

Indian prime minister visits Bangladesh to strengthen ties against China

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As a part of India's broader strategic thrust into South East Asia against China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a two-day visit to Bangladesh last weekend to strengthen ties with Dhaka. New Delhi regards Bangladesh as the gateway to South East Asia and crucial to its "Look East," now "Act East," strategic orientation.

Modi held talks with his counterpart Sheikh Hasina. Their joint statement declared that bilateral ties had entered a new phase involving a "pragmatic, mature and practical approach." During the visit, 22 bilateral agreements were signed. Among the most significant was a decision to implement the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA).

Under the LBA, the two countries will simplify their 4,000-km border by swapping some 200 tiny enclaves dotted around the border. Some 106 Indian enclaves within Bangladesh will be integrated into the latter's territory and 92 Bangladesh enclaves within India will become Indian territory.

The LBA was originally signed between Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh's first Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman in 1974. It was ratified by Rahman's Awami League government, but successive Indian governments failed to do so in the face of chauvinist opposition. Significantly Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) opposed attempts by previous Congress-led governments to reach a deal with Bangladesh over the LBA.

Motivated by the desire for better ties with Dhaka to pursue New Delhi's broader geo-political interests, the Modi government moved to ratify the LBA in the Indian parliament last month. Significantly, all the parliamentary parties supported the bill, highlighting the consensus in the political establishment on the need to have good relations with Bangladesh in order to

facilitate transit corridors to South East Asia.

As part of its "pivot to Asia" directed against China, the Obama administration has encouraged India to more aggressively intervene in the region. The Modi government has over the past year more heavily tilted toward Washington and, at the same time, transformed the previous "Look East" strategic orientation into an "Act East" policy—i.e., active involvement in US provocations against China in East and South East Asia. India's state-owned ONGC Videsh corporation has already secured exploration rights in the South China Sea from Vietnam, despite Chinese objections.

During Modi's visit, the two countries signed a "Coastal Shipping Agreement" to boost trade and connectivity, thus facilitating greater Indian access to the Bay of Bengal. Modi and Hasina also "agreed to work closely on the development of ocean-based Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and chart out ways for future cooperation."

Bilateral agreements covered cooperation in a wide array of areas, including civil nuclear energy, petroleum and power. Two Indian companies will invest over \$US4.5 billion in developing six power plants in Bangladesh. Modi promised to double power exports from India to Bangladesh. India announced a new \$2 billion credit facility for Bangladesh. In return, Dhaka offered to establish an exclusive economic zone for India. These are clear moves by India to counter China, which has heavily invested in Bangladesh and has several exclusive economic zones.

Modi also marked the opening of a long-awaited land route by bus across Bangladesh from the Indian state of West Bengal to its north-eastern states. The bus services from Kolkata to Agartala in the north-eastern state of Tripura will reduce the land distance by more than 1,000 kilometres. Currently buses have to wind

their way around Bangladesh's northern borders through a passage that is as narrow as 23 kilometres wide in some places. Faster trips will enable New Delhi to tighten its grip over the strategic border areas in the north east.

India and Bangladesh have not reached an agreement on water-sharing for their common rivers. Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh's efforts to sign the Teesta water agreement and also the LBA failed due to parochial opposition from Indian state governments bordering Bangladesh, particularly the West Bengal government of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Banerjee has since reversed her position on the LBA and joined Modi during in his visit to Dhaka, but has maintained her opposition to the Teesta water-sharing deal.

During his press conference with Hasina, Modi said: "Our rivers should nurture our relationship, not become a source of discord. Water-sharing is, above all, a human issue." Modi's main concern is that the protracted water-sharing dispute will hamper his efforts to secure closer economic and security ties with Dhaka.

The disputes between India and Bangladesh over water-sharing and border "enclaves" are rooted in the 1947 communal partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. This partition was imposed by British imperialism in league with the Indian Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, and the Muslim League.

A rebellion in what was then known as East Pakistan against rule from Islamabad led to the creation of the breakaway country of Bangladesh in 1971. India intervened militarily on the side of the rebels to ensure the political and social unrest did not spread into West Bengal and to weaken its regional rival, Pakistan. However, none of the issues resulting from the artificial carve-up of British India was resolved.



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