

MONSOON REVOLUTION IN BANGLADESH AND ITS STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper will analyse how the monsoon revolution in Bangladesh (BD) of August 2024 led to regime change with its strategic implications. The paradigm shift in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations that took place following the monsoon revolution and the opportunities to ameliorate Dhaka-Islamabad ties will also be examined in this paper. It is the second time in the last 50 years that regime change in Bangladesh has led to an improvement in Pak-BD ties. First, on August 15, 1975, when the president and founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, was assassinated along with the majority of his family members by soldiers, Pakistan was the first country to recognise the new government led by Khondkhar Mushtaq Ahmed. Second, on August 6, 2024, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and flee to India following massive student protests, Pakistan welcomed regime change in Dhaka.

Keywords: Sheikh Hasina, International Crisis Group, Narendra Modi, Jamaat-e-Islami.

Introduction

Regime change in Dhaka on August 6, following massive student protests, unfolded new opportunities for mending fences in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. Since 2009, when Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister, till 2024, her policies reflected indifference and hostility towards Islamabad despite repeated gestures from Pakistan. Pakistan welcomed the monsoon revolution, overthrowing Hasina's regime, and it reflected a gradual shift in the paradigm of Islamabad-Dhaka ties.

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International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think tank, vividly explained regime change in Bangladesh in the following words:

Sheikh Hasina's sudden downfall resulted from a combination of longstanding grievances and her reaction to the student-led quota reform movement. The protests emerged at a time of burgeoning discontent with her rule, stemming from both a struggling economy wracked by cronyism and a series of government steps that many citizens felt undermined Bangladeshi democracy. The government's unpopularity had only grown since it secured another five-year term in January's deeply flawed election. The resentment ran so deep that when Hasina responded to the protests with extreme violence, the demonstrations quickly morphed into a mass movement aimed at removing her from power. The trigger for Hasina's ouster came unexpectedly.¹

Standoff in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations during the reign of Sheikh Hasina, despite periodic initiatives from Islamabad to unleash a new era of friendship with Dhaka, failed to yield positive results. Antagonistic and indifferent posture of Sheikh Hasina towards Pakistan reflected how she was influenced by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh, during his speech in Dhaka, proudly took the credit of liberating East Pakistan and transforming it into a new country, Bangladesh, by using military force. Modi's visit to Dhaka on March 26, 2021, led to violence as demonstrations were held against his arrival. Islamists led the protests, students of madrassas (religious schools) and left-wing groups opposed to Mr Modi's visit to Bangladesh. They accused him of pursuing anti-Muslim policies. Those who organised the rallies and even supporters of the ruling Awami League accused security forces of brutally attacking protesters.²

Modi's visit to Dhaka on the occasion of celebrating the golden jubilee of Bangladesh took place despite domestic opposition. The government snubbed those opposing Modi's visit by arguing that India's role in the liberation of Bangladesh was pivotal. India repeatedly reminded Bangladesh that its independence from Pakistan was not possible without New Delhi's intervention, which added to Dhaka's burden of Indian favour. The 15 years of Hasina's rule, which deepened Indian influence in the state and society of Bangladesh, also contributed to Dhaka's erosion of sovereignty, a phenomenon that warrants analysis.

Earlier, in June 2015, the Indian Prime Minister, while delivering a speech at Dhaka University, recalled his country's role in liberating East Pakistan and

transforming it into an independent state of Bangladesh. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reacting to Modi's speech, asked the international community to take note of India's acknowledgement of its interference in East Pakistan. The Spokesperson said that it was regrettable that the Indian politicians not only indulge in actions that are in violation of the United Nations' Charter but also take pride in recalling their interference in the internal affairs of other states. The Spokesperson reiterated that the "people of Pakistan and Bangladesh are bound not only by the strong bonds of religious affinity but also by the history of their struggle for independence against colonial rule. Indian attempts to sow seeds of discord between the two brotherly nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh will not succeed, he stressed.³

This paper will examine the strategic implications of the monsoon revolution of August 2024 in Bangladesh by reviewing the following questions:

- How did regime change in Bangladesh lead to a *paradigm* shift in Pak-BD ties?
- What are the potential areas of *cooperation* for strengthening Pak-BD ties?
- What are the *prospects* and the way forward in Pakistan-Bangladesh ties?

The role of the new generation in Pakistan and Bangladesh in overcoming the legacy of the past and adopting a forward-looking approach to exploring opportunities for improving relations between the two brotherly Muslim countries needs to be taken into account. The generation of Pakistan and Bangladesh, which was born after 1971, does not carry the baggage of bitterness of the past. However, the two countries must take concrete steps to address the historical legacies that still haunt the people of both countries.

It is for the second time in the last 50 years that regime change in Bangladesh led to betterment in Pak-BD ties. On August 15, 1975, when the president and founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, was assassinated along with most of his family by soldiers, Pakistan was the first country to recognise the new government led by Khondkhar Mushtaq Ahmed. On August 6, 2024, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and flee to India following massive student protests, Pakistan welcomed regime change in Dhaka. It offered Bangladesh help and assistance, such as coping with colossal floods.

Events of August 1975 and 2004, which led to the removal of Awami League governments of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and Sheikh Hasina, his daughter, from power, reflected deep-rooted resentment among the people of Bangladesh against their authoritarian mode of governance and overt pro-Indian posture. The first regime change in Dhaka in August 1975 was the result of a military coup led by junior and middle-ranking officers. In contrast, the removal of the Awami League government in August 2004 was the outcome of a popular uprising led by the students, first against the quota system and then against the brutal use of force to quell the students' movement.

The 2024 Monsoon Revolution: Causes and Implications of Regime Change

Images of students' protests against the Hasina regime reflected the level of discontent and anger which culminated in the August 5 storming of the Prime Minister's House. After winning the highly controversial general elections of January 2024, Sheikh Hasina's arrogance against opposition parties reached its peak. She thought that her rule was invincible and could not be challenged by her opponents.

From any standpoint, "Hasina became authoritarian after winning the 2014 election, which gave her a second term in office following her victory in December 2008. During her first tenure, she was praised for establishing political and economic stability, with the nation experiencing 7% annual growth. Additionally, she took strong action against all her political opponents. Even the current head of the interim government, Dr Yunus, had conflicts with the deposed Hasina regime. Beginning in 2014, Hasina strengthened her control over nearly all national institutions, such as the media, police, court, electoral commission, and civil administration, by appointing people who shared her party's views to positions of power. She would allegedly perform a "DNA test" in Dhaka - a figurative forensic investigation of a person's prior relationships. If there were any evidence connecting them to any of her competitors, a person would not be considered for jobs or positions. Hasina became Bangladesh's all-powerful and unassailable leader. However, widespread corruption, extrajudicial assassinations, and human rights violations marred her administration. Fearing a repeat of previous events, Hasina feared an unconstitutional military coup. Thus, when the constitution was changed in 2011, her government eliminated the nonpartisan caretaker government and added strict requirements. The extra-constitutional use

of force was classified as treason under the amended constitution, with the death penalty as the only punishment available for such crimes”.⁴

The manner in which the constitution was amended by ending the provision of a caretaker setup reflected her zero tolerance for criticism and her fear that opposition parties, particularly the BNP, would get space in elections if held under a neutral caretaker setup. The elections of 2014, 2019, and 2024 were held, denying the opposition a level playing field. However, political suffocation was deepening with each passing day, which was triggered when the student community challenged her use of brute force to quell agitation against the quota system.

As reported in *The Economist* (London), “On the afternoon of August 5th [2024], televisions in Bangladesh broadcast showed images of a helicopter rising from the residence of Sheikh Hasina, the country’s prime minister until minutes before. The chopper was carrying her and her sister “to safety”. Shortly afterwards, images appeared of gleeful protesters entering the prime minister’s residence, lounging in her bed and making off with pets and furniture. Others were filmed dancing in the streets of Dhaka. In an address to the nation, General Waker-uz-Zaman, the army chief, confirmed that Sheikh Hasina had resigned and said he would form an interim government.⁵ Suppose Sheikh Hasina claimed that she won the January 2024 elections by a landslide victory and enjoyed popular support. Why did she fail to face protestors who had planned to storm the Prime Minister’s House on August 5 and flee to India? Had the Bangladeshi Chief of Army Staff not warned Sheikh Hasina to leave in 45 minutes, massive protestors would have stormed the Prime Minister’s House and caused damage to her⁶. Her credibility as a popular leader was ruined when she decided to escape and take refuge in India.

The monsoon revolution in Bangladesh, leading to a regime change, reflected how the student community and the general public had become increasingly antagonistic towards the 15-year rule of the Awami League. Confident that her economic performance during her tenure was enough to neutralise any challenge to her regime, she failed to read the minds of people, particularly those who had decided to get rid of her dictatorial rule. She miscalculated the surge of students’ movement in June 2024 and thought that by using brute force, she would be able to suppress, as in the past, any protest challenging her government. Large-scale corruption, nepotism and coercion against her political opponents

weakened her hold over power, which ultimately led to her downfall on August 5, 2024.

The manner in which Sheikh Hasina fled to India, leaving her Awami League supporters in a lurch, reflected that she had lost popular support at the grassroots level. It seemed that history repeated itself when, around 50 years ago, her father was assassinated along with his family. No popular protest against his killing took place because Mujib, like his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, had become highly popular. Both father and daughter compromised the sovereignty of their country by tilting in favour of India and by allowing New Delhi to interfere in the affairs of Bangladesh, which ultimately led to their downfall.

After the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, President Mohammed Shahabuddin sought an opinion from the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court before forming the interim government. The Appellate Division stated in its opinion that the president can form an interim government in the current situation, as there is no parliament in place and the prime minister has earlier resigned from office⁷. It was only after an opinion allowing the formation of a caretaker government was sought that the President took the oath from the caretaker Chief Adviser and his cabinet. It means that, despite lacking democratic credentials, the caretaker setup derives its legitimacy from the advisory opinion of the Supreme Court, which allowed the President to appoint an interim government in view of the unusual circumstances following the collapse of Hasina's government.

Transformation of Power Dynamics in Dhaka

Like the regime change in Bangladesh, which took place by assassinating Sheikh Mujibur Rehman on August 15, 1975 and the ouster from power of his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, on August 5, 2024, led to far-reaching strategic implications, particularly on relations with India and Pakistan. The military of Bangladesh, at the peak of students' protests, decided to remain neutral, which paved the way for Hasina's unpleasant departure from power. Sheikh Hasina was confident that she would use the military to crush protesters as she had done by using police and the Rapid Action Battalion,⁸ but she was mistaken. By sensing the mood of the people, the military high-ups decided not to follow her orders and to remain neutral.

Implications on Bangladesh-India Relations

Indeed, in August 2024, India lost its strategic ally because Sheikh Hasina's regime, in its more than 15 years of rule, possessed a heavy tilt in favour of New Delhi. When, on August 15, 1975, the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was shocked to hear about the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman along with his family, likewise, the Modi regime received a significant setback when Sheikh Hasina's regime was toppled by a popular uprising led by agitating students. The caretaker government of Chief Adviser Dr Mohammad Yunus is in the process of mitigating Indian influence and Dhaka's tilt towards New Delhi. Still, it will be an uphill task because of the deep penetration of New Delhi in the Bangladeshi state and society. As remarked by Rahul Roy Chaudhury and Viraj Solanki in their write-up in the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), London, that:

The ouster of Sheikh Hasina is a significant setback for India's security and regional policy. Under Hasina's rule, a secular Bangladesh, with which India shares its longest land border and strong cultural connections, had become India's closest ally and an effective enforcer of India's security goals. By eradicating training camps previously used by Indian separatist rebels, Bangladesh helped end the decades-long insurgency in India's traditionally turbulent northeastern region. India has granted Dhaka concessional credits of nearly US \$10 billion for over 40 projects, including high-impact community development projects, and also granted approximately 1.6 million visas – primarily for tourism – to Bangladeshi nationals in 2023. Furthermore, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first foreign leader to congratulate Hasina on her electoral victory in January 2024, and Hasina attended Modi's swearing-in ceremony on 9 June [2024] and made the first state visit of a foreign leader to India on 21–22 June [2024].⁹

All of a sudden, with Hasina's departure from power, billions of dollars of Indian investment in Bangladesh that had accumulated during Hasina's rule were gone. To dispel the impression that the ouster of Sheikh Hasina from power would be detrimental to India, Dr Mohammad Yunus held a telephonic conversation with Narendra Modi. He assured him of maintaining cordial ties with New Delhi and protecting the Hindu minority in Bangladesh¹⁰. Furthermore, the Foreign Secretary of India also visited Dhaka and held talks with his Bangladeshi counterpart to alleviate any negative sentiments in New Delhi regarding the ouster of Sheikh Hasina from power¹¹. Derek Grossman, in his article published in *India Today* on December 19, 2024, raised an alarmist view in Delhi about regime change in Dhaka by arguing that, "A related worry for New Delhi is the warming ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Islamabad has begun providing

ammunition to Bangladeshi security forces, and for the first time in five decades, a Pakistani cargo ship docked at Chittagong port in Bangladesh. Dhaka has waived customs inspections for Pakistani imports as well as security clearance requirements for Pakistani citizens seeking a visa to enter Bangladesh, heightening Indian concerns that Bangladesh is increasingly becoming a terrorist harboring state, like Pakistan or Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held a warm meeting with Yunus at the United Nations - in stark contrast to Modi's decision to shun the opportunity. Pakistan's support to Bangladesh is likely to only strengthen, based in part on mutual antipathy toward India, but also their growing Islamist connections and robust strategic ties to China. According to one recent commentary, India should be wary of the revival of a West Pakistan-East Pakistan axis. Although highly exaggerated, the piece is nevertheless probably reflective of how New Delhi, for the first time since the birth of Bangladesh out of East Pakistan in 1971, has to once again worry about the prospects of dealing with three separate fronts: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and China.¹²

Why reports of Pak-BD normalisation in relations tend to generate insecurity in New Delhi is not difficult to gauge. A slight shift towards warmth in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations is viewed with suspicion by the Indian state, and its media raises a hue and cry over reports indicating a thaw in relations. As a sovereign country, Bangladesh has the right to conduct its foreign policy, but New Delhi wants Dhaka to follow its dictate, particularly on ties with Pakistan.

According to a Bangladeshi writer, "Did Bangladesh's inevitable neighbour follow even a rule of its own best interest in underscoring the dynastic autocracy in Bangladesh? Was that the best option it had? Will it learn a lesson, in all candour, this time around? These are questions best left to political pundits in India and beyond. For us, citizens and denizens of Bangladesh, it is more of a single-payer option. India's unabashed selfishness in promoting a regime that clearly violated all rules of liberal democracy proves highly short-sighted, more now than ever. Border killings on a rhythmic scale are not simply a mystic symbol of India's political muscle but of its myopic nature. It is a bizarre thing: "India's Bangladesh Problem," as one pundit called it. Termites, they call their unhandsome neighbours. India's best interest may perhaps lie in strengthening a new democracy in Bangladesh. At any rate, not obstructing democratic aspirations of a new generation in its eastward neighbourhood is the key point".¹³ Critical voices in Bangladesh against India's undue interference in its affairs and dictating

on matters of relations with Pakistan are a reality and reflect a growing anti-Indian narrative.

Back-to-back events taking place in the context of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, following Sheikh Hasina's exit from power on August 5, 2024, have generated enormous apprehension, insecurity, and suspicion in India. For instance, "it all started with reports about Bangladesh purchasing military ammunition from Pakistan; the celebration of the death anniversary of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah at Dhaka Press Club; and a proposal put forward by a Bangladeshi Professor for signing a nuclear treaty with Islamabad. Other developments like the effort for resumption of direct flights, easing visa restrictions, launching of normal trade, revival of the joint economic commission (JEC), and revitalising cultural and educational ties have led the Indian media to discuss this closeness and ultimate potential unity of the two countries."¹⁴ However, it will be wishful thinking to expect that following regime change in Dhaka on August 5, 2024, the "India factor" in Bangladesh will cease to exist. Surrounded by India on three sides, economically dependent on its neighbour, and with deep penetration of its intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in the Bangladeshi state and society, it will not be possible for Dhaka to put itself entirely out of decades-old Indian influence. It means even after establishing strong defence relations with Pakistan, Bangladesh would remain vulnerable to Indian intervention through its patronised elements.

Pakistan's positive gesture welcoming regime change in Dhaka on August 5, 2024, reflected a keen desire on the part of Islamabad to strengthen ties with Bangladesh. For instance, in a letter addressed to Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, Pakistan's Prime Minister "expressed profound sympathies and concern over the extensive damage and loss of life caused by the floods, pledging solidarity and support from Pakistan."¹⁵ He lauded the resilience of the Bangladeshi people and expressed confidence in their ability to recover under Muhammad Yunus."¹⁶ In his meeting with the Pakistan Prime Minister on the sidelines of the D-8 summit in Cairo, the Bangladeshi interim Chief Adviser expressed a desire to resolve outstanding grievances from Dhaka's 1971 separation from Pakistan by stating that "the issues have kept coming again and again. Let's settle those issues for us to move forward."¹⁷ Reciprocating to Dr Muhammad Yunus's resolve to normalise ties with Islamabad, Pakistan's Prime Minister expressed a keen desire to promote bilateral cooperation primarily in the areas of trade, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchange."¹⁸

Back-to-back events reflecting warmth in Pakistan-Bangladeshi relations after regime change in Dhaka concentrated on defence cooperation, trade, economic and commercial ties. For instance, speaking to the business community at the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), Bangladesh High Commissioner to Pakistan, Iqbal Hussain, stated that “Bangladesh has simplified the visa process for Pakistanis to trade further and economic relations between the two countries, which must be a top priority to move forward. Bangladesh government is eager to improve relations with Pakistan, which had been less than satisfactory over the past decade.”¹⁹ As stated by President LCCI, Mian Abuzar, “two-way trade between Pakistan and Bangladesh amounted to \$ 718 million during the fiscal year 2023-24. Pakistan’s exports to Bangladesh were valued at \$661 million, while imports from Bangladesh were \$57 million.”²⁰ Trade is one area which can strengthen Pak-BD ties because economic diplomacy²¹ will help resolve contentious issues between the two countries.

On January 13, 2025, the Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) and the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Dhaka to form the Pakistan-Bangladesh Joint Business Council (PBJBC) to strengthen, facilitate and enable trade ties between the two countries.²² Pakistan’s trade delegation visiting Dhaka also held “significant meetings with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) and the FBCCI, focusing on collective trade promotion activities, exchange of delegations, and single country exhibitions.”²³ Exploring the enormous potential for expanding trade and commercial ties between Pakistan and Bangladesh is the need of the hour. Still, it requires a win-win situation for both countries and expresses substantial political will and determination from both sides.

According to Sabrina Chowdhury Balland in an article, “A New Beginning”: “Since Sheikh Hasina’s ouster, there have been clear signs of thawing of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan. There is an excellent step in the right direction. Pakistan and Bangladesh have the potential to build closer and more cooperative ties. For example, Pakistan can increase exports to Bangladesh by focusing on textiles, agriculture, and manufacturing. Joint energy, infrastructure development, and information technology ventures could boost economic integration. The two countries could also improve their intelligence sharing mechanism effort in the context of shared regional security concerns, border management, and climate change. Other cooperation could include

cultural diplomacy, youth exchanges, and shared educational projects, which can foster greater understanding and friendship between the peoples of both countries.”²⁴

High-level contacts between Dhaka and Islamabad gained momentum after the regime change in Bangladesh. Pakistan’s Prime Minister wrote a letter to Dr Mohammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government in Bangladesh and then telephoned him as well. The two sides examined in detail the need to promote trade, travel and economic ties as well as people-to-people contacts. According to the reports, “just three weeks after Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and a new interim government was installed, Dhaka ordered a fresh supply of artillery ammunition from Pakistan. The export is to be carried out in three shipments, starting in the first week of September and early December. This includes more than 40,000 rounds of ammunition, 40 tons of RDX and wax consistency for explosives and projectiles of high intensity, 2900 in number.”²⁵ A high-level military delegation from Bangladesh, led by Principal Staff Officer Lieutenant General S. M. Kamrul Hasan, visited Pakistan and held talks with the Chief of Army Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, and the Defence Secretary in Rawalpindi. According to the reports, the meetings focused on evolving regional security dynamics, enhancing military cooperation, and strengthening defence relations. Both sides emphasised the importance of a resilient defence partnership and joint efforts for regional peace and stability. Lieutenant General Hasan praised Pakistan’s military for its professionalism and sacrifices in the fight against terrorism, further underscoring the growing cooperation between the two countries.”²⁶ In February 2025, the naval chief of Bangladesh, Admiral Mohammad Nazmul Hasan, visited Pakistan and held talks with his Pakistani counterpart, the Chief of Army Staff and Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee.²⁷

Unfortunately, Pakistan-Bangladesh relations deteriorated in 2015 when Islamabad expressed its regret over the executions in Bangladesh for those found guilty of alleged atrocities committed during 1971. Expressing its deep concern and anguish over the execution of opposition politicians in Bangladesh, Pakistan called for the implementation of the tripartite agreement of 1974. A statement issued by Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad, said that, “We have noticed with deep concern and anguish the unfortunate executions of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury and Ali Ahsan Mujahid. Pakistan is deeply disturbed at this development. There is a need for

reconciliation in Bangladesh in accordance with the spirit of the Pakistan-Bangladesh agreement of 1974. The agreement calls for a forward-looking approach in matters relating to 1971. This would foster goodwill and harmony.”²⁸ The regime of Sheikh Hasina retaliated by imposing Visa curbs and other forms of interaction with Pakistan, including academic collaboration with Islamabad, were also suspended.

Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina condemned Pakistan for its reaction to the execution of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) leader Abdul Quader Molla, vowing to continue with the war crimes trial. Hasina also said her government would resist any attempt to create anarchy by the opposition. Since the execution of Molla on December 12, Pakistan has drawn massive criticism from Bangladesh for its reaction to the hanging of the JI leader. Earlier, the National Assembly adopted a resolution expressing concern over the execution of Molla. Following the resolution, Bangladesh’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Pakistan’s top envoy in Dhaka to register its protest.²⁹ Critics argue that the condemnation of executions in Bangladesh by the Pakistan government was tantamount to interference in the internal affairs of Dhaka, which led to Sheikh Hasina adopting a hostile stance against Islamabad.

Therefore, the relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh deteriorated following the criticism launched by Islamabad of executions in Bangladesh to the extent that the “Pakistan delegation decided to boycott a meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Dhaka. According to the reports, Pakistani diplomats and foreign ministry officials said it was not conducive for Pakistani lawmakers to participate in the moot, citing inadequate security arrangements. Bangladesh should reconsider its attitude towards Pakistan and respond to Islamabad’s overtures.”³⁰

Henceforth, “bitterness of the past still shapes the mindset in Bangladesh. All three national days in Bangladesh — February 22, 1952, National Language Day; March 25, 1971, Independence Day; and December 16, 1971, Victory Day — are directed against the past West Pakistani-dominated regimes. Textbooks in Bangladesh carry material on alleged atrocities by the Pakistan Army during the March-December 1971 military operation and the economic exploitation of the people of the then East Pakistan. Needless to say, the very survival of Bangladesh as an independent state is based on an anti-Pakistan narrative.”³¹

Yet, former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Muhammad Shamsul Haq gave a positive picture of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations when he argued that, “Bangladesh and Pakistan were bound by many common ties rooted in a shared history and culture, which was overshadowed but not obliterated by the tragic happenings of 1971. The Bengalis’ role in the creation of Pakistan was also a historical fact. Mr Abdul Kasem Fazlul Haq, a Bengali Muslim leader, moved the original Pakistan resolution. Of the Muslim majority provinces of British India, Bengal was the only province where the Muslim League was voted to power, thus providing the Muslim League with a political power base.”³² Furthermore, at the signing ceremony of the tripartite agreement in Delhi on April 9, 1974, Pakistan’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr Aziz Ahmed, paid glowing tributes to the Prime Ministers of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh for their statesmanlike approach in making this possible. He said Sheikh Mujibur Rehman made the most significant contribution because the agreement’s conclusion depended on how far he was prepared to go. Sheikh Mujib displayed a far-sighted and magnanimous approach, which led to the successful and constructive conclusion of the tripartite talks.” One needs to bear in mind that amnesty was granted by Mujib on December 16, 1973, to those who were convicted or detained under the Bangladesh government’s anti-Pakistan collaborators’ order of 1972. Mujib followed a policy of national reconciliation.³³ After Mr Aziz Ahmed’s statement expressing regret about the events of 1971 and subsequent expression by Mujib that “Bangladesh knows how to forgive”, it should have been enough to end the bitterness caused as a result of the military operation in the then East Pakistan, but it didn’t happen.

Notwithstanding a degree of hostility in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations since 2015, some positive signs were also noted during this period. For instance, “Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner in Karachi, Mr Saifur Raman, on the occasion of a reception to celebrate his country’s independence day, stated that, “Pakistan and Bangladesh share historical, cultural and religious ties. Both countries today are unfortunately suffering as a result of terrorism and extremism, and both must come together to fight these elements and secure the future of the coming generations. We must also be aware of the designs of nefarious regional powers who are trying to sow the seeds of discord between our two countries.”³⁴ Pakistan’s former High Commissioner to Dhaka, Mr Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, went an extra mile in normalising relations with Bangladesh when he held meetings with the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. In their meeting held on December 3, 2020, Sheikh Hasina called for strengthening ties with Pakistan. Earlier, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, spoke with his Bangladeshi counterpart over the phone and expressed his government’s desire to deepen

fraternal relations based on mutual trust, mutual respect and sovereign equality.”³⁵ Unfortunately, the goodwill gestures from Pakistan’s side towards Bangladesh remained unresponded to by the regime of Sheikh Hasina.

Innovation and creativity to strengthen Pakistan-Bangladesh relations will go a long way in unleashing the process of full normalisation in their ties. For instance, in an article, “Trade: a low hanging fruit in ties with Bangladesh”, the author Syed Shujaat Ahmed suggested that, “think tanks in both Bangladesh and Pakistan should join hands in producing joint research and advocacy. This will also bring independent voices in support of pro-trade and transit reforms. Think tanks should focus on their specific business community and respect and concern bodies in Pakistan. There is also a need for a proactive approach on these standing committees, which in the past also resulted in reforms and measures. Advocacy efforts should be backed by rigorous research which demonstrates loss to the business community and the country’s economy.”³⁶ According to the same author,

*A critical evaluation of data and trends reveals that several mutually agreed decisions have yet to be implemented. For instance, both sides agreed to sign a bilateral FTA to open more trade alongside SAFTA. This needs to be implemented in letter and spirit. There were many reservations besides these hindrances which Bangladesh raised. Key reservations include the special and differential treatment of Bangladeshi goods on the grounds of being the least developed nation, as well as differences over open markets following the FTA.*³⁷

Since the emergence of Bangladesh, for the first time after 1971, direct shipping cargo links were established between the ports of Karachi and Chittagong. According to a Pakistani writer, “it is heartening to see the revival of a direct sea-route connection between the two nations through cargo ships. For both countries to work together, there are opportunities in Information Technology, tourism, sports, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, and agriculture. Cultural engagements, youth exchanges, and shared educational projects will be critical in eliminating misunderstandings and bitterness and building confidence between the two nations.”³⁸

“Therefore, for now, what Pakistan needs to do is to erase the age-old disdain and the narrative of derogation since Pakistan carries no weight for Bangladesh, and it is only memories of 1971 that matter in the future of our political alignment. Today, if Bangladesh decides to sit at the table, we may only have the chance to listen since they have surpassed us in all that we may have to

offer, from internal and external progression.”³⁹ Henceforth, “The events unfolding in Bangladesh serve as a cautionary tale for Pakistan's political elite. The deep-seated grievances and demand for change among Bangladesh's populace highlight the critical importance of responsive governance and political inclusivity. For Pakistan, where political instability and economic challenges persist, the need to maintain an orderly and representative political system is paramount. Pakistan must heed this lesson: failure to address the concerns of its citizenry, particularly those related to economic opportunity and social justice, could lead to similar unrest. The Pakistani political elite should take proactive steps to ensure that political parties are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the people. Neglecting these aspects risks alienating the populace and creating an environment ripe for unrest.”⁴⁰ Whether the elites of Pakistan and Bangladesh can take steps to mend their strained relations is yet to be seen. At the popular level, there is a great degree of warmth between Bangladesh and Pakistan, which needs to be capitalised on by promoting cultural, educational, and tourism ties.

According to a Bangladeshi writer, “2024 marks the 50th anniversary of mutual recognition between Bangladesh and Pakistan. This moment is quite a celebratory one. At this favourable moment, as efforts are being made to rebuild the relationship, a natural question arises: will the old, sensitive issues of Bangladesh's outstanding dues with Pakistan be settled? This is a fundamental unresolved issue in their relationship. To move forward, Bangladesh and Pakistan must address their old debts and unresolved issues.”⁴¹ Has the ‘ripe moment’ arrived to bury the bitterness of the past and move forward, or will the new generation of the two countries, which do not carry the baggage of the past, pave the way for complete normalisation of relations between the two brotherly countries?

Conclusion

By adopting a visionary approach, the challenges and opportunities in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations should be examined from two distinct angles. First, there is a need for mutual trust and determination on the part of Pakistan and Bangladesh to sustain the normalisation process, and second, to mitigate obstacles that impede efforts to mend fences between Dhaka and Islamabad. Regardless of the impediments, one can identify the following potential areas of cooperation in Pakistan-Bangladesh ties.

- Enhancing maritime trade to augment the level of commercial activities.
- Reactivating the Joint Economic Commission.
- Revitalising educational ties.
- Expanding cultural cooperation.
- Direct air links connecting the capitals of two countries, along with Lahore and Dhaka, and Karachi and Dhaka.
- Opening of the Consulate of two countries in Lahore and Chittagong.
- Connectivity in Information Technology.
- Promoting gender cooperation.
- On arrival, visa facilities.
- Promoting youth linkages.
- Enhancing tourism.
- Cooperation in the banking sector.
- Declaring Karachi, Chittagong, Lahore, and Dhaka as sister cities.⁴²

The above potential areas of cooperation will go a long way in stabilising Pak-BD relations on a firm footing. Concerning issues which divide the two countries like offering of apology to Bangladesh for the alleged atrocities committed by the Pakistan armed forces during the military operation of 1971; division of assets and liabilities and the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis, the solution is to form 'truth and reconciliation commission' composed of renowned jurists and eminent personalities representing the civil society of the two countries to discuss all the three issues from a legal and technical point of view and present its findings which should be binding on both sides so that future generations of the two countries do not carry baggage of the past and establish cordial relations based on mutual respect.

As Pakistan-Bangladesh defence ties grow, along with the visit of senior military officers from both sides, it signifies a widening of their strategic depth in relations. Except during the regimes of the Awami League, Pakistan and Bangladesh maintained relatively cordial ties and moved on. Out of Bangladesh's 53 years of history, the Awami League ruled for around 25 years, which were not pleasant in Pak-BD ties because both Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and Sheikh Hasina focused on promoting contentious issues, namely an apology, division of assets, and repatriation of stranded Pakistanis.

To sum up, the strategic implications of the monsoon revolution in Bangladesh are a challenge for the caretaker regime of Dr Muhammad Yunus for

two main reasons. First, the legitimacy crisis faced by his government lacks a popular mandate. Second, by not cooperating with the interim government in Dhaka, India can generate a crisis in Bangladesh by stopping the supply of energy and damaging its economy. During Hasina's 15-year rule, India provided billions of dollars in assistance to Bangladesh to stabilise and modernise its economy and infrastructure. By imposing visa curbs for Bangladeshi nationals visiting India for studies, medical purposes, business, and tourism, it will make things difficult for Dhaka.

If the Yunus regime can prudently deal with the 'India factor' and wisely proceed to mend fences with Pakistan, it will have smooth sailing. Suppose Bangladesh can deal with the possibility of being sanctioned by Western countries due to the regime change of a 'democratically' elected government in August 2024. In that case, it will be able to remain in power for some time and hold free and fair general elections in 2026. Furthermore, maintaining its influence in the students' community and focusing on curbing inflation, the strategic implications of the monsoon revolution will be positive in nature. It all depends on how far the regime has gained acceptance among the majority of people and how effectively it can deal with economic, governance, and political issues in the months to come.

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