

India strengthens defence ties with Bangladesh

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Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina concluded a four-day trip to India last week—her first visit since 2010—during which she signed a range of defence and other agreements to strengthen relations between the two countries. India, backed by the US, is keen to undermine its regional rival China’s growing influence in Bangladesh.

Last June, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Dhaka and signed 22 agreements, including on maritime security and to establish special economic zones in Bangladesh. Later in the year Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar travelled to Bangladesh, accompanied India’s coast guard chief and the vice-chiefs of the army, air force and navy. Parrikar discussed the finalisation of “a new defence cooperation framework” with Bangladesh.

Hasina held discussions last week with Modi on defence, regional security and cooperation in “combating international terrorism.” Officials from Bangladesh and India signed a range of agreements, including defence, cyber security, information technology, connectivity, energy and human resource development, and a civil nuclear cooperation pact.

New Delhi offered Dhaka a \$US4.5 billion concessionary line of credit for development projects in Bangladesh. Modi declared that the line of credit “brings our resources allocation to Bangladesh to more than \$8 billion over the past six years.” This finance, however, is small compared the \$30 billion in investment promised during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Bangladesh last October. Beijing is concerned about Washington’s efforts to enlist India as a “frontline” state in its military encirclement of China. Last November in Tokyo Modi signed a defence agreement with Japan and, in line with US propaganda, declared support for “freedom of overflight and

navigation” in the South China Sea.

The main agreement signed during Hasina’s visit last week was a five-year defence cooperation pact. The first-ever defence cooperation agreement between the two countries is in addition to \$500 million for Bangladesh to buy military equipment from India. It includes annual consultations between the defence forces, training and capacity-building cooperation.

New Delhi hopes this will help to reduce Bangladesh’s reliance on China for its military needs. Beijing is currently Bangladesh’s leading provider of military equipment along with robust training and military exchange programs between the two countries.

New Delhi’s concerns over these ties were recently voiced by Sukh Deo Muni, from New Delhi’s Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, who declared that “India does not want China to consolidate defence ties just next to its belly.” Bangladesh’s \$24 billion purchase of two refurbished submarines from China last year has increased these worries.

Institute of Conflict, Law and Development Studies executive director Abdur Rashid in Dhaka welcomed the Hasina government’s defence deal with India. He stated that the “approximately 80 percent dependency at this moment you see on China ... should be brought down. That actually reduces our vulnerability. If one is interrupted we can depend on the other.”

Dhaka is attempting to maintain a delicate balancing act between New Delhi and Beijing. Bangladesh’s foreign secretary, Shahidul Haque, claimed that last week’s agreement did not oblige Dhaka to buy arms from India.

Efforts are being made to increase connectivity between the two countries. A new rail link between the Indian city of Kolkata and Khulna in Bangladesh and a bus link between Kolkata and Dhaka were inaugurated.

Another old rail link was restored.

A key sticking point between the two countries, however, centres on Teesta River water sharing. The main reason Bangladesh cancelled Hasina's scheduled visit to India last December was the failure of the Modi government to reach an agreement on this issue.

The Teesta River flows through West Bengal before passing into the sea in Bangladesh. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposes any deal. The whole question is a product of 1948 communal partition of India, which arbitrarily divides rivers between the two countries.

To placate Hasina, Modi declared that the Teesta pact was important for the Indo-Bangladesh relationship and he hoped that Banerjee would eventually support an agreement.

In a face-saving statement, Foreign Secretary Haque told the media that the Indian prime minister "firmly" believed there would be an "early solution" to the Teesta issue and that water resources should be a "uniting factor" between the two countries. The *Dhaka Tribune*, however, declared on April 9 that "Indo-Bangladesh relations are shrinking" and was critical of Indian pressure on Bangladesh.

Sections of the Indian ruling elite want the Teesta issue settled. The *Hindustan Times* published an editorial on April 6 entitled, "India must go the extra mile for Sheikh Hasina to strengthen ties with Bangladesh." It stated that it was "imperative for India to strengthen the hands of an ally who has adopted a common stance on issues that are crucial for New Delhi, such as terrorism and regional diplomacy."

Even though the Teesta issue remains on hold, Dhaka is ready to develop closer relations with New Delhi because of US pressure.

At the same time, if Bangladesh is to reach the ambitious annual growth target of 8 percent by 2020—up from the current 6 percent—it must diversify its trade, which is heavily dependent on the apparel industry. To do so it will not only need Indian investment but the fees it will receive as a transportation hub between East Asia and South Asia.

The main opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP), which has denounced Hasina as an "Indian stooge," opposed the military pact. Playing the anti-Indian card, BNP's senior joint secretary general Rizvi Ahmed declared that the defence pact meant that

Bangladesh's territorial sovereignty had been handed over to India.

The agreements, he said, had been signed to appease India, adding that "Bangladesh's defence system has now been turned into [a] made-in-India one." He declared that "April 8 [the day the deal was signed] will be considered as a black day in Bangladesh history." With general elections scheduled in early 2019, BNP is promoting anti-Indian chauvinism in a bid to mobilise opposition against Hasina's Awami League.

Though the exact course of political developments and diplomatic horse-trading is not certain, Washington is pushing Dhaka to integrate itself into US and Indian military plans against China. In the context of growing geopolitical tensions, Dhaka's ability to manoeuvre between China and India is becoming increasingly tenuous.



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