



Pakistan's Reengagement with Bangladesh: Expectations and Challenges

Webinar

(Transcription by Zunaira Inam)

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Introductory Remarks

Forward looking approach towards Pak-Bangladesh ties is a welcome approach. It is high time they review their traditional policies towards each other.

How can that be made possible? On one hand, we need to be hopeful. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that Pakistan's High Commissioner to Bangladesh was appointed after a break of two years. There is a lot of historical baggage, but no conflicts as of now. The right approach would be to look ahead and forge better relations.

Dr. Rifaat Hussain

Bangladesh is no longer an economic basket case and the prospect for future seems to be very good. They have done urgent economic reforms. The question of future of Pak-Bangladesh needs to be framed across the historical backdrop because that is essential to understand current situation. A good starting point could be the birth of Bangladesh, a bloody legacy of its birth has casted a shadow on Pak-Bangladesh relations.

There are two competing narratives; Pakistan viewed it as a great tragedy. Post-cold war, East Pakistan was the only majority province that was separated from its motherland through armed struggle. Other view is regarded as revolt against subjugation, political exclusion, issue of Urdu language, unfair distribution of resources etc. It is important to reconcile and overcome these opposing narratives.

On the basis of Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman's 6 points, Awami League fought the 1970 elections, which was a clean sweep. As opposed to this, in West Pakistan there was PPP which became the runner up and joined hands with the military government and blocked the transfer of power to Awami League.

Nearly 10 million refugees, mostly Hindu Bengalis fled to India, India started funding Mukti Bahini, and intervened in the civil war. Pakistan suffered a military defeat and on 16th December 1971, surrender of Dhaka took place.

Ever since Bangladesh's birth, pro-India tilt has been the cardinal principle, against this acrimonious background, we have to look at what is the current state of principle. There are certain positive factors, despite their difficulties East and West Pakistan lived together for 25 years, there are many narrative memories, and Muslim League was founded in Bengal in 1905.

Both are Muslim states and both countries are members of SAARC, OIC and Commonwealth. This cements the ties between them. Even though Awami league has been the ruling party and has pursued a pro India policy until recently, but the recent legislation introduced by India the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Registry Act has brought a change and created certain disaffection between Dhaka and New Delhi.

Bangladesh was a founding member of SAARC, the prolonged postponement of SAARC summits due to India-Pak enmity has concerned Bangladesh about the future of SAARC. Pakistan must overcome the legacy of the war of 71, it has yet to offer an apology for its alleged crimes, and it has offered its regrets but has refrained from public apology. Tremendous dispute about number of people killed in the war. We need truth and reconciliation commission to establish the facts on the ground

Imran khan's call to his Bangladeshi counterpart can be seen as a positive step that Pakistan is willing to cooperate with its Bangladeshi brothers and sisters to melt the ice that has kept the relationship in deep freeze. The ball is now in Bangladesh's court and can use this as a way of getting strategic autonomy and moving away from Indian dependence.

Mukhlesur Rahman Chowdhury

Bangladesh and Pakistan, India and all neighboring countries started SAARC in 1985 and recently it has become redundant. India has created hurdles and used Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Bangladesh and Pakistan have cultural and religious relations. Bangladesh's motto is friendship to all. But Bangladeshi minds have asserted India influences Bangladesh in every sector; India pressurizes it to buy arms and ammunitions from India. India stopped onion exports and Pakistan offered instead. India has killed Bangladeshi people at the border.

Bangladesh PM has decided not to keep all eggs in one basket. China is investing heavily in Bangladesh, almost 24 billion dollars. Bangladesh and Pakistan should sit together; they should have better relations with all neighboring countries. Recently, NRC and CAA have affected Pakistan and Bangladesh. Even in creation of Pakistan, Bengal leaders

played a significant role. Apart from the grievances and independence of 71, Pakistan and Bangladesh have similar issues and commonalities. Bangladesh is an independent country, it is a Muslim country and it will decide itself what its future will be. All of Bangladesh's relationships should be built on mutual trust and respect of sovereignty.

Revival of SAARC is extremely important, when PM Modi opposed the secretary-generalship of Pakistan, Sheikh Haseena over ruled and accepted Pakistan as secretary general.

There is a need to start trade investment, cricket tournament, cultural programs, Bangladesh and Pakistan are major countries after India, if they are united, India will come to the table as well. Bangladesh's neutral position will help the region. If Pakistan apologize publicly and officially it would really help move the relations forward. Bangladesh can also play a great role in uniting the SAARC countries.

Prof. Shahaab Enam Khan

Covid-19 virus has been an equalizer in the world; all countries are dealing with it equally. Post 1971 Bangladesh is completely different to pre 71; it was not a civil war. War continued for 9 months, Indian armed forces joined only 13 days prior to the victory, the refugees weren't mainly Hindus, and it was not a win-win situation for India and Bangladesh. It was in India's geostrategic interest, which coincided with Bangladesh independence war.

Bangladesh had started its liberation movement from 1965 onwards. In 1970, there was a sweeping election win but the transfer of power wasn't there. You have a very strong greatly aggrieved society that has been asking for equal opportunity. And then this event occurs. Also the apology is an issue inbuilt into the society; every other family has been a victim of 71 atrocities. It shouldn't just be viewed from a political lens but a societal point of view. Emphasizing on India as a factor is generalization. Musharraf visited Dhaka and talked about regret, but it's not a substitute for the atrocities that have taken place. After the 1975 assassination of the father of the nation, Indira Gandhi offered support and shelter, sense of gratitude and cooperation started from then.

Bangladesh opened the door for 1.2 million Burmese for no strategic reasons; the reason was that it had experienced a similar pain in 71. The second round of people Bangladesh shelters are 250,000 plus couple of generations of stranded Pakistanis, who claimed to be Pakistanis when they were being granted Bangladesh citizenship. Bangladesh is keeping them with all Geneva convention rights.

The Rohingya Crisis, it wasn't cheap for Bangladesh, and when it tried to sort it out, none of the countries offered help. Not India, China or Pakistan. The Bangladeshi PM has to

feed 170 million people so we don't lean pro-China/Pakistan/India/US. All these countries have their own national interests.

Bangladesh remains silent on Kashmir and Galwan Valley issues. These are the extensions of these countries unilateral politics, need not be internationalized. India's biggest South Asian trading partner is Bangladesh. In South Asia, we have less than 5% internal trade. This is not allowing the market to flourish.

Bangladesh is surrounded by India, and the India-Bangladesh relationship is always discussed by Pakistan, but this relationship will continue. Bangladesh believes in multilateralism that spirit is very much there. How can this be leveraged?

One proposal is to revive SAARC. Second is to overstress the security, all countries in this region are victims of terrorism. The menace is always there. Need to show genuine show of support. Transboundary terrorism needs a mindset change.

A new cold war is coming and everyone will have to adapt to that.

All South Asian countries talk nice to each other but don't reform their market mechanisms. Cost of non-cooperation is very high. You will always be inventing conspiracy theories and security paranoia. Bangladesh counter terrorism has improved tremendously. We should learn from each other.

All countries of South Asia must think positively towards bilateral relations and strengthening SAARC, and try to help each other in UN systems. Relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh will be reasonably good in the future.

Dr. Moonis Ahmar

The idea of revitalization, reimagining, reexamining, reinventing, reengagement, have been talked about since long. When talking about the prospect of Bangladesh and Pakistan relations, reengagement, the ground realities must be kept in consideration. There are certain bitter realities of this relationship, as the Americans got the independence from British, took Britain several years to grant recognition now they are close allies. Similarly, Pakistan and Bangladesh will take time to get over their past.

The 3 days celebrated by Bangladesh officially; February 21st 1952, international language day, March 25th Independence Day and December 16th victory day. Who's the target? They all revolve around Pakistan bashing. Although, they have every right to celebrate these days but what happened in the past has certainly led to blame game and a lot of paranoia, a lot has been written about the 1971 liberation war. Next year 2021 Bangladesh will celebrate its 50th anniversary golden jubilee. Entirely new generations are coming of age in Bangladesh who do not have the same memories of pre 1971. The older generation is phasing out. The generation that saw traumatic events of 1971 is phasing out. There are

various liberation museums in Bangladesh but in Pakistan there isn't much knowledge or awareness about what had happened in then East Pakistan. But if we go to Bangladesh, even now the legacy of 1971 is still there. How to deal with that legacy? We need a forward looking approach. At stake is the future of 1.6 billion people of South Asia.

The issues that the two countries should have seriously dealt with, they have not. General Musharaff visited Dhaka in 2002, various agreements were signed but even now the total trade between the two is not more than 850 million dollars. If you want to build win-win type of situation, the requirement is vibrant commercial relations. There are no direct flights between the two countries, connectivity needs to be restored. There used to be shipping links, trade relations, economic relations and those need to be augmented. It must also be kept in mind that the Indian factor will never allow normalizing of relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Samina Yasmeen

At some stage people who were primarily responsible for being unfair to others in the history did issue apology. Pakistan needs to demonstrate more magnanimity. This would go some way in taking care of the sensitivities in Bangladesh but it might be too daring to suggest that.

Dr. Shaheen akhtar

1971 events were traumatic moments in history and Pakistan's relationship with Bangladesh; we have to somehow move away from that. It requires a lot of courage. Trust building in top leadership and the idea of truth and reconciliation commission is important.

How the two countries work out their issues will be important for the future. The youth of Bangladesh is very keen to visit Pakistan. Youth exchanges and study tours can help in building ties. The people at both sides need to figure out how to reconnect with each other, while the political groups take care of the issues at that level. Connectivity is a big issue. Dhaka and Karachi had a close connectivity. There are lots of opportunities to bring the two countries close through the ship building industry. There is a lot of openness on the Pakistani side, the academia, thinks tanks need to form deeper linkages.

The visa regimes are being gradually more restricted. That needs to be loosened up. With regards to climate change and disaster management policies, a lot of learning can be done from Bangladesh. Pandemic cooperation is very important through SAARC and bilateral actions. Since there are water sharing issues between Bangladesh and India, they can learn from Pakistani experience from Indus water treaty. The trust deficit needs to be addressed while moving towards opportunity. The two countries should not be reactive as cooperation in South Asia and SAARC are very important.