For India- The Importance of Bangladesh

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 06/23/2014 - 21:50

Paper No. 5729 Dated 23-June-2014

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In tune with the Indian government’s active policy of good will with neighbors, Indian Foreign Minister Ms. Sushma Swaraj will be visiting Dhaka on June 26.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi completed a very successful official tour of Bhutan in mid-June, just ahead of China – Bhutan talks, and returned assured that Indian Security Interests are high on Thimpu’s priority list. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson in Beijing reflected positivity on India–Bhutan relations.

Ms. Sushma Swaraj is a very senior member of the BJP-Led government in New Delhi and her influence within the party and the government cannot be under estimated. Mr. Modi will visit Bangladesh soon enough as the schedule of the leaders are worked out. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to visit India first, and there is no misunderstanding. Trust and mutual respect are the keywords.
It is time that the foreign policy establishment worked on the India-Bangladesh relationship with the importance it deserves. Bangladesh has emerged as a country that cannot be ignored by anyone due to different reasons. China, Japan, the US, the UK and the European Union (EU) have been planning their strategic diplomacy in Dhaka all along, and this seems to have intensified in recent years. Dhaka’s relationship with Islamabad cooled down under the Awami League (Al) government led by Sheikh Hasina. And Sheikh Hasina’s coalition government has made Bangladesh the leading country in South Asia where social indices are concerned. This is no mean achievement. Bangladesh in beginning to emerge as the center form where connectivity could spread both towards the west (India, Nepal, Bhutan) and to East (Land route through Myanmar ending in Vietnam’s Ports).

Five Indian states have common borders with Bangladesh, something which can be made into a win-win situation through connectivity and trade. Of course, there will be opposition from different interest groups for different reasons. These must be overcome in due course but two major ones need immediate attention.

First is the Teesta River water treaty. Everything has been done. At the last moment West Bengal Chief Minister Ms. Mamta Bannerjee refused to support the treaty on flimsy grounds, leading to a loss of face for the Indian government, and political setback for Sheikh Hasina and her government. Ms. Bannerjee does not understand the harm she did to Indian interests and the stability of Bangladesh.

The other is the land border agreement (LBA) of 1974 signed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sk. Mujibur Rehman. Where Bangladesh has even ratified the treaty, India is yet to move the bill through Parliament. The BJP opposed the move on the grounds that certain amount of land related to adversely possessed enclaves cannot be given away.

As foreign minister Ms. Sushma Swarjaj will have to deal with this very issue which she opposed, when it will be discussed during her Visit to Dhaka. It must be understood by New Delhi that no border/territorial agreement can even be achieved without give and take. A look at land border agreements between different countries will show to achieve an amicable settlement there must be understanding, concessions and the right spirit between the two sides. India has been long at talks with China on the border demarcation issue. This single problem leads at times to attendant problems and reflects on the overall relationship. The political leaders must answer whether they would like to remain in perpetual animosity with Bangladesh (and china). This is absurd.

The Teesta issue has raised another important question. How far can states interfere with foreign policy regarding a neighboring country? Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Ms. Jayalalitha scuttled Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh’s visit to Sri Lanka to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo. Certainly views of state governments can be considered but they cannot become over riding actors. Foreign policy is the responsibility of the Central Government because it is a wide and complicated subject. In both cases (of Teesta and Sri Lanka), states have hurt overall national interest.
These issues must be taken into consideration when prosecuting relation with Bangladesh. India suffered its worst relations with Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006 when the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami led four party alliance was in power.

While 43 years have passed, the issue of Bangladesh’s liberation is yet to be fully settled. The ghost of the liberation war has to be exorcised. The assassination of the founder of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman on August 15, 1975 almost rolled back liberation. Developments revealed that many politicians and military officers who sided with the revolution were indeed Trojan Horses of Pakistan. These people have multiplied especially with the help of Jamaat. The political ideology of the people of Bangladesh still remain in a whirlpool. But it can be said generally that support is divided between the Awami League, the BNP and the Jamaat, BNP and Jamaat being close allies.

Sheikh Hasina, after being elected in December 2009 as Prime Minister, used her huge majority in Parliament to lunch two initiatives. One was eradication of terrorism from the country, and the other was the trial of the 1971 war criminals for crime against humanity. One Jamaat senior leader has been executed, their mentor Golam Azam has been sentenced to life and cases against others are proceeding. This trial, which was long demanded by the freedom fighters, has set back both the Jamaat and BNP.

On the terrorism front Sheikh Hasina has scored unprecedented success. Indian insurgents like the ULFA, NISCN (I/M) and others have been rooted out of this country, and Islamic terrorists and extremists have been hit hard. Apart from Bangladesh India has been the greatest beneficiary of the Sheikh Hasina government’s action against terrorism.

At the same time it cannot be said that terrorism has been completely rooted out. It is an extremely difficult task because religious extremist ideology has been injected in section of the people in Bangladesh, and foreign funding to spread this ideology continues. Unfortunately, leading countries like the USA and UK continue to play a detrimental role in Bangladesh.

In the last three years or so relation between the Sheikh Hasina government and the West (read the US and UK mainly) have cooked. The left of centre ideology of the Awami League and its allies are viewed ideologically at variance with that of the west. Efforts have been made at regime change in Dhaka. The trial of war criminals was faulted by the West on legalistic and moralistic grounds. True, the January 5, 2014 general elections were boycotted by the opposition resulting in almost a walkover for the Awami League. But this could have been avoided if the opposition leader and BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia did not take an uncompromising stand. Pressure continues from the West for a re-election but many countries including china, Russia and Japan have recognized the present government and are doing business with it.

The USA’s Asia ‘PIVOT’ has elements of Bangladesh in its calculation. Like in Myanmar the USA is trying to quietly push its influence in Bangladesh to stem the expansion of Chinese influence westward especially in the Indian Ocean. Russia is quietly nurturing its influence in Bangladesh and getting the contrast for building the 1000 MW nuclear power plant in Rupur, Bangladesh, is an understated but significant
achievement for Moscow.

Recently, Sheikh Hasina made two important visits – to Japan (May 2014) and China (June 2014) to diplomatically seal relations between her government and that of Japan and China, who have not pressured her for a re-election. It was clear that Bangladesh did not figure in the recent China – Japan conflict over Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.

Japan pledged US $ 6 billion assistance over the next five years, and China got further contracts in Bangladesh infrastructure.

In strategic dimensions Japan would be seen as support to the US in Bangladesh, while China is consistently working on its strategic hub in Bangladesh to project power in the Indian Ocean region and more recently talked about a maritime silk route.

China appears to be getting impatient over the delay in the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCRM) road from Kunming (China) to Chittagong port city (Bangladesh). It is also keenly interested in participating, even in a consortium if need be, in the construction of the deep sea port in Sonadia Island in the Bay of Bengal, near Chittagong.

Pakistan is no longer a major power in Bangladesh, but will become one if and when the opposition returns. It is unlikely, however, that Pakistan would be in a kind of position it was in during the BNP- Jamaat rule of 2001 to 2006.

What can be seen is that Bangladesh is becoming a country of global strategic interest. India is still in a position to remove barriers and establish a strategic development and security partnership with Dhaka. Foreign Minister Ms. Sushma Swraj is visiting Bangladesh at a very interesting time.

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