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## Perceptions and Misperceptions: An Assessment of Bangladesh - India Relations

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### Introduction

South Asia has experienced varying degrees of cooperation and conflicts throughout its history. The complex and the troubled relations between South Asian countries are shaped largely by the suspicion and mistrust among individual states. Moreover, the misgivings and the differences in perceptions of states in the region emerge out of the longstanding and untackled disputes and the presence of the dominant power, India in the region. Geographical position places India at the centre of the South Asian region. India dominates this region in terms of political and strategic terms and its power overshadows the collective power of all its smaller neighbours. The 'Indo-centric' position has always played a significant role in the region because India shares common land borders with every country in the region.

Relations between India and its neighbours have been shaped largely by India's geographical size and strength, by its desire to limit the regional role of external powers and by its neighbours' corresponding sense of vulnerabilities to Indian dominance and power. India is central to the processes of South Asia's political, strategic, economic and demographic developments.

Bangladesh is not an exception to this scenario. The Indo-centric nature of the region and the Indian power not only causes concern in Bangladesh, but also increases its insecurity. Bangladesh's relations with India have witnessed various ups and downs and there exist numerous unresolved issues which have troubled Bangladesh-India relations. Certain vital elements such as geographical proximity, economic strength, military superiority, cultural domination, inter-dependence, etc. increases India's sphere of influence

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in Bangladesh. Moreover, the position of India as an upper riparian state and India's initiatives in dealing with most of the Bangladeshi water resources adds to India's 'enemy' image in Bangladesh. Though the positive role played by India in its relations with Bangladesh is largely acknowledged in that country, the changing dynamics of political leadership and the differences in their foreign and security policies, military rule and the coercive political culture have adversely affected Bangladesh's relations with India. Bangladesh, on its part, has initiated efforts to minimize India's influence and also formulated policies to cope with the India's overwhelming presence and power in a way that would not result in direct Indian intervention in Bangladeshi domestic affairs. While the majority of initiatives taken by Bangladesh and India have reduced suspicions and mistrust in Bangladesh-India relations to a considerable level, the presence and activities of militant groups and the rise of extremists who try to undermine the liberal democratic system troubled Bangladesh's relations with India. An analysis of Bangladesh-India relations thus reveals that the relations between both the states are conditioned by the perception of their respective national interests and aspirations. It is in this context

that this paper examines the convergences and divergences in mutual perceptions of Bangladesh and India towards each other, through an analysis of the contemporary bilateral relations.

### **The Nature of Perceptions**

There are differences over the perceptions as far as Bangladesh and India are concerned. The Bangladeshi perception of India as an enemy or threat emerges out of its concern regarding India as the major factor behind each and everything that troubles Bangladesh. Being the dominant power in the region, the regional security and foreign policy initiatives taken by India are viewed with suspicion in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's relations with India, therefore, largely influence the coercive elements of India's dominance in the region. In order to balance India's dominance, Bangladesh initiates efforts to seek external intervention which, in turn, create security concerns in India. The existence of longstanding and contested disputes in bilateral relations influences Bangladesh-India relations and also increases mutual threat perceptions towards each other.

### **Bangladesh-India Relations**

India and Bangladesh maintain an

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extensive and wide-range of relations covering a number of areas of mutual interest. Relations between both the states are complex, sensitive and multi-dimensional in nature. The long-lasting linguistic, cultural and religious similarities between the people of Bangladesh and India transcend their respective national identities. Mutual relations are also shaped largely by geopolitics, history, culture, economic factors, etc. These variables do not in any way allow Bangladesh-India relations to move close towards each other while on the other hand, the realities of Bangladesh's geo-political position and security do not allow bilateral relations to be pushed too far.<sup>1</sup> As far as Indo-Bangladesh relations are concerned, both states have common ethno-linguistic origins and are inheritors to one of the greatest ancient civilizations. They also lived over a long historical period within the same political entity till India's partition in 1947. Moreover, India occupied a prominent position in the process of transforming the province of East Bengal within Pakistan into the sovereign state of Bangladesh. India was also the first country to recognize the newly-independent state of Bangladesh. The 'India factor' thus has always had significance in Bangladeshi politics.

The basis of troubled relations

between Bangladesh and India lie in the complex conditions that emerged out of the creation of Bangladesh and the developments that followed thereafter. India played a significant role in the liberation war of Bangladesh. While the decisive role played by India in the Bangladeshi independence war was acclaimed by most Bangladeshis, another section of Bangladeshi people, who were not in favour of India's role and strategic support, suspected and feared that Bangladesh would become a client state of India, depending on it for internal and external security for a long time.<sup>2</sup> The friendly relations during the initial years did not last long and was replaced by strained and uneasy relations. It was further worsened by numerous issues which include: legacies of partition, such as contested water resources and border issues, economic and trade imbalances, persistent communal violence and anti-India propaganda in Bangladesh, illegal infiltration and large scale migration, Chakma refugee problem, transit and transshipment issues, territorial issues like the construction of the Farakka barrage by India, the Tin Bigha corridor and Purbasha island issue and the problem of adversely-held enclaves.<sup>3,4</sup> The economic crisis after Bangladesh's independence and the resultant unstable political situations that followed made it difficult for

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Bangladesh to maintain effective relations with India.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent developments after Bangladesh's independence, the assassination of its founding father, Mujibur Rahman, the military coups, martial laws, armed border clashes and other bilateral issues have affected the Bangladesh-India relations adversely.

Strategic thinking in Bangladesh has identified different phases in Bangladesh-India relations, which include: 'a pro-India phase up to 1975, including the years when it was East Pakistan; an anti-India phase post-1975, mostly the military rule, up to the end of Cold War or 1988; and an emerging cooperative phase vis-à-vis India in the post-Cold War era or the 1990s'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the last few years, especially Sheikh Hasina's tenure as Bangladeshi Prime Minister, show a positive trend in bilateral relations.

Considering friendship with India as a corner stone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh, the founding father of Bangladesh *Banghabandu* (friend of Bengal), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman adopted a secular, democratic and socialist policy of nation-building. The independent state of Bangladesh was also founded on the ideals of 'nationalism', 'secularism', 'socialism' and 'democracy'

commonly known as Mujibbad or Mujibism.<sup>7</sup> The similarities in the foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh and India, perceptions concerning common needs, aims and objectives, the recognition of India's crucial role in Bangladesh's liberation war, Bangladesh's dependence on India for ensuring strategic and economic needs and the mutual understanding among the leaders of both the countries enabled cordial and cooperative relations between Bangladesh and India.<sup>8</sup> However, the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975 not only ended the golden era of Bangladesh-India relations, but also dismissed India's hopes of restoring friendship with Bangladesh and the hope that Bangladesh would remain democratic.<sup>9</sup>

Relations between Bangladesh and India deteriorated after the Mujib era (1971-75). The anti-India phase (1975-90) was dominated by the military rule in Bangladesh. Divergence of interests in Bangladesh-India relations was also visible throughout this period. This period in Bangladeshi politics was characterized by policies formulated by military rulers which largely reflected the military regimes that had ruled East Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Several areas of confrontation between Bangladesh and India emerged and the Indian perception towards

Bangladesh also changed during this period. The change in perception forced India to consider harder lines with Bangladesh. The successive military regimes post-1975 distanced Bangladesh from its traditional allies, India and the Soviet Union and developed friendly relations with countries who had not been friends before. The lack of trust in Bangladesh-India relations also changed mutual perceptions towards each other. Moreover, the presence of outside powers substantially affected the geographical and strategic asymmetry and the influential role of external powers in the region troubled India.

A new trend in India's neighbourhood diplomacy and the change in the political leadership in the 1990s, however, led to a marked reduction in tensions in India's relations with Bangladesh. High-level visits between the leaders and senior officials of both Bangladesh and India led to a definite improvement in mutual relations. Bilateral relations showed a progressive shift towards improvement with the accession of Sheikh Hasina, daughter of slain Awami Leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. There was also change in the mutual perceptions about each other and this, in turn, restored

mutual cooperation. Bilateral relations also improved and both states initiated efforts to resolve decades old disputes. The second tenure of Sheikh Hasina as Bangladeshi Prime Minister in 2009 offers more promises and also rises to the challenge of restoring the lost warmth in Bangladesh-India relations.

### **Bangladeshi Perceptions of India**

Though Bangladesh is not a weak state in an absolute sense, however, it is far weaker than India when compared to India in terms of population, territory, military strength, social, cultural and political structures. Bangladesh is also weak with fragile institutions and less economic power and this relative disparity is what is important in the context of Bangladesh-India relations. Bangladesh perceives a wide range of security dilemmas vis-à-vis India. This emerges especially due to the territorial size of Bangladesh and also due to the overwhelming presence of India on its three sides. As Wolfram F. Hanrieder says, 'security and power are closely related: more power, more security; less power, less security'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Bangladesh, being a less powerful state as compared to India, considers itself more vulnerable to

threats from India. A typical moderate Bangladeshi perception about India can be summed up in the former Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, Mohammed Shamsul Haq's words:

*Smaller than China, India is the second biggest country of the world in population, ranking tenth in engineering and technological development. It has the world's fourth largest army, sixth largest navy and eighth largest air force. The six South Asian neighbours of India together add up to a third of India's size and are vastly outstripped by her in resources, economic, scientific and technological development. This asymmetry is characteristic of South Asia, and India stands out pre-eminent in every respect.*<sup>12</sup>

Mutual relations between Bangladesh and India reveal several controversial issues which have proved to be extremely difficult to resolve and have exacerbated Bangladesh's threat perceptions vis-à-vis India. The Bangladeshi dilemma of security threats from India is acknowledged by Bateman when he says, 'Bangladesh cannot gain more in national security than India is willing to accept as a threat'.<sup>13</sup> The Bangladeshi perception of threats to its security from India is influenced by various issues and it

can be divided mainly into geopolitical, economic, military and political threats which cannot be easily weighed off against each other. Bangladesh also recognizes that the nature of threats is in a state of constant evolution.<sup>14</sup> This fact is acknowledged by Buzan when he says, 'these threats define its insecurity and set the agenda for national security as a policy problem'.<sup>15</sup> Bangladesh is also concerned about the hegemony and domination of India in the region. Though India helped Bangladesh gain independence, India's claims that it was motivated solely by humanitarian considerations were viewed subsequently with suspicion in Bangladesh. It can be surmised that India was motivated by the strategic interest of dividing its arch enemy, Pakistan, and proving the two-nation theory wrong.

India's hegemonic role and its influence upon smaller South Asian states are reflected in the Indian strategist, K. Subrahmanyam's words: 'India with its population, size, resources and industrial output will be a dominant country in the region, just as the U.S., Soviet Union, and China happen to be in their respective areas'.<sup>16</sup> The 'India factor', therefore, is of vital significance in Bangladesh's foreign and economic policies. India's historical and

geographical proximity greatly influences the conduct of Bangladesh's foreign policy decision making. Further, the 'big brother' attitude of India aroused a deep, though dormant, psychological fear among the Bangladeshis.<sup>17</sup>

### **The emergence of strains**

Relations between Bangladesh and India began to show signs of stress and strains as early as 1972; the difference emerged mainly due to India's insensitivity to realize the sensitivities and psychology of a people who had just emerged from a long history of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation.<sup>18</sup> The presence of the Indian army; the posture of the Indian bureaucrats who reminded Bangladeshis of the high-handed attitudes of the West Pakistani bureaucrats; visits by a large number of intellectuals from West Bengal who had migrated from East Bengal in 1947; the self glorification of those Bengalis who had crossed the border during the liberation war; large-scale smuggling by the interested sections of both the countries; the subservient attitude of the Awami League leaders of Bangladesh and the alleged removal across the border of abandoned Pakistani arms and ammunitions by the Indian army - all aroused Bangladesh's suspicion.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, before the Indian Army

was withdrawn from Bangladesh after the India-Pakistan war of 1971, they took away the vast amounts of arms and ammunitions that remained in Bangladesh after the defeat of the Pakistani forces.<sup>20</sup> This left the Bangladeshi army nearly unarmed and vulnerable in dealing with internal threats and the various armed attacks of miscreants that the war had created. The Bangladeshis felt that if India had any regard for safeguarding their independence, it would not have left Bangladesh in such a weak position, with a nearly unarmed army. This, in turn, heightened Bangladeshi negative perceptions about India. Hence, the challenge for Bangladesh was not only to avoid becoming hostage to India's policies and interests, but also to fashion its own policies and emphasize more on safeguarding its own national interests.

Bangladesh remains extremely vulnerable due to the flow of small arms and drugs to its territory which, in turn, threatens the domestic situation in Bangladesh. The extent of these problems became the most disturbing factor in Bangladesh-India relations especially when the border and the north-eastern regions of India were used as suitable transit points. The geopolitical situation and the sub-systemic framework of South Asia also caused concern in

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Bangladesh. The growing concern regarding India and the innate fear of India swallowing up Bangladesh forced Bangladesh to consider India as the biggest threat to its national security. On the whole, the limitations of Bangladesh to reduce India's influence, together with the internal political crisis and anti-Indian rhetoric in Bangladesh, not only constrained cooperation in Bangladesh-India relations, but also increased Bangladesh's threat perceptions.

Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India have not been smooth. Some of the contested issues in Bangladesh-India relations remain and continue to create strains in bilateral relations. While Bangladesh has never made any formal statement identifying India as its enemy or potential threat, its military and security policies have clearly exhibited a shift. The growing suspicion and the fear of Indian supremacy in the region led Bangladesh to seek regional and extra-regional linkages.<sup>21</sup> Developing friendly relations with external powers, the Islamic world and the West was considered as a substitute by Bangladesh and the change in foreign and security policies helped Bangladesh to move close towards China, Pakistan, United States and other Islamic countries.

External powers like China not only extended substantial support for Bangladesh to safeguard its national independence, but also offered support in the issue of the sharing of Ganges water. China and Pakistan identified the geographical configuration of Bangladesh as an ideal base for their proxy wars and other destabilization activities against India and made use of Bangladesh's differences with India in order to advance their interests in the region. These external relations substantially helped Bangladesh to improve its position and also reduced its dependence on India. Bangladesh has also acquired weapons from China that are offensive in character, aimed at meeting external threats, especially from India.<sup>22</sup> Bangladesh also established contacts with other members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The membership in OIC consolidated Bangladesh's position in the Muslim world. Moreover, to reduce the threat perceptions from India, by managing potential conflict issues and in the context of evolving international realities, Bangladesh proposed the setting up of a governing regime for South Asia and it eventually led to the formation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The external support and institutional mechanisms has thus helped

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Bangladesh to check the growing Indian influence in the region to a considerable level.

Apart from all these differences, a new trend in India's neighbourhood diplomacy and the change in the political leadership in both the countries in the 1990s promised a marked reduction in tensions in Bangladesh-India relations. Bilateral relations also showed a progressive shift towards improvement with the election of Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The forward-looking policy adopted by Sheikh Hasina during her second tenure as the Bangladeshi Prime Minister in 2009 provides an opportunity for improving relations with India. The change in leadership in Bangladeshi politics also changed Bangladeshi perceptions about India and bilateral relations improved considerably after the 2008 general elections which restored parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh after a two-year long military-backed interim. Though the several bilateral disputes remain unresolved, the new government initiated efforts to address some of these longstanding issues and also considered restoring the lost warmth in bilateral relations. As a positive gesture towards change in Bangladeshi perception and backing India on its security concerns,

Bangladesh handed over the chief ULFA leader to India. Bangladesh also agreed to India's demand for land transit and signed an agreement on a US\$1 billion soft loan for infrastructure development.<sup>23</sup> Both countries also discussed issues related to regional connectivity, trade and transit through each other's borders, use of seaports, upgradation of rail and transport routes, sharing of common water resources, etc. As far as domestic politics is concerned, Bangladesh has initiated measures to handle religious extremists and militants and made changes in judicial process and put on trial the war criminals of 1971. The restoration of 'secularism' as a state principle in the constitution may also be considered as a landmark development in Bangladeshi politics.

As far as Bangladesh-India relations are concerned, both states also signed bilateral trade agreements in order to strengthen trade and investment. In order to increase bilateral investment flow, Bangladesh and India also signed a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPA) in 2009, which seeks to promote and protect investments from either country in the territory of the other. The signing of this agreement cemented the 'most favoured nation' provision in Bangladesh-India trade relations.<sup>24</sup>

Bilateral relations have thus witnessed a paradigm shift and the Bangladeshi initiatives substantiate the change in perception and the direction towards a better Bangladesh-India relations which it had failed to make significant progress during the earlier period.

### **Indian Perceptions of Bangladesh**

India is the dominant power in South Asia. While India forms the core of the region, its smaller neighbouring countries form the periphery. Being the status-quoist State in the region, India faces no significant threats to its security from its smaller neighbours. However, the unequal distribution of power in the region and the high levels of insecurity in inter-state and intra-state relations not only troubled the region with diverse kinds of conflicts and problems, but also increase the perception of security threats towards each other. The dimensions, magnitude and depth of such conflicts have had an adverse effect on the quality of governance, development and bilateral relations between the States in this region.

In India's foreign policy spectrum, the Pakistan factor has been of huge importance in determining its relations with its other neighbouring

states. Until the creation of Bangladesh, the South Asian defence policy of India was formulated on the basis of the possibility of a two-front war against both the wings of Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> However, after Bangladesh's independence, the area of Pakistan to be defended against became more compact and India's need to conduct a two-front war (in case of another war with Pakistan) was also eliminated. The relations between India and Bangladesh have not received adequate attention from the Indian foreign policy managers. The relationship between the two countries thus reveal the big-country/small-country syndrome, which has often been at the core of much of the tension that existed between Bangladesh and India.<sup>26</sup>

Foreign policy decision making in India involves certain elements that are common in its relations with other neighbouring countries in South Asia. Maintaining cordial relations with its immediate neighbours remain a complex challenge for India because of several unresolved issues. India has also faced difficulty in sustaining stable relations with Bangladesh because of a number of issues. Though the relations between Bangladesh and India are not as bad as the longstanding confrontational issues which have characterized the relations between India and

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Pakistan, several outstanding issues have strained Bangladesh–India bilateral relations. India and Bangladesh have conflicts over unsettled borders; this ranges from illegal migration, smuggling, drug and human trafficking, free movement of insurgents, terrorists and criminals. Disputes related to boundary have caused a multitude of problems and intermittent clashes and exchange of fire between the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Border Security Forces (BSF) causing concern in India. Moreover, the attacks (for instance in 2001) by Bangladeshi forces against Indian troops, which have resulted in the killing of Indian jawans and civilians along the Assam–Mehalaya–Bangladesh border, increased India’s threat perception. The presence and growing menace of extremism and Islamic fundamentalism, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups and the use of Bangladeshi territory by the insurgents and terrorists against India has always been an area of concern for India. The alarming rise in the smuggling of arms to insurgents in India’s north-eastern region, influence of political parties and organizations of radical Islamic and fundamentalist forces backed by militant and Jihadi groups have all caused bitterness towards Bangladesh in India. The threats

posed by Bangladesh towards India thus prove to be more vicious and insidious.<sup>27</sup> Above all, the Bangladeshi initiatives to seek external assistance through extra-regional balancing became instrumental in increasing India’s perception of security threats from Bangladesh. The presence of outside powers in India’s geo-political backyard and the influential role of China and Pakistan increased India’s threat perceptions. India believes that Bangladesh intentionally perceives India as a security threat and adopts anti-India position with an objective to resort its ties with external powers like China, Pakistan, the US and other Islamic countries.<sup>28</sup>

Though the motivations of Indian support for Bangladeshi struggle were many, India’s contribution in supporting Bangladesh, particularly its military intervention, initiated friendly relations between the two countries. The cordial relations between Bangladesh and India also resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace between Bangladesh and India on March 9, 1972. The role played by India in Bangladesh’s independence war was primarily politico-strategic. India was determined to change the political and strategic interests of the region in its favour and wanted Bangladesh and other smaller states

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to accept India's supremacy in the region.<sup>29</sup>

A significant improvement in the bilateral relations has come about in the past few years due to the high power initiative pursued by India in handling strategic issues with Bangladesh. The new policy options adopted by India revealed India's intention to achieve larger goal of regional leadership.<sup>30</sup> This was also reflected in former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral's words, when he stated: 'India's future depends on what its neighbours think of it. If India's energies are wasted in fights with neighbours, India will never become a world power'.<sup>31</sup> India's role in supporting regionalism and the emerging cooperative phase in Bangladesh-India relations also witnessed two important developments, facilitated by India's 'Gujral Doctrine'.<sup>32</sup> The first was the thirty-year water sharing agreement for the Ganges signed on 12 December 1996 between Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and H.D. Deve Gowda of India.<sup>33</sup> The agreement offered a new formula for the sharing of Ganges waters in the dry season at Farakka. The second was the peace accord with the tribal people of Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>34</sup> The accord, signed in December 1997, sanctioned the complete return of Chakma

refugees from India to Bangladesh.<sup>35</sup>

Time and again, India has reiterated its stand that it is vitally interested in the security and stability of smaller countries. As far as India's relations with Bangladesh are concerned, India expressed deep concern about the threat posed to its security by Pakistan's external intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), operating in conjunction with the fundamentalist elements in Bangladesh in carrying out anti-India activities.<sup>36</sup> India was also concerned about the frequent border fights, illegal migration and insurgencies, the presence of terrorist training camps and the role of Islamic religious schools (Madrasas) in Bangladesh encouraging extremism and supporting Al-Qaeda activities. India believes that the major terrorist attacks in India are planned and actively aided by militant networks operating from within Bangladesh and described Bangladesh as a launching pad for terrorists into India. Indian insurgent groups continue to enjoy safe heavens in Bangladesh and this has heightened the India's negative perception about Bangladesh. Though these issues increased India's perceptions, the initiatives taken by Sheikh Hasina's government in the recent years to contain the use of Bangladeshi

territory by Indian separatists and militants have acted as a catalyst in reducing this perception. The new initiatives and control steps pursued by Bangladesh and the forward-looking policy to open up relations with India taken by Dhaka to fulfill its commitment towards India also found an echo in Bangladesh-India relations which, in turn, reduced the Indian perceptions of threat from Bangladesh substantially.

### **The Way Forward**

Bangladesh is vulnerable to internal and external threats to its security and the Bangladeshi perceptions of threats from India can be avoided if the internal stability of Bangladesh is achieved. Though there exists instability in Bangladesh-India relations, the second tenure of Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina in 2009 promises a change and a new trend in Bangladesh's relations with India. The change in leadership in Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina's goodwill gestures towards improving ties with India will certainly add momentum to more balanced and better Bangladesh-India relations. Though it was during Sheikh Hasina's first tenure as Bangladeshi Prime Minister that the historic thirty-year accord regarding the sharing of water resources was signed on 14

December 1996, her second term offers more promises and can be expected to rise above the challenges in Bangladesh-India relations. While the 1996 accord largely reduced tensions in Bangladesh-India relations and also recalled the cordial relations between both the states after Bangladeshi independence, the visit by Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi in January 2010 and the decisions taken by both the governments will ensure the return of lost warmth in bilateral relations.

Bangladesh and India are not just two neighbours with different perceptions, but are also significant members of various regional and international organizations. Bangladesh, on its part, initiated efforts to minimize India's influence and also formulated policies to cope with India's overwhelming presence and power in a way that would not result in direct Indian intervention in Bangladeshi domestic affairs. All these show a change in Bangladeshi perceptions and their political will to find a solution towards broadening ties with a next-door regional power. Considering the significance of India on its border, Bangladesh has to adopt credible and positive approach in developing friendly relations with India. Moreover, Bangladesh has to consider India more as an opportunity and a challenge than as

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a potential threat. It would also be better for regional peace if both states view each other as friends rather than adversaries.

The new government led by the Awami League in Bangladesh, its pro-India position and changing perceptions towards India seem to be moving relations towards the directions of the earlier 'golden era' (Mujib era) in Bangladesh-India relations. Bangladeshi initiatives to fulfill its commitments to India and the substantial improvement in trade and economic relations mark a significant step towards progress in mutual ties. The Bangladeshi support for India's candidature in the reformed United Nations Security Council also shows a decisive move towards this direction. Bangladesh's willingness to permit the use of Chittagong and Mongla seaports for the land locked Indian north-east also substantiates positive developments in Bangladeshi perception vis-à-vis India. Though the change in perception that is growing in Bangladesh is that it has given in to Indian demands without reciprocal gestures, the major initiatives and policies taken by both the governments promise a brighter future in Bangladesh-India economic cooperation. The change in mutual perceptions and the more conducive environment in

improving Bangladesh-India relations overshadow the differences in bilateral relations and this need to be sustained. Above all, there is the need for an effective foreign policy based largely on a democratic and accountable system of government and effective management to achieve the long term objective for a dynamic and cordial Bangladesh-India partnership. Being the dominant power in the region, India should also take effective measures to develop political, economic and social cooperation with Bangladesh in order to facilitate improved bilateral relations between both the states.

### **Conclusion**

Talukdar Maniruzzaman, Bangladesh's political analyst, regards Bangladesh's links with India as essentially Bangladesh's 'struggle for survival as an independent state'.<sup>37</sup> More than four decades after its independence, Bangladesh's relations with India have not taken a concrete form due to some unresolved disputes between these states. Relations between both the states witnessed various ups and downs and the differences over a number of issues have made them distant neighbours. The divergences in security perceptions and the policies adopted by India are seen as

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a security threat by the Bangladeshis. The asymmetry in size and the differences in power capabilities made it convenient for the Bangladeshis to cultivate such threat perceptions. The Friendship Treaty of 1972 also added to this perception because it did not preclude the possibility of Indian armed intervention in the country's internal affairs. India's big brother attitude, the Indira Doctrine and India's attempts to establish hegemony in the region also added to Bangladesh's feeling of insecurity.

While domestic politics have always influenced foreign policies of countries around the world, what is interesting in Bangladesh-India relations is the extent of influence of the Bangladeshi political leadership in shaping its policy towards India. Foreign policy instead of being an instrument for furthering national objectives has become a device in enhancing sectional and group interests in domestic politics in Bangladesh. Thus, often during elections in Bangladesh, the India threat factor is raised in order to gain electoral points. Each party accuses the other of being pro-India. The fear of being labelled as 'pro-India' has prevented many Bangladeshi leaders taking positive steps towards improving relations with India. The powerful Bangladeshi military has

also had a role in cultivating the threat perception about India. The more India is perceived as a threat, the more importance the military enjoys and opportunities of spending enhanced budget on defence.

There continues to be considerable bitterness between Bangladesh and India regarding numerous disputes and these also have undergone a complex process marked by differences in Bangladesh-India relations. But the failure on the part of both the states to resolve these issues has contributed in growing threat perceptions about each other. Neither the cordial relations of the Mujib era nor the post-1975 period of suspicion and mistrust could survive as a permanent feature in the relations between these states. Successive governments and the foreign policy elites of both the countries have at various times initiated measures to settle the disputes that have prevailed since the creation of Bangladesh, but have not succeeded completely.

Though Bangladesh seemingly perceived threats from India, it is necessary to examine certain factors from Indian point of view. India has never militarily or economically threatened Bangladesh, though the north-eastern border states in India faced serious transgression and

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infiltration by Bangladesh militants and anti-Indian insurgent groups. The border regions of India and Bangladesh are guarded by paramilitary BSF and not by the Indian Army.

Bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh have undergone a vast change—from being friends; the countries have become suspicious of each other and become hostile neighbours; and again become friends. The unresolved disputes and the domestic politics between and within both the countries have contributed significantly to this state of relations. Bangladesh continues to perceive a threat to its security and independence from India though this perception of threat is not as intense as it once was. However, contemporary bilateral relations have improved considerably and also show a progressive shift from the earlier approaches of the two states. The regular bilateral talks and high level visits underscore the importance attached by the leadership of both countries towards maintaining friendly ties.

To conclude, the 'Indo-centric' nature of South Asia is a reality and the 'India-factor' is a fact that India can neither avoid nor its smaller neighbours overlook. Therefore, India and Bangladesh have no option

but to move towards improving their relations as both countries should realize that while friends can be changed, neighbours cannot. India and Bangladesh must take initiatives to bring back the lost warmth in their relations and learn to live with each other. In order to reinstate mutual cooperation, both states have to develop adequate institutional mechanisms and normative frameworks for resolving major security challenges. More trade will bring more interdependence and there is a need for more trade as far as economic interactions between Bangladesh and India are concerned. Moreover, a broader regional security strategy or a sub-regional security framework between the bordering states of both Bangladesh and India is also necessary in improving mutual relations. Though the recent development in bilateral relations forms only the foundation of the beginning of the new trend in Bangladesh–India relations, both states have a long way to go. The need of the hour also necessitates a sense of belonging and the security cooperation can prevail only when both Bangladeshis and Indians feel that they all are South Asians.

The political leadership in both countries needs to display maturity in dealing with each other. State visits by both countries must be

institutionalized, trade must be promoted so that there is interdependence and there should be more consultations in the diplomatic level, particularly at WTO, NAM, so that common positions on international issues can be formulated. All these steps will create relations which are forward-looking, transcending domestic politics in both countries. ■

### Endnotes

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