

India-Bangladesh Relations: Bridging the Gap while Marching Forward

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India's relations with Bangladesh have perhaps been more scrutinised in recent times. The bilateral ties are weighed mostly in terms of an imaginary competition between India and China, especially whether India is losing out to China has remained a major debating point for the political and social elites in both countries. Such a view does not take into account India's support to Bangladesh's liberation war and the close socio-cultural ties which are embodied in the fact that the national anthems of the two countries were written by Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the great son of Bengal who cannot be confined to the territoriality of the post-colonial states of India and Bangladesh. India has extended investment of US\$ 10 billion, the largest to any other country in the world, and the high- impact community development projects which are implemented on grant aid have been significant. The two countries are making progress in security cooperation. All these make India's relations with Bangladesh to stand on its own feet. There are some issues like the firing at the border, trade issues, and the repatriation of Rohingyas remain main sticking points. Nevertheless, these sticking points cannot be the measuring rod to evaluate the bilateral ties. The two countries need to focus on ironing out their differences. India promised to look into these nagging issues that have emerged as a challenge during foreign secretary Shringla's visit to Dhaka.



India-Bangladesh relations have been subjected to several media speculations, of late. In the regional context, the ongoing Indo-China border tension has made many in the neighbourhood to look at India and China's relations with the countries of the region within the parameter of a zero-sum game. In this context, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's two days visit to Dhaka on August 18-19 assumes significance. In a statement, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the visit was to "discuss and take forward cooperation on matters of mutual interest".¹ Though this visit was planned at short notice, especially when virtual meetings have become the new normal, it was essentially a consultative meeting to touch base with Bangladesh - one of the most important neighbours of India. In a lecture at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA-New Delhi) on September 4, 2020, the Foreign Secretary emphasised that there is no substitute for face to face diplomacy. Moreover, confidentiality is a matter of concern in any virtual meeting. Equally, meeting a leader in person, connecting and networking are essential too, which make a tremendous difference.

This visit was primarily to meet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and convey Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message to her. The importance of this meeting was demonstrated by the fact that she personally received Mr Shringla. The fact that he was also the first foreign dignitary that Hasina received since the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic also signifies the importance the two countries attach to the bilateral relationship. While the media speculated on the suddenness of this visit, it is unlikely that he would have got an audience with PM Hasina without it being pre-planned. The meeting with her covered the entire gamut of bilateral relations, which includes security challenges, stepping up exchange of intelligence and repatriation of Rohingyas – one of the major concerns for Dhaka. Strangely and unfortunately, there appears to be a media war for the past one month on the contour and the content of bilateral relations.²

There is no substitute for face to face diplomacy.

Three prime actors shape the relationship between states. First, the government to government official relationship and one can measure this relationship through official statements and sometimes the body language of the leaders. Second, the opinion of the elites articulated in the media. The view in media mostly remains fragmented in terms of ideology and approach.³ Within

¹ "Foreign Secretary Shringla On Two-day Visit To Bangladesh To Boost Bilateral Ties", *Republic World*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/foreign-secretary-on-2-day-visit-to-bangladesh-to-boost-bilateral-ties.html>

² Kallol Bhattacharya, "Bangladesh rejects criticism of China deal", *The Hindu*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bangladesh-rejects-criticism-of-china-deal/article31893183.ece+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in>; Zia Hassan, "Is Bangladesh really turning away from India and toward China – or is this just a storm in a teacup?", *Scroll*, August 27, 2020; <https://scroll.in/article/971474/is-bangladesh-really-turning-away-from-india-and-toward-china-or-is-this-just-a-storm-in-a-teacup>; Adman Pitman, China's Stake in Bangladesh Is Overplayed, *Diplomat*, August 08, 2020, Mohammad A Arafat, "Bangladesh-India ties are not a zero-sum game", *Daily Star*, August 05, 2020, Nayanima Basu, "China takes Bangladesh into its embrace now as Delhi-Dhaka ties go downhill", *The Print*, 31 July 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/china-takes-bangladesh-into-its-embrace-now-as-delhi-dhaka-ties-go-downhill/471769/>

³ Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, "Indian foreign secretary's visit and the state of Bangladesh-India relations", *Daily Star*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/indian-foreign-secretarys-visit-and-the-state-bangladesh-india-relations-1948269>. Also see M Serajul Islam, Indian foreign secretary's hasty visit misfires, *New age*, 23 August 2020 for a contrarian perspective.

these elites, especially in Bangladesh, one often hears a lot of complaints about Indian omissions and commissions – sometimes justified but most of the time without any basis. They often portray India's support to the liberation of Bangladesh as agenda-driven perhaps blinded by their ideological biases. Third, are the common people. Again this category is not monolithic in their approach to India. Many of them come for medical treatment to India, as they cannot afford the expenses of getting themselves treated in Singapore or Bangkok, like the resourceful elites. India provides quality and cheapest destination for health service. For the common men, India is also the cheapest tourist and education⁴ destination.

Indian Projects in Bangladesh: Is there India China Competition?

Two countries discussed the roadmap to complete the ongoing Indian funded infrastructure projects in Bangladesh at the earliest.

During the nearly hour and half-long meeting with PM Hasina, the two countries discussed the roadmap to complete the ongoing Indian funded infrastructure projects in Bangladesh at the earliest. They also discussed ways and means to restart the existing connectivity network. India has promised that some of the ongoing projects will be completed next year. Often, some projects have been delayed for reasons

beyond India's control. For example, the MEA pointed out in a written reply to the Parliament Standing Committee lately that some projects could not be undertaken as the prospective beneficiaries could not submit proposals on time with all supporting documents as procedures for obtaining various clearances in local government offices takes considerable time. Furthermore, about the ongoing projects, the beneficiaries were not able to submit the bills on time as they were struggling to complete the work on time due to various issues such as unavailability of material, human resources for specific work, inclement weather conditions, etc. Lack of experience of some beneficiaries for submission of bills with proper documentation also led to the resubmission of bills and finally resulted in a delay in disbursement of funds.⁵

Despite such challenges as mentioned in the Parliament Committee report, it needs to be noted that in any democracy there is a laid-out process regarding disbursement of funds which translates to 'bureaucratic red-tapism' because of the delay it causes to approve projects due to procedural reasons; but this exists as a part of the structure within the government.⁶ Second, it is not that India has not taken measures to streamline the process of approval and to move away from the

⁴ Starting from 2017, Government of India is providing 10,000 scholarships for heirs of the liberation war fighters of Bangladesh called 'Muktijodhas' under the Nutan India-Bangladesh Maitree Muktijodha Sontan Scholarship Scheme. See DD News, "India to give Ten thousand scholarships to heirs of liberation war fighters in Bangladesh", 22 July 2019, <http://ddnews.gov.in/international/india-give-ten-thousand-scholarships-heirs-liberation-war-fighters-bangladesh>. Till last year Over 3500 ICCR scholarships have been granted to Bangladeshi nationals by the government of India. ICCR provides scholarship under five categories (i) India Scholarship Scheme; ii) Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme; iii) SAARC Scholarship Scheme; iv) Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme; and v) Ayush Scholarship Scheme.

⁵ Lok Sabha, Committee on External Affairs, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, "Ministry of External Affairs: Demand for Grant", (2020-21), Second report, March 2020, p.64.

⁶ See, Saifuddin Saif, "17th review meet on Indian LoC projects starts Wednesday", *The Business Standard*, August 16, 2020, <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/infrastructure/17th-review-meet-indian-loc-projects-starts-wednesday-120346>

past and implement projects at a faster pace. India has established three separate divisions known as Development Partnership Administration (DPA)- I, II and III, to oversee the projects. The DPA helps in capacity building, evaluate the line of credits (LoCs), coordinate the disbursement of the fund and make an assessment of the progress of the projects that are being implemented. The total commitment under the line of credit to Dhaka and High Impact Community development projects (HICDP) currently stands around US\$10 billion, which is quite substantial in comparison to the total credit line that India has extended to other countries.

Those who argue that Chinese investment is much more massive to the tune of US\$24 billion do not take into account the commercial rate of interest or perhaps they don't want to highlight this, to make a point against India.⁷ Writing in the Chinese government mouthpiece *The Global Times*, Wang Jiamei argued, "... there is no need for China to compete with other countries in offering competitive interest rates just to please partners or win contracts, to the detriment of its own interests. China should maintain its bottom line by avoiding interest rate competition in loan offerings. Soft loans, of course, help a country to obtain contracts, but that doesn't mean China should treat all projects as infrastructure aid and give out low-interest loans without thinking about the bottom line, as that would be unsustainable for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It should be made clear that the BRI is not a charity program, and most projects under the initiative are reciprocal, rather than aid."⁸ According to a report on the investment by China, there are "some 27 projects are supposed to be funded with the \$20 billion as per the initial agreement of October 2016. Until July 2019, loan agreements for seven projects involving \$5.4 billion were signed, and a total of \$981.36 million was disbursed."⁹ The rate of interest applicable to the buyers' credit is 3.0 per cent annually.¹⁰ Some Chinese projects have been delayed, and some have been scrapped.¹¹ The two countries have established the Bangladesh-China Working Group on Investment Cooperation, and the first meeting took place last year.

Line of Credits

Under the present Bangladesh government, elected to office in three consecutive elections, India and Bangladesh are working hard with conviction and interest to restore connectivity that existed before 1965. Several projects are in various stages of implementation. Several connectivity projects

⁷ Mir Mostafizur Rahman, "Bangladesh to seek better terms for Chinese financing", *The Financial Express*, October 09, 2019, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-to-seek-better-terms-for-chinese-financing-1570595328>

⁸ Wang Jiamei, "China should not try to compete for projects by offering low interest rates on loans", *Global Times*, June 18, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1052266.shtml>

⁹ Rejaul Karim Byron and Jagaran Chakma, "China Funded Projects: Red tape holds back progress", *The Daily Star*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/china-funded-projects-red-tape-holds-back-progress-1815790>. Also see, Jagaran Chakma, "Dhaka, Beijing to sign MoU on investment cooperation", *The Daily Star*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/dhaka-beijing-sign-mou-investment-cooperation-1764046>

¹⁰ According to the argument, rate applicable to the management fee shall be 0.25 per cent and the commitment fee shall be 0.25 per cent. The maturity period for the loan will be 240 months, among which the grace period will be 60 months and the repayment period will be 180 months. See, Mir Mostafizur Rahman, "BD gets \$1.0b China loan to improve power grid", *Financial Express*, August 08, 2020, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/bd-gets-10b-china-loan-to-improve-power-grid-1596857911>

¹¹ Adam Pitman, "China's Stake in Bangladesh Is Overplayed", *The Diplomat*, August 08, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/chinas-stake-in-bangladesh-is-overplayed/> +&cd=14&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in

in the fields of power, energy, railways, road and transport, health and technical education, information technology cooperation and shipping and solar sector worth \$8 billion are being implemented through Indian LoC with an interest of less than 1 per cent to be paid over a longer period. Rampal Maitree Power Plant, India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, and rail links between Akhaura-Agartala, Chilahati-Haldibari and Khulna-Mongla are expected to be completed next year.¹² On September 7 first-ever inland waterway between the two countries connecting Sonamura, about 60 km from Agartala in the Indian side, and Daudkandi of Chittagong in Bangladesh was inaugurated.¹³

Every year, the officials of the two countries meet twice to review the projects that are being implemented under the Indian LoCs. During the visit of the Foreign Secretary, India also proposed to restart the Joint Consultative Council (JCC) which is at the foreign minister-level that oversees various Indian funded projects in Bangladesh apart from discussing various bilateral issues between the two countries that need attention. India has proposed a virtual meeting to restart the process since the JCC last met in February 2019.

India and Bangladesh are working hard with conviction and interest to restore connectivity that existed before 1965.

Apart from this, India provides grant assistance of Taka 250 million worth for Small Development Projects which is now renamed as High Impact Community Development Project to develop small infrastructure projects in the areas of livelihood activity, education, health, or community development. Conservation of the environment, vocational training, sanitation, waste management and restoration, empowerment of women and child welfare are expected to

be the primary focus areas of such projects which have transformative effects on the lives of ordinary Bangladeshis. A total number of 63 projects with grant aid worth \$160 million has already been implemented. India has established 36 community clinics in five districts of Bangladesh and 11 water treatment plants which will help common people. All these projects are executed by locals and have helped in contributing to employment generation.

There is close cooperation between the two countries in the power sector. India is providing 1160 MW electricity to Bangladesh through grid connectivity, out of which 160 MW is from the Palatana power project in Tripura. There is a proposal for interconnection between Katihar-Parbatipur-Bornagar 765 KV link and Surajmaninagar-Cumilla (North) 400 KV link. India and Bangladesh are investing in hydel projects in Bhutan too. Bangladesh would import electricity from Bhutan using the existing Indian transmission lines. Apart from this, India is building a 1320 MW power plant at Ramphal and is closely involved in the works at Rooppur nuclear power plant. To note, some of the power plants which produce electricity are sitting idle as cross border power trade provide cheap electricity, and the Bangladesh government has justified import of electricity. Khaled Mahmood, chairman of Bangladesh Power Development Board said, "Per unit imported electricity cost less than BDT 6 whereas the generation cost of oil-fired power plants is about BDT

¹² Ministry of External Affairs, "Statement on Foreign Secretary's Visit to Dhaka on 18 – 19 August 2020", August 26, 2020, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32913/Statement_on_Foreign_Secretarys_Visit_to_Dhaka_on_18__19_August_2020

¹³ Debraj Deb, "Explained: What the opening of waterway with Bangladesh means for Tripura", *Indian Express*, September 07, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-the-opening-of-waterway-with-bangladesh-means-for-tripura-6584061/>

11-17. This cost factor justifies why we are importing electricity from India keeping our plants idle."¹⁴

Facilitating Trade and People to People Contact During Covid-19

In July, India took several steps to normalise trade relation with Bangladesh, which was affected by Covid-19 pandemic. After more than two-month of the closure of trade, cross-border trade resumed in June 2020. The Petrapole-Benapole border accounts for 70 per cent of the bilateral trade. Interestingly, the trade via Akhaura-Agartala in Tripura continued without any hindrance once the bilateral trade resumed. However, import from Bangladesh was halted by the state government of West Bengal citing pandemic and enforcing two weeks quarantine of the truck drivers who carry goods from Bangladesh. Closure of this border point will undoubtedly have a severe impact on trade. This prompted the central government to intervene. On May 1, India's MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) order under clause 12 clearly stated that no State/Union Territory shall stop the movement of cargo for cross border land trade under treaties with neighbouring countries". Such "unilateral action of stopping cross border movement of essential goods would have larger implications for the Indian government about its legally binding international commitments".¹⁵ India's export to Bangladesh in the Financial Year 2019-2020 was \$8.1b, and import from Bangladesh was \$1.2b.¹⁶ Both countries are exploring measures to expand trade. The two countries are addressing various non-tariff barriers, including standardisation, that is a major stumbling block in enhancing bilateral trade. This issue must be addressed urgently. With the introduction of GST by India, the countervailing duty, which is equal to excise duty on a domestically manufactured garment that was imposed earlier on garments import from Bangladesh, has been removed. As a result, Bangladesh's export of Ready Made Garment to India has surged.¹⁷

The two countries have introduced Coordinated Border Patrol Mechanism since 2011 to guard the vast porous border that has often been used by criminal elements to smuggle cattle, traffic drugs, push fake currencies and other contrabands.

Apart from this, the two countries have border *haats* (weekly markets) that facilitate trade in local goods between the people living within five km radius of the border without a tariff.¹⁸ There are

¹⁴ Eyamin Sajid, "Why import from India when we have surplus electricity?", *The Business Standard* (Dhaka), August 26, 2019, <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/energy/why-import-india-when-we-have-surplus-electricity>

¹⁵ Timsy Jaipuria, "Export-import halted at West Bengal-Bangladesh land borders, Centre in talks with state to ease restrictions", *CNBC TV 18*, July 04, 2020, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/economy/export-import-halt-at-west-bengal-bangladesh-land-borders-centre-in-talks-with-state-to-ease-restrictions-6256301.htm>

¹⁶ Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, "Export-Import Data," <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/iecnt.asp>

¹⁷ Dilip Kumar Jha, "With GST, Bangladesh enters Indian garments market", *Business Standard*, December 17, 2017, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/with-gst-bangladesh-enters-indian-garments-market-117122200699_1.html, M Allirajan, "Textile imports rise after GST kicks in", *Times of India*, December 05, 2017, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/61921778.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

¹⁸ Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, "MoU to establish Border Haat Across India Bangladesh Border", October 23, 2010,

four border *haats*: two in Tripura and two in Meghalaya which are already operational. There is a proposal to open three more border *haats* in Tripura-Bangladesh border.¹⁹ A meeting in this regard was held in February this year. Border haat also contributes to the interaction between the people at the local level.

There were many 'firsts' in India-Bangladesh relations in July this year. The first trial of container ship was conducted since it was stopped 55 years ago from Kolkata to Agartala and Karimganj via the Chittagong port carrying a large cargo of steel bars and pulses. For the first time, electronically sealed rake of 50 parcel cargo operated from Guntur to Benapole in Bangladesh carrying chillies and fabrics. Parcel vans and containers have now been added to the existing mode of transportation. India also handed over ten diesel locomotives to Bangladesh under grant assistance. Unfortunately, some newspapers unnecessarily created controversy around it that the locomotives were ten years old.²⁰

Addressing the Challenges at the Border:

Both countries have close security cooperation. Close collaboration is marked by cooperation between the security forces of the two countries, joint-patrol and joint-management of the border and coordinated patrol between the coast-guards and joint-anti-terror exercises have been initiated. The two countries have introduced Coordinated Border Patrol Mechanism since 2011 to guard the vast porous border that has often been used by criminal elements to smuggle cattle, traffic drugs, push fake currencies and other contrabands. But Dhaka insists that India address the killing of Bangladeshi nationals in the border.²¹ This was raised by Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary in his meeting with Mr Shringla²² too. There is a need to address this issue jointly, and responsibility lies with both the countries. The most important cause of firing is cattle smuggling. The Director General of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam pointed to this when he said, "Cattle smuggling is the main reason behind border killings, and it should be stopped (to) bring down border killings.... Concerted efforts from all quarters, including law enforcement agencies, people residing along the border areas, and public representatives have become crucial to put a stop to the border killings."²³ He was decried in social media for speaking about the reality of the border while highlighting the incidents of firing. This issue figures regularly in the Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) meetings that are held regularly. In the last meeting held in December 2019, the BSF through a press release assured the BGB that "Firing

https://commerce.gov.in/writereaddata/trade/MOU_Border_Haats_across_Border_India_and_Bangladesh2010.pdf

¹⁹ Debraj Deb, "India and Bangladesh identify locations for three new border Haats in Tripura frontiers", *Indian Express*, February 6, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/tripura/india-and-bangladesh-identify-locations-for-three-new-border-haats-in-tripura-frontiers-6253831/>

²⁰ Nayanima Basu, "10 locos that India gifted to Bangladesh were all second-hand but that's what 'Dhaka sought'", *The Print*, August 02, 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/10-locos-that-india-gifted-to-bangladesh-were-all-second-hand-but-thats-what-dhaka-sought/473318/>

²¹ Asif Nazrul, "Bangladeshe Bharat Birodhi Manobhab Kyano" (Why there is Anti-Indian attitude in Bangladesh), *Prothom Alo*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/বাংলাদেশে-ভারতবিরোধী-মনোভাব-কেন>

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Dhaka), "Highest importance for Bangladesh in India's 'neighbourhood first' policy", August 19, 2020, https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/6bd3a61a-860f-4843-aa1c-a68ea911fa84

²³ "BGB chief terms cattle smuggling 'main reason behind border killings", *Dhaka Tribune*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2019/06/30/bgb-chief-terms-cattle-smuggling-main-reason-behind-border-killings>

is resorted to only in self-defence when BSF patrols are *gheraoed* and attacked by Dahs etc. It was specified that BSF does not discriminate between criminals based on nationality."²⁴ This right to 'self-defence' by the security forces was agreed upon in 2011 as the border guarding forces are regularly faced with well-armed criminal gangs that mostly operate in groups.²⁵ They are armed with country-made bombs, sharp-edged weapons, sticks, high beam torches, etc. More than 800 BSF personal have been attacked and injured by the smugglers till date.²⁶ This blame game only reflects the inability of the two forces to address the issue due to variety of reasons besides non-recognition of cow smuggling by Bangladesh. There appears to be systemic encouragement of cattle smuggling from several quarters in Bangladesh, and this nexus seems deep-rooted.²⁷

	2017	2018	2019
BSF Jawan Injured	937	1274	2014
Fence breaches	445	414	746
Cattle seized	119,299	63,716	77,410
No of Bangladesh national killed	08	01	13*
No of Indian national killed	05	03	12*

Source: Times of India, July 20, 2020²⁸

* BSF Sources

The number of killings put out by the BSF and the number put by various media and NGOs on Bangladesh however largely vary. While asking the reason for this discrepancy, it was clarified that "several of these smugglers who lost their lives while sharing profits from the smuggling due to inter-gang rivalries are also attributed to the BSF".²⁹ Eleven BSF troops have also been killed and 960 injured while thwarting these attempts (2010-19) in more than 1,890 incidents.³⁰ The

²⁴ "49th border coordination conference between BSF, BGB in Delhi", *Business Standard*, December 29, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/49th-border-coordination-conference-between-bsf-bgb-in-delhi-119122900793_1.html

²⁵ "BSF Jawan Loses Hand in Attack by Cattle Smugglers Along Indo-Bangladesh Border", *News18*, July 19 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/bsf-jawan-loses-hand-in-attack-by-cattle-smugglers-along-indo-bangladesh-border-2226795.html>

²⁶ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "Locking horns at the border", *Indian Express*, July 20, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-bangladesh-cattle-smuggling-border-west-bengal-6515253/>. Also see, "Floating cattle' smuggling prompts BSF to deploy more troops, boats along Bangla border in WB", *Indian Express*, July 21, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/floating-cattle-smuggling-prompts-bsf-to-deploy-more-troops-boats-along-bangla-border-in-wb-5840303/>

²⁷ Author's informal discussion with a Bangladesh trader on this issue in December 2018.

²⁸ Indrani Bagchi, "Cattle in the way: India, Bangladesh trade smuggling charges", *Times of India*, July 20, 2020, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/77072720.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

²⁹ Author's interview with official who would not like to be named. These are the numbers shared at the official bilateral meetings that takes place annually between BSF and BGB.

³⁰ Steel fence project to stop cross-border killings along Bangla border "rusting": Officials", *Outlook*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/steel-fence-project-to-stop-crossborder-killings-along-bangla-border-rusting-officials/1735771>

frustration of the BSF regarding the rampant cattle smuggling when it accused BGB of being hand in gloves with the cow smugglers speak of a different reality.

There is an immediate need to stop both the smuggling as well as firings on the border for the greater interest of the two countries. Both the governments are keen on this, and perhaps there is a need to put modalities in place. While the BSF also mentions the difficulties in stopping these cattle find their way to the border as they come mostly from far off places like Punjab and Rajasthan, the right approach is to seek the cooperation of the police in tackling these transport of cattle to the border region in the East. Similarly, the BGB needs to increase its vigil in the border areas to prevent its nationals reaching the fences and riverine border with India in the night times. On the Indian side, the night curfew needs to be clamped down stringently, and the BGB would need to have a similar strategy. Without active cooperation of the BGB, it would be challenging to address the issue of firings at the border.

Other Security Challenges:

India shared a problematic relation with Bangladesh between 2001-2006 when India's concern regarding the presence of Indian insurgent groups in Bangladesh did not receive empathetic attention and ultimately, rejected. The relationship, however, moved forward with significant security cooperation when Dhaka handed over the insurgent leaders and foot soldiers living in Bangladesh, thereby, bridging the trust deficit. Its policy of zero tolerance to terrorism and its cooperation in tracking the Burdwan blast culprits can be considered a significant step in boosting counter-terror cooperation.

The relationship, however, moved forward with significant security cooperation when Dhaka handed over the insurgent leaders and foot soldiers living in Bangladesh, thereby, bridging the trust deficit.

One of the significant concerns of Dhaka that was discussed with the Foreign Secretary of India this time was the need to repatriate Rohingya refugees who are living in Bangladesh. From time to time, Dhaka has brought this issue to India's attention and has emphasised the broader regional security implications of the presence of these displaced people and has requested India to put pressure on Myanmar to take back the refugees. India has been supportive of Dhaka's efforts. It has underlined through various statements that Myanmar needs to take back the Rohingyas, and it also supports early and safe repatriation of Rohingyas with dignity. To facilitate the return, India gifted 250 prefabricated houses, built as part of an agreement. It also supplied aid to the Rohingyas living in Bangladesh refugee camps under operation *Insanijat* (Humanity). It is imperative for India to devise a new approach to the Rohingya refugees and should look at their presence from the regional security perspective.

Besides, human trafficking is a significant issue between the two neighbours as those Trafficked are mostly women and children. Many times the porous border allows notorious criminals to hide in each other's territory after committing crimes. One such high profile case was the case of Bangabandhu killer, Abdul Majed, in India who lived in India for a few years. Without intelligence cooperation, arresting such criminals becomes difficult. The arrest of Nur Hossain, who was

accused of killing seven people in Narayanganj and slipped inside India later was handed over to Bangladesh, is another case in point.

Both India and Bangladesh have institutionalised DC/DM level meeting which is also attended by senior police and paramilitary officials of the BSF and BGB of the respective areas, to enhance security in the border areas. This meeting discusses cross border crime in that area and cooperate and coordinate with each other to tackle crimes which are mostly cross-border in nature. The incident of cattle smuggling also needs to be taken up in these meetings. The last meeting of DC/DM took place in Agartala (Tripura) in February this year.

Concluding Observations

Bangladesh is India's closest neighbour with which it shares the longest border. The porous border brings many challenges that need compassionate consideration and attention. The blame-game theory will never lead to any solution. Because both the countries have layers of relationship and intertwined security concerns – mostly non-traditional, close collaboration is required. Interestingly, the India vs China debate continues to rage in the media circle in Bangladesh and India. And there is no zero-sum game as assumed by certain sections of the media. India's relationship with Bangladesh (and vice versa) stands in its merit, and it is cemented by cultural bond and close people to people contact.

Some local media attributed various theories to Foreign Secretary Shringla's unscheduled visit to Bangladesh labelling it with multiple motivations and even stating how unnerved India has been over China's "increasing influence" in Bangladesh. There was speculation regarding the length of the Foreign Secretary's meeting with Prime Minister, whether he was kept waiting for four hours and interestingly whether the meeting took place or not. Some reports even claimed with certainty about what transpired between Mr Shringla and Prime Minister Hasina even when it was a close meeting with

There was a need to renew contact with Bangladesh, discuss issues of major concerns, restart some of the projects that were halted and get a new road map on how to move forward in the post-Covid-19 world.

the presence of only the Indian High Commissioner, Ms Riva Ganguly Das there. Such misleading reports, for the first time, forced the Indian High Commission to issue a press release denouncing false media reportage. The Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata too issued a press release on August 14 stating that how some Indian media photoshopped the images of PM Hasina and Pakistan PM Imran Khan in an attempt to hurt the friendly ties that exist between India and Bangladesh. He even urged all concerned agencies to disregard the false information that is being peddled. The immediate reactions from both the countries with regards to various news items published in the press show that the two countries are concerned about how covert efforts are being made to undermine the existing friendly relations.³¹ It is interesting to note how the media and columnists of both countries are reacting to reports and columns published in each other's

³¹ M Serajul Islam, "Indian foreign secretary's hasty visit misfires", *New Age*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/114231/indian-foreign-secretarys-hasty-visit-misfires>

country. The two governments only responded to speculative reports to stop these non-ending stories from inventing and reinventing the so-called spiralling down of the ties.

In reality, people-to-people contact has received a further boost by India's decision to provide the largest number of visas to Bangladeshis. Bus and train services that existed earlier are now restored, and new train and bus services have been added to take the people-to-people contact forward. Due to Covid-19, travel between the two countries has completely stopped. Respective countries evacuated stranded citizens amid the pandemic restrictions. India has also proposed to create an air bubble between the two countries to operate a limited number of flights to restart travel and facilitate visits of business people, government officials and especially those in Bangladesh who seek medical treatments in India. To note, Bangladeshis constituted approximately 50 per cent of the total medical tourists coming to India from abroad. The ordinary people have a larger stake in India-Bangladesh relations. Perhaps India needs to pay attention to this constituency. There is also a need to connect the younger generation by organising youth camps, sports and cultural activities that would connect the youth.

Both the countries have layers of relationship and intertwined security concerns – mostly non-traditional.

Both countries have also discussed the need for cooperation in the health sector, especially on the development of Covid-19 vaccine. Bangladesh is also interested in exploring any scope for Coronavirus vaccine trial in the country as it is discussing this matter with other countries as well in its effort to fight the pandemic. India also plans to hold a joint program with Bangladesh to celebrate Mujib Borsho (Year) and to issue a commemorative stamp on Bangabandhu during the time.

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Shringla's visit to Dhaka was to touch base with Bangladesh, a country with which it shares close ties. Moreover, the two countries are slowly opening up their economies and normalising travel within the country. Certainly from India's point of view, there was a need to renew contact with Bangladesh, discuss issues of major concerns, restart some of the projects that were halted and get a new road map on how to move forward in the post-Covid-19 world. India and Bangladesh are going to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's war of liberation and establishment of diplomatic ties with India.

It is thus not surprising that the Indo-Bangladesh relationship has been defined as 'Shonali Adhyay'(Golden chapter) by PM Modi and is upheld as a 'role model in the region' by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar. This sentiment has been reciprocated by Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abdul Momen, who defined Bangladesh's ties with India as historic, rock-solid and blood relation. Foreign Secretary's first visit to Bangladesh in the Covid-19 situation only underlines the realities of this relation

³² “India plans to issue commemorative stamp on Bangabandhu during Mujib Borsho”, *Daily Star*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/india-plans-issue-commemorative-stamp-bangabandhu-during-mujib-borsho-1951257>.

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The views expressed in this article are personal.

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