

India strengthens its relations with Bangladesh

Rohantha De Silva
11 November 2017

The Indian government is anxious to strengthen relations with Bangladesh to counter Chinese influence in that country. Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Bangladesh on October 22 and 23 as part of this rivalry. Earlier in the month, Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley toured Bangladesh.

India's moves to undercut Beijing's influence is motivated by its geo-political interests. New Delhi's main concern is Dhaka's close relations with China. The Bangladesh paper the *New Age* noted in its opinion page on October 29: "New Delhi was concerned that China was getting involved in building economic infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, many of which were also strategic in nature."

At the same time, New Delhi is acting on behalf of Washington, which has been aggressively working to integrate countries in the Asia-Pacific region into its military-strategic offensive against China.

Both New Delhi and Washington are particularly unhappy about Bangladesh joining China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, which now involves 60 countries, covering 70 percent of the world's population. The US considers China's OBOR as a serious challenge to its drive to assert world dominance.

On October 5, Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque announced his country's backing for the OBOR plan. Addressing a World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in New Delhi itself, he said Bangladesh needed "quick upgrading of our infrastructure, and our generation wants much more interaction and connectivity."

During her visit, Swaraj met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, the leader of the opposition Bangladesh National Party

(BNP).

Spelling out Bangladesh's importance to India, Swaraj said: "India is following a policy of neighbours first, and among the neighbours Bangladesh is foremost." She said the relations between the two countries had gone beyond a strategic partnership.

Swaraj attended the annual India-Bangladesh joint consultative commission. After meeting with the Bangladesh foreign minister, Swaraj claimed that the two countries stood together in "fighting violent extremism and terrorism at all levels."

She said: "We are both determined to protect our societies from the threat of ideologies of hate, violence and terror by adopting a zero tolerance policy."

Swaraj inaugurated 15 development projects funded by India, worth about \$US8.7 million. They cover education, health care, information technology, water supply and social welfare, and include 11 water treatment plants and 36 community clinics. She also gave books, computers and multimedia equipment to the Hindi and Sanskrit departments of several universities.

During the early October visit of Indian Finance Minister Jaitley, the two countries signed a \$4.5 billion line of credit (LoC) agreement between the Export-Import Bank of India and the Economic Relations Division of the Bangladesh finance ministry. It will be used to fund 17 major projects in Bangladesh, including electricity, railroads, roads, shipping and ports.

The LoC was agreed during Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in April. As with two previous similar agreements, Bangladesh will pay 1 percent annual interest over a 20-year payback period, with a 5-year grace period. Bangladesh must also purchase 65 to 75 percent of the services, goods or works from India.

India is trying to compete with China in offering investment, although unsuccessfully. In October last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping stopped over in Bangladesh on his way to a BRICS summit in Goa, India. He pledged \$21 billion in aid and loans for various infrastructure and development projects and secured a promise from Hasina to make Bangladesh a strategic partner of China.

While in Bangladesh, Indian External Affairs Minister Swaraj also declared that both countries would “solve all irritants with sincerity,” but did not specify the “irritants.” Sharing the waters of the two countries’ common rivers is a long-standing problem.

The Teesta River, which flows through the north of India’s West Bengal state before entering Bangladesh, was not even mentioned during the visit. Opposition by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has prevented the signing of an agreement so far.

The 1948 communal-based partition of India arbitrarily divided rivers between countries. Promises by various Indian leaders, including present Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to solve this issue have failed to materialise.

Despite the unresolved Teesta issue, Bangladesh is willing to develop closer relations with New Delhi. The Bangladesh government has set an annual growth target of 8 percent by 2020, from the current 6 percent. To achieve that, the government would have to diversify the country’s trade into other sectors, from its present reliance on the garment industry, which accounts for 80 percent of exports. Hence the quest for Indian investment, and also the fees Dhaka could obtain as a trading hub between East Asia and South Asia.

New Delhi is becoming more aggressive toward its regional rival China. India is integrating into Washington’s economic and military build-up against China and forging closer military-security ties with key US allies, Japan and Australia.

This year’s standoff between Chinese and Indian military forces in the Doklam area, at the tri-junction of the India-China-Bhutan border, has underscored Bangladesh’s importance to India. China is planning to build a link road to access the Chumbi valley, which is subject of a dispute between China and the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

From the Chumbi valley, India’s Siliguri Corridor—the only land connection between India’s

northeastern states and the rest of India—would be within the range of Chinese artillery. If China occupied the Doklam plateau in any future conflict, India would be forced to use Bangladesh as a transit for military purposes.



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