

Chinese defence minister seeks to boost ties with Bangladesh

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Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan's recent high-profile trip to Bangladesh further highlights the intensifying geo-political rivalry in the region.

Chang, who was accompanied by a 39-member delegation, met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, President Abdul Hamid and senior defence officials, including the Bangladesh army, navy and air force chiefs.

The May 28–30 visit followed indications that the Bangladesh government might be accommodating to economic and political pressures from India and Japan. In line with Washington's "pivot" to Asia, India and Japan are attempting to undermine Chinese influence throughout the region.

China, however, remains Bangladesh's main supplier of military hardware, its largest trading partner and continues to make large investments in the country.

During his meeting with Prime Minister Hasina, Chang said China wanted to "expand strategic relations with Bangladesh," including deepening bilateral cooperation and increasing military exchanges and personnel training in new equipment technology.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, since 2010 Beijing has supplied Dhaka with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets, as well as surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles. Dhaka has also ordered new Ming-class submarines that will join the Bangladesh fleet later this year.

Hasina told Chang that Bangladesh wanted to strengthen its cooperation with China, especially in the fields of economy, agriculture, and infrastructure. She also said that her government would continue working with Beijing on the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, which aims to increase trade and economic activity in the region.

Dhaka is highly dependent on Chinese investment. China currently has a \$705 million contract to build a two-lane under-water tunnel connecting Chittagong port and Karnaphuli River Valley. In early May, the Hasina government also approved the \$4.47 billion Padma Bridge rail link project. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was initiated by Beijing, recently granted a \$66 million loan for two power distribution projects and the improvement of transmission lines in Bangladesh.

Chinese investors are also keen to shift labour-intensive industries, such as garment manufacturing, to Bangladesh in order to exploit its cheap labour. Bangladeshi wages—in manufacturing and non-manufacturing sectors—are less than one-fourth of those in China and half of that in India.

Under pressure from the US, India and Japan are attempting to undercut the relations between Beijing and Dhaka.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh last year and signed a number of significant agreements, including a long delayed Land Boundary Agreement demarcating borders and river water sharing between the two countries. Modi also promised to provide \$2 billion in loans.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited Bangladesh Prime minister Hasina to attend last month's outreach meeting during the G7 Ise-Shima Summit in Japan. Abe promised Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina that he would release \$1.5 billion this year from a \$5 billion loan agreed during his visit to Bangladesh in 2014.

Bangladesh industry has grown rapidly over the past decade but the country does not have a deep-water port. Recent years has seen intense competition between India, Japan and China for various seaport contracts in

the country. A June 7 article in the *Diplomat* commented that Bangladesh lacked a deep-water seaport “not because of a lack of options, a deficit of investors” but because “many powerful players are pushing for too many contending plans ...”

Bangladesh had previously agreed to assign the Sonadia seaport development to China. However, Hasina did not sign the scheduled agreement when she visited Beijing in 2014 because of pressure from the US and India.

One of the reasons given by the government was that Japan would build a new port in Matabari, a few kilometres away from Sonadia. Beijing said it wanted to develop another port at Payra. Last month Bangladesh, signed a contract with a Dutch company to build the Payra port.

In 2005, an internal report produced for the then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, said that China’s plans for Chittagong harbour were part of Beijing’s “string of pearls” that also involved a Chinese-built port at Gwadar in Pakistan, and facilities in Myanmar, Cambodia and the South China Sea.

New Delhi, as a strategic partner of Washington and rival of Beijing, now claims that China is encircling India under its “string of pearl strategy.” And in line with Washington’s “pivot” against China, Japan is backing US provocations in the South China Sea and supporting the territorial claims of Vietnam and Philippines.

Under conditions of sharpening geo-political tensions created by Washington’s pivot, Dhaka’s ability to manoeuvre between the major powers to advance its interests is becoming increasingly limited.



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