

## The Big Picture: *Strengthening India-Bangladesh Ties* Summary

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> Dec 2020

Reading Time: 20 Minutes

Topics covered from the syllabus:

- **GS-2:**
  - India and its neighbourhood- relations.
  - Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

Note:

- Following is the summary of 'The Big Picture' discussion, which was aired on RSTV.
- Host: Frank Rausan Pereira
- Panellists: P. R. Chakravarty, Former Ambassador; Dr. Sreeram Chaulia, Foreign Affairs Expert; Maj. Gen. Ashwani Siwach (Retd), Strategic Analyst.
- Please note that some inputs have been given by our team in order to make the topic more relevant to UPSC.

Context:

- During a **virtual summit held between Indian PM and his Bangladeshi Counterpart**, India and Bangladesh have reaffirmed faith in their traditional, strong relationship by **reopening the Chilahati-Haldibari rail link**, which was closed down in 1965.
- Both have also signed 7 different agreements in the areas of hydrocarbon, agriculture, textiles and other areas.
- PM Modi also stated that strengthening Indian ties with Bangladesh is his priority as Bangladesh is a **key pillar of India's neighbourhood first policy** (see inset). Similarly, Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina called India a 'true friend' of Bangladesh.

### Prelims Focus

**Neighbourhood first Policy:** This is a dimension of Indian foreign policy which seeks to strengthen India's ties with its immediate neighbours.

- Apart from focussing on other developmental aspects, the major initiatives have been in the area of **regional connectivity** in the SAARC region.
- Due to Pakistan's obstinance, a sub-group of four territorial neighbours, being referred to as **BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal)** has been formed to promote road connectivity.
- Media reports have pointed to challenges in coordination and execution, which have hobbled the completion of projects.

**Belt and Road Initiative:** This is a Chinese project having stated aim to improve connectivity and transport infrastructure in the member countries.

- It consists of **two projects: a land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the marine-based Maritime Silk Road (MSR).**
- India has two major concerns about the project:

- **Violation of Indian Sovereignty: China Pakistan Economic Corridor**, which is a part of BRI, passes through Karakoram tract (which is a part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir). Thus, it is not legal on the part of China to proceed with a project in Indian territory without a formal agreement with Indian government.
- **Debt Trap:** Huge investments by Chinese look attractive at the start. However, as the realised revenue from the project does not match the expectations, paying interest on the project becomes unviable for the beneficiary country. This might lead to countries entering into an exploitative contract with Chinese. For e.g. after Sri Lanka was unable to pay its debt, it was forced to **lease the Hambantota port to China**.

**Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA):** It is an intergovernmental organisation which provides services of arbitration to **resolve disputes arising out of international agreements**.

- Its headquarters is in The **Hague, Netherlands**.
- Currently it has 122 members, including India.

**PCA award in India-Bangladesh boundary dispute:**

- Bangladesh took the maritime boundary delimitation dispute to PCA in 2009.
- The argument focussed on **delimitation of maritime boundary including territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf**.
- The tribunal awarded approximately 19,000 sq. km. area to Bangladesh out of the disputed 25,000 sq. km.
- To its credit, India has stood by its decision to abide by the award.

## MAINS Focus

**Factors for improvement in the relationship between India and Bangladesh:**

- **Personal Synergy between the Leaders:** Both the Indian PM and Bangladeshi PM have invested personal energy in the bilateral relationship between the two countries:
  - PM Modi has been a strong advocate of improvement of bilateral ties with Indian neighbours. This has been visible from the very start of his innings as the PM of India, when he **invited the SAARC nations (including Pakistan) for his oath-taking ceremony**. Also, the PM was instrumental in the quick resolution of the **Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh**, which resolved the four-decade old enclave issue between the two countries.
  - Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has also been a supporter of strong linkages between the two countries due to association of her party, Awami League, with India during the **freedom struggle of Bangladesh** from Pakistan.
- **Connectivity:** Both countries have realised that connectivity is the key to their prosperity. For India, Bangladesh is crucial to enhance its **reach towards its north-eastern states**. At the same time, Bangladesh needs to have a conducive relationship with the largest of its two neighbours (the other one being Myanmar). Therefore, both countries have opened previously closed links and have worked on identifying new ones.
  - **Train links:** Railways is a fast and cheap mode of transport, compared to inland shipping and roadways respectively. Therefore, it is important to invest in the improvement of rail connectivity, in order to achieve better trade connectivity and synergy between commerce in the two countries. Apart from Chilahati-Haldibari, other rail links between India and Bangladesh are Petrapole (India) to Benapole (Bangladesh), Gede (India) to Darshana (Bangladesh), Singhabad (India) to Rohanpur (Bangladesh) and Radhikapur (India) to Birol (Bangladesh).
  - **Bus links:** Roadways are important for faster connectivity and larger availability of choices for origins and destinations. The recently started bus services — Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and

Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati — will link West Bengal to three North-Eastern states of India via Bangladesh capital Dhaka.

- **Chittagong Port:** Bangladesh has made the Chittagong port available to India for **transporting goods to the north-eastern states of India**. This will be a huge factor in the economic progress of the Indian territory of north-east, by slashing both time and distance required to transport goods.
- **Economic Growth in Bangladesh:** Bangladesh has been one of the fastest-growing economies of Asia during pre-COVID times. This has attached a sense of importance towards Bangladesh, which India has been quick to realise.
  - Many experts have pointed to its favourable location and large population, which is leading to Bangladesh being courted by different countries like China as a potential market. As the economic growth brings prosperity to Bangladesh, **purchasing power** of the population would increase, thereby creating demand for both the high value as well as the mass consumption products.
- **Strategic Importance:** The proximity of Bangladesh to strategic Bay of Bengal and India's long coastline make it critical for India, apart from other factors:
  - **Terrorist outfits:** Sheikh Hasina government has played an important role in uprooting the terrorist safe havens nearby Chittagong hill tract, leading to decreased terrorist activity in India. Many of these terrorist groups like NSCN (Khaplang) and ULFA have been disbanded and many of their leaders have been apprehended, while others have tried to shift to Myanmar.
  - **Military Exercises:** There has been a flurry of activities between the Indian armed forces and the Bangladesh military in the form of joint exercises like **Sampriti**, training programmes and other contact programmes. This has lent a strategic depth to the relation between the two countries.
- **Bangladesh as the coordinator:** Indian PM has appreciated the role played by Bangladesh in **rejuvenating the SAARC (minus one)** relationship, which had stagnated due to the intransigence of Pakistan. Bangladesh has been instrumental in putting forward India's point of view to the smaller countries of the sub-continent like Bhutan and Nepal and setting up the BBIN corridor. This would be a huge shot in the arm for the land-locked countries of the Indian subcontinent, who are craving direct access to the Indian Ocean.
- **India's soft power in Bangladesh:** The people's perception towards India is favorable in Bangladesh. Both share common historical roots, with **Bengali language** acting as a linguistic bridge between the two countries. Also, India is a destination for **medical tourism**, education and other such activities to Bangladesh. In return, Bangladesh is the largest source of regional tourists to India.

#### **Irritants in the relationship:**

- **China Factor** (To read other dimensions of India-China relations, click [here](#) – link to RCEP article): Military Relations between India's largest neighbour and the neighbour sharing largest boundary with India, viz. China and Bangladesh have not been perceived well in India.
  - **Trade Ties:** China is the **biggest trade partner** of Bangladesh, with India having to be content with the second place.
  - **Belt and Road Initiative:** Bangladesh is a part of Belt and Road Initiative (see inset) by China, under which China has invested approx. \$24 bn in Bangladesh. India has time and again opposed the project, both due to the sovereignty concerns as well as its potential to cause debt crisis in the member countries. In fact, in what seems like a quid pro quo, China has also allowed access to a range of Bangladeshi products in its domestic market, which will not be subject to any duty.
  - **String of Pearls:** Many experts have pointed to the circling of India by the Chinese by **setting up military posts and ports in the Indian ocean**. The Chinese ports in the Indian Ocean

Region like Hambantota, Gwadar, Kyakpyu etc. have been a cause of concern for India, especially in the recent context of the Galwan valley incident and the border standoff between the armies of India and China. In this context, use of Bangladesh's Chittagong port by the Chinese is sure to raise anxiety levels in Indian strategic community.

- **Radicalisation of vulnerable population:** Of late, ISI from Pakistan has been trying to find a stronghold in Bangladesh to further its agenda of destabilising India. In its pursuit of radicalising innocent youth, **Rohingyas can be an easy target** for the ISI, because of their vulnerability. Similarly, even the local Jamaat-e-Islami activists have been approached by ISI, according to the media reports. India must be quick to neutralise this threat by providing humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya minority and making the Rohingyas aware of such attempts by the ISI.
- **River Water Dispute:** River water disputes have been a bone of contention between the two countries. For e.g. recently Teesta dispute was in the news. There are two major dimensions to the River disputes:
  - **Domestic Politics:** The Indian state of West Bengal has involved itself in the Teesta water sharing, leading to delays in finalising the agreement.
  - **Geophysical constraints:** Water sharing is a highly complex issue, in which multiple dimensions need to be taken into account. For e.g. **changes in demography** change the water requirement of a region as much as **cropping patterns** and climate change does. To illustrate the point, both sides on the Bengal border are major producers of rice, which is regarded as a water guzzler. Again, glacier melting floods parts of both the countries during non-lean season, while both sides also face water deficit in the lean season. Therefore, taking all factors into consideration is of utmost importance, before finalising the formula for water sharing.

#### Way Forward:

- **Strengthening Military ties:** There have been media reports indicating weapon sale from India to Bangladesh. India has offered its Brahmos missiles as well as naval ships from its robust shipbuilding industry to Bangladesh, apart from other weapons. This will enhance trust between the two countries and lend a strategic depth to the relations.
- **Post-pandemic recovery:** There is a need to understand that just as India does not like its huge deficit with China, Bangladesh is also worried about its **trade-deficit** with India. Therefore, we need to open our markets to the Bangladeshi goods and services and encourage investments in Bangladesh by Indian businesses. Also, this would be favourable to India also as it will result in future flow of surplus back to India, as Bangladesh improves its position as an exporter. We need to build upon the special trade relationship, considering Bangladesh is our top SAARC trade partner.
- **Confidence-building Measures:** India has been accommodative of the smaller countries in its neighbourhood in myriad ways. For e.g. as a part of **medical diplomacy**, India has promised COVID vaccine to the tune of 30 million doses to Bangladesh. At the same time, Bangladesh diplomats have gone on record to say that Bangladesh and India are one space with a border to manage. This projects the level of integration which is envisioned by the leadership between the two countries.
- **Understanding changing conditions:** Despite India's benevolence, smaller countries in the region have perceived Indian attitude as big brotherly and complained of Indian interference in the domestic matters, although most of it is a part of **India-bashing generated by political opportunism** in the respective countries. However, it has to be understood that this is a natural response of a small country trying to balance its relations with the two big neighbours. Till the time Bangladesh respects India's national security concerns, India should not have concerns about its growing ties with any country including China. For e.g. the recent cancellation of the visit of Chinese Defence Minister to Bangladesh demonstrates Bangladeshi resilience to Chinese demands which might not be looked favourably in India.

- **Helping Bangladesh retain its edge:** Textile industry is Bangladesh's strength. However, it faces tough competition from countries like Vietnam. In such a situation, Indian tilt towards either of the country will be decisive as **India's huge domestic market** will provide an edge for the exporting country. There is a requirement for India to balance its priorities and provide strategic support to the industry of a friendly country.
- **Managing strategic divergence:** Experts have pointed that with a weakened opposition, Sheikh Hasina government has become more authoritative and less open to dissent and criticism. Therefore, India must keep its options open in terms of keeping in touch with other elements of Bangladesh polity. This will also be critical to ensure a **balance in Bangladesh's tilt towards China**.
- **Playing to our strength:** India needs to recognise that it cannot compete with China in providing cash assistance to the developing countries. However, if Indian foreign policy-makers are crafty enough, they can **leverage Japan's fiscal strength**, to build a goodwill for India and its strategic partners. For e.g. Bangladesh has been reluctant to accept Chinese investments in the Sonadiya port. Yet it agreed to a soft loan from Japan to build the Matarbari deep seaport. This paves the way for navigating the future Indo-Chinese rivalry for influence in the Asia-Africa region.
- **Providing alternatives to Bangladesh:** Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has been forthcoming in her desire for better alternatives in the foreign policy domain. India must recognise that economic growth of Bangladesh hinges on its secular credentials, about which PM Hasina is completely aware. Apart from that, her political survival depends upon her pursuit of secularism as extremist forces strengthen the opposition parties in Bangladesh. Therefore, India needs to present opportunities to PM Hasina to strengthen her domestic influence and safeguard her political position in the country.

#### Conclusion:

- The Indo-Bangladesh ties are **strengthened by a common culture and mutual support** to each other. This has been further enforced by the **personal synergy** between the current leadership in both countries. The prominent disputes have been addressed to the satisfaction of both countries and others are under discussion.
- However, there is a need to develop understanding and tolerance towards each other's foreign policy decisions till the time they are **mutually sensitive** of each other's core concerns, while working in the areas of mutual interest by taking partner countries on board.

#### Practice question:

1. Analyse the constraints faced by India and Bangladesh in taking their relationship to the next level, with special reference to China. Also, throw light on the recent steps taken and opportunities missed by the governments of the two countries in the pursuit of better relations.

#### UPSC Previous Year Question:

1. What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. (GS II, 2013)
2. The protests in Shahbag Square in Dhaka in Bangladesh reveal a fundamental split in society between the nationalists and Islamic forces. What is its significance for India? (GS II, 2013)
3. 'China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia', In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbor. (GS II, 2017)

#### Related link:

- RCEP article – China's influence on RCEP negotiations: mentioned in the article.

