electrical power shortage. Bangladesh has an installed power generation capacity of a little more than 4,000 MW average per day. Dhaka claims the power demand is close to 5,000 MW, making it about a 20% power-short nation. However, the power demand figures of any country, projected by the authorities, have no real meaning, since they reflect low expectations, i.e., that there will not be sufficient power to meet the needs of a growing economy.

In fact, there is a need for tremendous expansion of



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Nuclear power is the key to development of the Subcontinent, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently announced that “We are taking initiatives to set up a nuclear power plant at Rooppur site.” Other nations are already vying to build it.

economic activity, and the power to fuel it, to keep up with a growing population. One of the areas where India does have enormous experience and expertise is in the area of nuclear power generation. Having mustered the technology of the entire nuclear fuel cycle, over the last five decades, India is in a good position to help Bangladesh go nuclear.

On March 4, 2009, Sheikh Hasina, whose recently deceased husband, Dr. M.A. Wazed, was the former head of the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, revived the almost five-decades-old project to build a 600 MW nuclear power plant in Rooppur. The Prime Minister told parliament on that occasion that: “We are taking initiatives to set up a nuclear power plant at Rooppur site.” And, proposals floated by Russia, China, and South Korea, the three nations vying to build the plant, indicate that a 1,000 MW plant will be built at Rooppur.

Security Threats

Since the assassination of its founder, and father of Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, Bangladesh was steadily slipping under the control of two forces that were keen to pose a threat to India and the region. These two forces—the Saudi-funded madrassah-mosque crowd and the British Bangladeshi-Muslims under the control of British intelligence—had joined hands to radicalize the country and make it a nesting place for all kinds of terrorists, including those who were involved in separatist movements in Northeast India. As a result, Bangladesh was turning into a terror-

ist hub, where drug traffickers, Islamic jihadists, and gun-runners—all enjoying some protection of foreign intelligence agencies and local politicians using the terrorists' muscle to gain political power—were sitting across the table making deals.

Last February, soon after Sheikh Hasina was elected as Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the third time, a massive assassination plot was set up. The Feb. 25 set-up to kill senior army officers, and then pull off a coup, by eliminating Sheikh Hasina and Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed, was centered on the ongoing demands of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) military personnel for better pay and working conditions.

This was the pretext on which the discussions began, and then, the killers moved in. A day after the massacre, in which 70 top military officers were killed, the New Delhi-based *Times of India* reported the spread of the BDR “rebellion” to other parts of the country. The *Times* correspondent said that, “it became clearer that there was a larger, more insider design to the rebellion. The rebels were seen wearing distinctive orange-colored bandanas, colors belonging to a U.K.-based Islamist organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir. According to terrorism analysts, Tahrir has been focused on Bangladesh for the past couple of years to turn the nation into an Islamist caliphate.”

This is the British hook into the flesh of Bangladesh, and if this is not pulled out, neither the country, nor Sheikh Hasina, will ever be safe. To begin with, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) is a terrorist outfit, born, nurtured, and protected in Britain. Like the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, and the Mirpuri terrorists demanding an independent Kashmir, HuT is also controlled and used by Her Majesty's Service to assassinate leaders and destabilize nations.

HuT is banned in Russia, Germany, and many other nations because of its terrorist activities. In Britain, from time to time, questions have been raised about its terrorist activities, but Prime Minister Tony Blair, earlier, and now Gordon Brown, made clear that HuT is to be given a free hand. In fact, the British government was actively helping the HuT to overturn the German government's banning of the party in 2003, because of its vicious anti-Jewish activities. Blair played a major role in keeping the killers alive and well.

Saudis Fund the Terrorists

Although the world has come to recognize the large-scale funding of the Wahhabi variety of terrorists by the

Saudis, its involvement in Bangladesh is not widely known. The Saudi-based Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation—a non-governmental organization (NGO) with extremist ties—in recent years, has restored many mosques in Bangladesh's North-West.

With tacit support from, if not an arrangement with, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition to the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League, and essentially an anti-India political grouping, Saudis have pumped a load of money into the madrassahs and mosques. One report in 2008 indicated that, in Bangladesh, there are 64,000 private Quranic schools (madrassahs), most of which are beyond any form of governmental control or supervision, against 9,000 state-run schools. Between 2001 and 2005, the number of schools that received state funds rose by 9.74% compared to 22.2% from private sources. Needless to say, most of these private sources originated in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Under the cover of building mosques, setting up madrassahs and other educational institutions, hospitals and health-care centers, these NGOs have systematically funded Islamic militant groups and given financial backing to those involved in the widespread wave of bomb attacks that shocked Bangladesh in 2005.

Writing for *Global Politician*, Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury pointed out on April 22, 2008, that the cadres for various militant organizations in Bangladesh have been recruited from the thousands of madrassahs that have mushroomed throughout the country. “Many are located along the Indian border in the west and north, where young radicals from both countries are taught the virtues of orthodox Islam. Funding for the madrassahs comes from donations from local communities and international Islamic charities, such as the Saudi Arabia based and immensely wealthy Rabitat Al Alam Al Islami,” Choudhury wrote.

For years, these extremists gathered in hidden training camps, mosques, and madrassahs, learning how to use weapons and build bombs. In their diaries they scrawled slogans of political alienation. In 2005, their ideology culminated in a series of nearly 500 bomb blasts in a single day that shook the nation and killed three people. Islamic NGOs operate largely in the poor districts of northwestern Bangladesh, in places like Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi. And it is here that militant Islamic groups have extended their reach and become more active.