



Bangladesh- China Relations in the Changing Regional Dynamics

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Webinar Notes

by

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On 29 December 2020 Institute of Regional Studies organized a webinar by involving four renowned scholars. The following are the notes of the event. After introduction of the speaker, a transcription is presented.

Ms. Nabila Jaffer, Research Analyst while inaugurated the webinar stated that in the existing world order relations between countries are based on national interests and geopolitical necessities. China's influence in South Asia has significantly grown over the years. Bangladeshi-Chinese relations in particular are now more robust and comprehensive. China has been consistently supporting Bangladesh for its infrastructure projects and currently they are also forging and developing their cooperation on handling corona virus pandemic and keeping in view this background she invited four eminent speakers from China, Bangladesh and Pakistan including,

Ambassador Naghmana A. Hashmi (Pakistan)

Professor ShahabEnam Khan (Bangladesh)

Professor LIN Minwang (China)

Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta (Bangladesh)

Ambassador Naghmana A. Hashmi (Pakistan)

Ambassador Naghmana A. Hashmi has served as Pakistan's ambassador to China from 2019 to 2020. She had earlier served in Beijing from 2003- 2007 as Deputy Head of Mission. During her stay in China she proactively promoted and further strengthened deep- rooted friendship with China cemented economic and trade ties. She personally supervised the measures to protect the lives of Pakistani nationals who were stranded in Wuhan and other parts of the China during Covid-19 pandemic. She has also served as Pakistan's ambassador to the European Union, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland. In Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she served in various capacities in the departments of Human Resource and Career Planning, United Nations, Policy Planning and Public Diplomacy and the Organization of Islamic Conference.

Ambassador Naghmana A. Hashmih as highlighted some pertinent points about the advantages of the location, history and geography of South Asian countries. She tried to skim over how this region is a place of competition where big powers have always been trying to buy for influence due to which the region has been mired into differences and not integrating for collective growth. While talking about the shift of Bangladesh towards China, she further added that since 1971, Bangladesh was a traditional ally to India and depending a lot on its bigger neighbor. At that

time China was not proactively establishing its influence beyond its borders. China was trying to consolidate its economy and political system to meet its two centennial goals. One of which they have met this year which is taking China out of absolute poverty by the end of 2020 even after corona pandemic which is commendable. Second is to turn China into a middle income country by 2041 which seems to be well on its track. In the humble opinion of Ambassador Hashmi the extent, speed and strength of the rise of China has bewildered everybody. However, the concept of BRI which is development and peace through connectivity is an approach of shared future and the shared destiny of mankind. She further continued that the U.S. - China rivalry or competition for influence in the region has become more eminent with the rise of China. To counterbalance the influence of China, India has shifted its policy towards U.S. However, South Asian countries may have benefited in many ways from the rise of China because Chinese philosophy of peace and development through shared future is very much different from western conception of development.

Coming to the recent tilt of Dhaka towards Beijing, she cited relevant examples from the past to justify the rocky start of China- Bangladesh relations. However, in the last two decades the relationships have grown closer into a mutually beneficial partnership. The two countries have series of high level visits and agreements. Since 2014, China has surpassed India as the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh. Then the historic visit of President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in 2016 where the two countries signed a very important \$26 billion package for infrastructure and development. Furthermore, China was the first to help Bangladesh in the difficult time of Covid-19 pandemic which has almost affected everybody round the globe in one way or another. This has further cemented the trust between the two countries. The whole relationship seems to be evolving towards a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship as Chinese concept is to prosper via cultural and commercial activities rather than intimidation in hegemonic manner.

Ambassador Hashmi further revealed a comparison between Bangladesh- India relations *vis a vis*. Bangladesh- China relations. It is a fact that the relations with India took a start at a very positive note but it has not been consistent and not had a regular upward trajectory like its relationship with China has been. In this regard, Ambassador Hashmi especially highlighted the passing of the Citizenship Act by India that led to some irritation between the two countries. There is a fear in Bangladesh that this would again open the doors of Bangladesh to a deluge of

Muslim refugees as the country has already stuck with refugees from Rohingya. Bangladesh may not have the physical as well as financial capacity to deal with this situation. On the other hand, China does not want coercive policies in South Asia. It prefers a positive interdependence of economic linkages and people to people contacts of intellectual linkages to extend its influence and grow beneficially together.

Ambassador Hashmi made concluding remarks while emphasizing the steady but increasing relations between China and Bangladesh despite deep Indian concerns. To develop the concept of a shared future for humanity, China has slowly and gradually crafted a niche for itself in this region for development, peace and prosperity. On the other hand, U.S. - India strategic shift is apparent to neutralize the growing Chinese influence in the region. She stressed that it is a challenge for smaller countries of South Asia to watch out the competition of U.S. and China with deep concern to modulate their policies and strategies accordingly.

Professor Shahab Enam Khan (Bangladesh)

Professor Khan holds a Master's degree in International political economy from the University of Manchester. He is teaching in the Department of International Relations at the Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka since September 2004. He has served as advisor, consultant and board member of the various international organizations and also served as a member of various high level committees formed by the Government of Bangladesh. He has been credited for drafting several key political policy documents including the National Broadcast Policy 2014 and the National Counter Terrorism Strategy.

Professor Khan believed South Asia as one of the least integrated regions in the world paradoxically a region with highest concentration of people, wealth and resources which can be tapped in for the collective benefits. While enclosing the most recent Bangladesh- Myanmar case, Prof. Khan mentioned that Bangladesh is now bearing almost 1.1 million refugees as the country had already learnt in 1971 the particular genesis and pain that refugee face. Bangladesh does not want to go for hostility rather the country wants to understand the whole regional gamut of relationship through the prism of prosperity and hence the economy plays the most important role in this regard.

He further added that Bangladesh has quite a large portfolio to manage as China is the largest exporter to Bangladesh currently in terms of Bangladesh's import basket. On the other hand, U.S. is the largest importer from Bangladesh in terms of Bangladesh's export basket. The problem lies in a fact that there is a tussle going on between big powers certainly impacted the international scenario. It is a point where balancing between U.S. and China remains of a paramount or critical importance for Bangladesh according to Professor Khan.

He further added that Chinese engagement in South Asian countries should be treatable if it is equitable as well. Over the past few years, Bangladesh's indicators in terms of gender, infant mortality, hygiene or access to medical care have significantly improved. However, the phenomenon of growth and development should also exist in neighboring countries to go forward in a more flourishing manner.

He further negated the apprehensions circulating in international media regarding Chinese debt trap diplomacy. Despite, he talked about Chinese pragmatism where they jump into business, investment and private sector rather just coming up and increasing debt. So, if it is all about joint venture than obviously the increasing relationship is not a zero-sum game but it has greater prospects for Bangladesh.

In conclusion, Prof. Khan felt that Chinese interest in the region is of paramount importance and vice versa. It is the need of time to let the economy and market make decisions. Chinese believe in shared destiny of mankind while having better equitable international relations that is diametrically opposite to American military industrial complex. This is the main reason why China is becoming much more viable nation economically than most of the other nations. It is also a reality that relations in future would be based on economic benefits rather than strategic and security interests. Last but not the least; he maintained that Bangladesh believes in incorporation while keeping balance with other powers.

Professor LIN Minwang (China)

Professor LIN Minwang is Assistant Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University. His main research areas include International Relations in South Asia and International Relations Theory. His papers published in peer reviewed journals such as World

Economic Politics, Foreign Affairs and in Journal of Contemporary Asia Studies. He has also authored two books including 'Choosing War' and 'The BRI and Geopolitics in South Asia.'

Professor LIN Minwang observed the bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh in the background of changing regional dynamics in South Asia. He divided his speech into two parts.

First, South Asia seems to be gradually forming two opposing camps currently including U.S. - Indian camp and China- Pakistan camp. Bangladesh is just caught between these two emerging divisions. According to Professor Lin, Indian side did not even hesitate to use pandemic as a tool to discredit China. Indian alliance with the United States and the signing of BECA signaled that the Indian side has just used Chinese threats as an excuse. However Prof. Lin hoped that Biden Administration would be soft towards China because of the political values they follow and the relations of Team Biden with Beijing in the past.

Second, Prof. Lin considered BRI initiative as a natural development rather than having deep geopolitical intentions and strategy tool to dominate South Asia as many scholars view. This is just due to the economic realities and market availability in South Asia that Chinese companies rushed to the region. Based on the development experience with ASEAN countries via close integration with the emerging markets; Prof. Lin elaborated that China has developed relations with Bangladesh while turning it into a key destination for BRI projects. This is just because of its economic performance of Bangladesh as the economic growth rate in the last ten years is more than six percent that is highest among the emerging markets.

In conclusion, Prof, Lin wrapped the discussion by enclosing that Chinese enterprises have confidence in Bangladesh. The country was upgraded to strategic partner after the visit of President Xi Jinping in 2016 resulting in the thrust of Chinese investment. Moreover, huge market potential in the South Asian region is the main reason why Chinese companies have been brought in the region.

Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta (Bangladesh)

Dr. Sujit Kumar is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Chittagong University, Bangladesh. Dr. Datta did his PhD from the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University, China. Dr. Datta has authored several

articles and books chapters on different issues in the renowned international and national peer reviewed Journals. Dr. Datta has presented several research papers in international seminars and conferences in China, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Dr. Datta is of the view that Bangladesh has no visible discourse with China in a complex geographical competition in South Asia. Currently, China is a key partner in the development of Bangladesh while securing the main Chinese interests in Bangladesh which involve geostrategic and geopolitical along with enhancing economic ties.

According to Dr. Datta China is taking a significant place in South Asia because of India's big brother attitude towards small states in the region. India would not be able to resolve the crisis in relations if it does not change its attitude. The whole situation will also put a negative impact on the economic situation of the region.

Dr. Datta further emphasized that Bangladesh is transforming from least developed country to middle income country. This is very much related with China's policy to be adopted from government industry and foreign remedies oriented economy to industrialized economy. Since China is moving to super level of industrialization, it needs to send its additional industries and non- technical technology to developing country same as China made its own industrialization with Japan's second hand technology and industry. Dr. Datta felt that the same model also fits for Bangladesh as China has always focused economic aspirations through multilateralism.

Dr. Datta continued the discussion keeping into consideration some relevant examples. According to him, the ongoing Sino- Indian conflict could be referable in the changing regional dynamics and new emerging relations. Bangladesh with its strategic geopolitical location, huge population, markets and manufacturing power could grasp an opportunity from the ongoing Sino- Indian rivalry. Besides, China has stepped in Bangladesh with ongoing commitment at the time of Covid-19 pandemic. In June 2020, China granted duty free access to 97 percent of Bangladeshi exports. On the other hand, in the same month Bangladesh has become hopeless apparently regarding the decade long negotiation with India on the water sharing pact for the Teesta River. As a consequence, Bangladesh has asked China to finance almost 1 billion dollar to water management project. Furthermore, in recent years, National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Rohingya Issue, water sharing dispute and border

killings have broken up tension and anxiety among the masses in Bangladesh where a huge number of populations has already been anti- Indian. China's growing influence on Bangladesh has neutralized much of New Delhi's influence on Dhaka. These developments have put Bangladesh in a bargaining position from India and China. India will try its best to prevent Bangladesh away from Chinese pair of influence. From now onwards, Bangladesh may like to play hardboard with both India and China. This new triangular relation needs to be watched with more concern. Dr. Datta concluded the whole speech on a mathematical note where Bangladesh, China and India's triangular relationship is equal to competition plus cooperation minus confrontations. However, competition plus cooperation between China and India are away from the ground in reality in Bangladesh.

Question/ Answer Session

The detailed presentations were followed by an active question/ Answer session. While addressing the question how the growing political and economic cooperation between China and other South Asian states can change India's behavior towards its neighbors while given the fact that India is also becoming a comprehensive strategic and military partner of the U.S. in its Asia Pacific strategy, Prof. Shahab Enam Khan maintained that Chinese have always understood the necessity for expansion while keeping this region stable. The hardcore reality is that the economy and the purchasing capacity of the regional countries only permit to buy and keep stuck in the lower recipient of Chinese dominated globalization. The countries in the region do not enjoy trade diversification as well as lagging behind protections to create own sustainable economy. This is the reason why Chinese trade is phenomenally large with South Asian countries. The countries need to talk rational and sometimes introspection is also need of the time.

While responding to another question about the U.S. observation to China- Bangladesh warm emerging relationships, Prof. Khan mentioned that Chinese are quite meticulous and culturally hard working nation. They understand that they have to keep their business alive. On the other hand, Americans are also very well aware of the fact that an unstable Bangladesh or destabilized region is not in anybody's benefit. Moreover, Americans also realize that they are unable to invest in these countries to a large extent. Bangladesh has economic development as its priority. So, it seems that Americans have no problem if Chinese intervene in the economic development

of the region. In the end of the day, everybody will get benefit from this development and stability.

While addressing the last question, Is Bangladesh growing ties with China at the expense of its relations with India? Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta maintained that the beauty of Chinese foreign policy is not to interfere in the other's domestic internal affairs. Keeping in view the economic perspective; government of Bangladesh wants to collaborate with China for the mega projects. India is facing its own internal problems and not capable to invest more money in mega projects of Bangladesh. So, Bangladesh has no alternative other than China that is ready to invest.

Conclusion

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Imran Sardar, Research Analyst at IRS stated that Dhaka will continue with its policies to maintain a workable balance in its relations with both China and India. This may not be that easy given the dynamics of power struggle in the region. Growth of Dhaka-Beijing relations would only be possible by reducing the apprehensions of Chinese domination. The future policy orientation of Dhaka could serve as a model for other smaller states to emulate in the turbulent South Asia Region.