Indian premier visits Bangladesh to counter China

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a two-day visit to Bangladesh arriving last Friday to develop political and economic ties and undermine Chinese influence in the region. Modi wanted to patch up ties with Bangladesh, which have been strained due to his government's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which discriminates against Muslim immigrants from South Asia, including Bangladesh. He held talks with his counterpart Sheikh Hasina and other government and opposition leaders.

Underscoring the importance New Delhi gives to its ties with Bangladesh, Modi's visit was his first overseas tour since the coronavirus pandemic emerged. Highlighting her government's keen interests in developing ties with New Delhi, Hasina welcomed Modi in person at Dhaka international airport.

Modi's Bangladesh visit took place in the context of escalating rivalry in South Asia between India and the US on one side and China on the other side. India has become a front-line state in the aggressive US-led confrontation with China. New Delhi collaborated closely with Washington in regime-change operations in Sri Lanka in 2015 and in Maldives in 2018, ousting governments regarded as too close to China. In his efforts to deepen ties with Bangladesh, Modi is pursuing India's geopolitical interests against China while operating on behalf of the US.

The US is building alliances in order to encircle China, and ultimately for war. Modi's Bangladesh visit took place just two weeks after the first-ever summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as the Quad, a US-led quasi-alliance, including Japan, Australia and India, targeting China. In the weekend before Modi's visit to Dhaka, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin made a three-day visit to India to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries against China. Two days after Modi's trip, the Indian navy held a joint exercise with the US navy, involving the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier and its strike group.

Modi's visit was officially to attend celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. The developments in early 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, were the outcome of the 1947 communal partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. Pakistan was made up of two parts separated by thousands of kilometres—current Pakistan was West Pakistan and Bangladesh was East Pakistan.

Power was wielded by the ruling elites based in West Pakistan which subordinated Bengali-populated East Pakistan, including through military might. Popular outrage fuelled a national liberation movement that led to armed clashes in early 1971 which Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi exploited to send armies into East Pakistan.

The Indian military delivered a bloody blow to Pakistan but also suppressed a Bangladesh national movement involving workers and farmers led by sections of the national bourgeoisie. The new state of Bangladesh was led by Mujibar Rahman, Sheik Hasina's father, who became the first prime minister. Through its military intervention, India shored up the reactionary regional state structures created by the 1947 communal partition.

Modi's visit took place as his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) is facing assembly elections in five Indian states, including West Bengal, which borders Bangladesh. In a naked attempt to influence the voters, Modi visited a Hindu temple outside Dhaka, which is sacred to the Matua community that also has a significant presence in West

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Bengal.

During his discussions with Hasina, Modi promised that India would give 1.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Bangladesh—a pitiful amount compared to the Bangladeshi population of more than 160 million. The promise was, however, a significant concession given that India has stopped vaccine exports for the next two months. In January, New Delhi provided seven million doses to Dhaka, including two million as a grant. The donation was a bid to boost India's political influence in Bangladesh.

Modi's most significant discussions concerned nuclear cooperation. India is involved in the development of the transmission lines from the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Bangladesh, which will be worth over $US1 billion and covered by an Indian line of credit. The nuclear reactor related critical infrastructure is being built by the Russian Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation. Non-critical infrastructure is being built by Bangladeshi and Indian construction companies.

During Modi's visit, the countries signed five agreements involving trade, disaster management, information technology, youth affairs, and sports. No agreement, however, was reached on the long-standing issue of water sharing of the Teesta River, which flows through West Bengal before passing into the sea in Bangladesh. West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposes any deal with Bangladesh over water sharing on the reactionary parochial ground that it would discriminate against West Bengal. Modi has avoided any agreement on water sharing, particularly at this time, as Banerjee could use it to whip up West Bengali provincialism against his BJP in the current state elections.

India and the US are keen to undermine Bangladesh's ties with China and integrate it fully into their offensive against Beijing. Trump's Secretary of Defense Mark Esper phoned Hasina in early September, in a rare outreach. The US is pressuring Bangladesh to buy more military hardware from Washington. Bangladesh is already in talks with the US to buy Apache helicopters and missiles. China is currently the main military supplier, with Bangladesh spending $2.59 billion on Chinese military equipment between 2010 and 2019.

Bangladesh is also a partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a network of highways, railways and pipelines connecting China to South and Central Asia and also to Europe, in a bid to counter Washington's encirclement. China is also the main investor in Bangladesh but the US has increased its investment drive. In a virtual dialogue held on September 30, then US Undersecretary of State Keith Krach agreed to ask US companies to invest in energy, IT, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural sectors in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is engaged in an increasingly precarious balancing act between India and the US on the one side and China on the other side. A day before Modi's visit, Gowher Rizvi, international affairs advisor to Hasina, said: "We are part of China's BRI but we are very willing to be a part of the Indo-Pacific relationship… we are not going to choose [between India and China]".

During Modi's visit, protests erupted in Bangladesh against his government's anti-Muslim policies, including the CAA. The protest started at the main mosque in the capital Dhaka and spread to other districts in the country. The police attacked demonstrators who burned furniture and tyres on the roads—a further indication of the Dhaka government's growing authoritarianism. Under Hasina political opponents, including from the main opposition Bangladesh National Party and its allies, have been violently suppressed. Forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings have increased.

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