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By Bhaskar Roy

Chinese President Xi Jinping is scheduled to pay an official visit to Bangladesh on October 14. Obviously the red carpet will be rolled out for him in Dhaka.

The two countries have maintained stable and sustained relationship over the decades. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sk. Hasina visited China twice since she returned to power in 2009. Whichever political party or coalition has been the ruling dispensation in Dhaka, care was taken to ensure that this important relationship remained undisturbed.

Xi Jinping is, perhaps, the strongest Chinese leader of Communist China. Deng Xiaoping who changed China's political and economic narrative with his 1978 "reform and opening up" philosophy is sometimes described as China's greatest leader. He brought China out of the disaster of the Cultural Revolution and the country owes it to him for what it is today. But he was the "first among equals", and had to negotiate with his peers. Mao Zedong was very powerful, perhaps even more powerful than Xi is now. But Mao was ruthless and caused destruction that took China at least 50 years back. Xi, on the other hand, is building China many times over and return the nation to its historical glory.

In the spring of 2017, Xi will enter his second and last period of another five years of presidency, according to the laid down practice. But will that be his last tenure? Doubts are being raised in the Chinese Communist Party circles. He will be just about 70, he appears in good health, and he has demolished his serious opponents.

China's foreign exchange reserves have crossed four trillion US dollars. It has, however, seen changes in its economic model. It cannot for

long remain an export oriented country. Rising labour costs are gradually becoming a disincentive to foreign investors who set up factories and export their products. They are now looking for cheaper destinations like Vietnam, Indonesia and even India.

Beijing is looking for foreign investment destinations with overcapacity and excess labour. Jobs have to be created abroad. There are around ten thousand Chinese working in Pakistan. Similar models are being created in some African countries and Chinese workers cut into local jobs. The behaviour of Chinese enterprises in developing or less developing countries has been abysmal at times. They bring in finances and Chinese government loans, but they are tied loans, and local workers in Chinese projects like mines, dams, power projects and other large infrastructure projects are exploited and treated poorly.

Along with investments, these Chinese companies which are mainly state owned, bring in corruption to grease the palms of local officials who matter. Myanmar, which was in the stranglehold of China for over two decades, is beginning to resist. The people in Myanmar do not want them. The Chinese flagship project in Myanmar, the Myitsone dam, remains suspended. It is because of people's resentment; and it has become a huge political issue. Experts in Myanmar say that if the NLD government restarts this project they will lose the people's support and fall. Similar is the state of other Chinese projects in Myanmar.

China's grand strategy in South Asia and extended South Asia have recently suffered some jolts. Readjusting its old strategy of encircling India in the region by a string of pearls, it is now building relations with India. They took time to realise that it was not possible to lock India, and that India had emerged as a regional power with global impact. As the old saying goes "it is the economy, stupid!" India is growing at a rate of seven percent, while China is forced to slow down its economic growth. India is also finally applying itself more seriously at its defence requirements. Despite China's huge military construction, India is not in 1962. Problems, however, remain between India and China not only on the border issue, but also in regional and global politics. Yet, both are partners in BRICS, India has joined the SCO, and India is also a founding member of the Shanghai based Asian Infrastructure Development Bank. A balancing act all round. While Chinese leaders and their propaganda organs loudly proclaim that China does not differentiate between a large country and a small one, in practice it is not true. A Senior Chinese leader told the Cambodians some time back, 'China is a big country and Cambodia is small. It is a fact'. So much was conveyed in so few words.

Its "all weather friend" Pakistan has put China in some very uncomfortable positions. At Pakistan's behest, Beijing put a technical hold for a second time in succession on India's request to list Pakistani based terrorist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) Chief Masood Azhar in the UN Committee on terrorism. This, when the organisation itself is already listed as a terrorists organisation. It is one of the most bizarre proceedings in the history of the United Nations.

When Sh. Hasina meets Xi Jinping the issue of terrorism may be on the agenda. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister, true to her words, has launched a furious attack on terrorists in her own country as well as cooperating with other countries in the region. China has not been heard condemning terrorist attacks in Bangladesh. Does this have anything to do with their "all weather" friend? The Pakistani ISI's

connection and funding of the Bangladeshi terrorist organisation Jamatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) and its latest avatar, the neo-JMB. At least two ISI operatives in Pakistan's High Commission in Dhaka were quietly expelled due to their contacts with JMB elements.

The Chinese take history very seriously and learn from it. It is said that those who do not learn from history can never win the future. The people of Bangladesh may recall that during the liberation war in 1971 China supported Pakistan. Beijing accorded diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh in 1976 only after the assassination of the architect of liberation Bangabandhu Sk. Mujibur Rahman in 1975, and that too after Pakistan established diplomatic relations with Bangladesh.

Gen. Zia-ur-Rehman, later President of Bangladesh, is said to have been the moving force driving relations with China. Available evidence suggests that Zia was complicit in the assassination of Sk Mujibur Rahman stitched together, they make a fascinating historical narrative. That is why China always supported Zia's political party, the BNP and its ally the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), the Pakistani acolytes.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, countries have to move ahead in the world of globalization and economic interdependence. China is unlikely to rock the boat of the ruling Awami League and its coalition government, but they also do not forget their old friends. This is one attribute that China has, which big powers like the United States do not. But in Bangladesh the Americans took time to come around and support Sk. Hasina. From the American political point of view the BNP was open to market economy while the Awami League had socialist inclinations.

China is the biggest investor in Bangladesh and helped in high profile infrastructure projects that catch the eye. All three arms of the Bangladeshi armed forces are largely equipped with Chinese military products, sometimes at friendship prices.

There is a lot of expectations from Xi Jinping's visit. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md. Sharier Alam listed out a series of expectations from the visit. It is said Xi is coming with a bag of US \$ 20 billion. Some are a little sceptical of Chinese promises. Just before President Xi visited India in 2014, the Chinese Consul General in Mumbai announced that he was coming with US \$ 100 billion investment bonanza. Later it was pruned down to US\$ 20 billion. Indians are yet to see the money. If the Chinese put in one dollar they expect a return of a 100 dollars. This is not to denigrate China. Profit motive is there everywhere.

The most important aspect of Xi Jinping's visit is upgrading strategic relationship. China's first bet was on Myanmar where they planned to develop a sea port with access for the Chinese navy. The plan is in the freezer. With the Japanese coming into Myanmar under the umbrella of JICA, and the US having lifted all sanction on the country, the Chinese are going to face stiff competition.

Bangladesh is, therefore, now under Chinese focus. Possibility of a deep sea port in Payra has whetted their appetite. The other is the BCIM corridor linking Bengal in India, through Bangladesh and Myanmar to China (Kunming). The other name given to this project by a group of Indian academics is KZK (Kolkata to Kunming). Myanmar is yet to clear the project.

Success of BCIM would enable China to implement its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project, though India and Myanmar have reserved their opinions. This project, part of Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road (OBOR) is a huge strategic platform. The Chinese call it a win-win project for all. But to other it is like an onion. One would have to peel many layers to discover *what is the real thing*. And that will take years.

Nevertheless, President Xi Jinping's visit is both an opportunity and challenge for Prime Minister Sk. Hasina and her government. There will be people in Bangladesh anxiously waiting for Chinese funded projects for their personal benefits.

The watch phrase is "trust, but verify first". Haste does not leave time and space for verification.

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