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Larger Conspiracy behind BNP's bitter criticism of Sheikh Hasina's India initiative

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By Bhaskar Roy

Ahead of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sk. Hasina's visit (April 7-9), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "Your dream of golden Bangla is our dream too".

Contrast this with the chorus of criticism from the main Bangladesh opposition party, the BNP, both before and after the visit. This significant visit was roundly trashed as a sell out to India, especially the defence agreement, which was to institutionalise the various ongoing defence cooperation under one portal. The five hundred million military tranche advanced by India does by no means put any condition on Dhaka. There is nothing secretive about this accord, and no offensive agenda.

The bitterness and frustration in the BNP was so evident, yet without a credible reason. There was no appreciation of the rest of the four and a half billion credit tranche at a very low interest (of one percent). The first tranche was for one billion dollars, of which 200 million was converted into aid. The second was for two billion dollars. Each step was initiated by India. Bangladesh aims to use this to create jobs, infrastructure and education. Under Sk. Hasina's prime ministership, Bangladesh has raced ahead with a seven percent rate of growth and other positive social indicators that puts the country at the top. Why does this irritate the BNP, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the like? Would they like to keep Bangladesh in the state that Henry Kissinger described, as a "basket case"? This is curious and more than surprising.

Bangladesh is a critical player in South Asia's development and in SAARC's unity, stability and progress. It has been in the forefront against terrorism and separatism, promoting women's development, child welfare, information technology, job creation and fighting other challenges. This, despite the vitriolic attacks from those who still pursue an anti-liberation agenda.

Unfortunately, BNP chairperson and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia tried to inject political toxicity when she told the media, “people once again noticed that India’s defence, political and geo-political dominance over Bangladesh would grow due to signing of treaties and MOUs in different areas, including security assistance and cyber-crime, arms purchase, line of credit, assistance in nuclear project, import of diesel and power and increasing connectivity” (April 12). She went on to charge all the deals signed as giving priority to Indian interests. Not unsurprisingly, she took another swipe at India, accusing New Delhi of “grossly interfering” in the country’s 2014 elections.

Begum Zia would do well to remember that during her prime ministership, India had bent over backwards to accommodate Bangladesh. She and her government responded with dangerous anti-India acts, including giving sanctuary to Indian insurgents and terrorists, clandestinely importing ten truckloads of arms and ammunition from China for these insurgents to create mayhem in North East India, and trying to project the Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) terrorists as a creation of India. This visceral anti-Indianism is a virus that she and her political comrades like the Jamaat carry from the days of the liberation war.

There is a not-so-hidden agenda in the BNP plan to put China against India in Bangladesh. This powerful tilt is extremely dangerous, not only for Bangladesh but also for the region. During Khaleda Zia’s regime, a tripartite intelligence operation was created between Bangladesh, Pakistan and China to sabotage India and collect information. China, however, was not actively involved but was a recipient of the fruits.

Does the BNP cherish liberation or do they want to turn the clock back as far as possible? During the war of liberation China openly supported Pakistan and its rapacious soldiers and local cohorts like the Jamaat, while India fought for liberation. China would have opened a front against India had not a warning been given by the Soviet Union.

China vetoed Bangladesh’s membership of the United Nations till 1974, and accorded recognition to Bangladesh only in January, 1976, after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 in a pro-Pakistan conspiracy.

Of course, relations between nations are not static and respond to the changing geopolitical realities. The Soviet Union and China were bitter opponents, but have entered into close strategic cooperative relations, Sk. Hasina is aware of these realities and responded accordingly. Recently Bangladesh acquired two submarines from China, and when the Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to Bangladesh he carried a 20 billion dollar package.

Why does this small defence agreement with India irk Khaleda Zia so much? As prime minister she contracted the country’s biggest defence agreement with China, during her visit in 2002. Today, more than 70 percent of Bangladesh’s military arms and equipment are from China. Bangladesh is emerging as a major buyer of Chinese weapons. So, what is Khaleda Zia’s problem? After all, like Myanmar, Seychelles, Vietnam, and to an extent Sri Lanka, have military relations with New Delhi and have procured arms from it. They have not

been subsumed by India, as Khaleda Zia would like us to believe.

Strangely, the BNP opposed rest of India's connectivity with its north east through Bangladesh on the specious grounds that in the event of an India-China war, India would move its military through Bangladeshi territory and China would not like it! BNP forgot that in such a case India would have to seek explicit permission from Dhaka.

The Bangladesh general elections are scheduled for 2019. If the situation in the country so demands, in the interest of the nation's on-going development process the elections can be brought forward. For the opposition, there is a twin threat. On the one hand the common people are beginning to enjoy a better daily life. Bangladesh is now accepted internationally very positively for its policy aimed at putting the country into a comfortable position economically by 2022 as Sk. Hasina promised.

On the other hand, the machinations of the BNP and Jamaat are unravelling. The criticism against International Crimes Tribunal trying the 1971 genocide criminals have subsided to a great extent. Efforts to declare "March 25", 1971 as Genocide Day is beginning to find tractions internationally. Of course, much more documentation work will have to be done to present a solid case.

The trial and execution of HUJI commander Mufti Hannan and two of his associates in the Shajalal Shrine attack case targeting the British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhry which killed three people (Choudhary was injured) has brought to light some BNP leaders' assurance of protection to Hannan. These are documented. Hannan made two serious attacks on Sk. Hasina's life, one of which on August 21, 2004 seriously injured her. It is reported that there have been twenty attacks on Sk. Hasina's life, the latest being tampering with her aircraft which an alert pilot managed to detect.

BNP must recall that at one point of time during their rule, in alliance with the Jamaat, there were talks, among the international community, to declare Bangladesh a state sponsor of terrorism. It was only after a warning from US President George W. Bush that the government acted against the JMB (in 2005). A review of the country's GDP growth and social indicators will show where Bangladesh was going.

In today's globalised world interdependence and cooperation between nations is the new normal for development and progress. India and Bangladesh share a 4,100 km border which has been ratified by both the countries, and the problem of adversely possessed enclaves was also resolved. The sea boundary issue was also resolved amicably.

Khaleda described the power purchase agreement with India as against national interest. Would she rather keep her nation power starved and industries struggling to survive? Where will jobs come from? New agreement, like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) connectivity paves the way for trade, power import and water augmentation which can further energise Bangladesh. The Bay of Bengal initiative for Science, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is another bright light. Cooperation in the fight against terrorism has been outstanding.

The Teesta river water sharing agreement has been ready for signing from 2010, but has been held up by West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee's obdurate stand. This, too, will be resolved as promised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Ms. Banerjee's proposal to examine three to four other rivers flowing into Bangladesh is a non-starter. Bangladesh and India are joined at the hip, especially by the Bengali people on both sides. There are aberrations, but they are surmountable. The future, however, remains bright.

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