

Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Signs of Change

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Relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan have a complicated history. The relationship is overshadowed by the tragic events of 1971, which led to the intervention from the Indian side and the formation of Bangladesh as a separate state. There is also a palpable India-factor that defines relations between them like relationship between all the other states in South Asia. And the fact that both these Muslim majority states are part of the Muslim *ummah* also sometimes tends to come in as a factor determining bilateral relations.

Other factors have also influenced Bangladesh-Pakistan relations. The legacy of Pakistan continues to haunt Bangladeshi society and polity even to this date and even after seceding from Pakistan in 1971, those who believed in the ideology of Pakistan have struggled to keep alive the conviction that all Muslims in the subcontinent belonged to a separate nation, distinct from the Hindus and need to come under a single administrative unit. The domestic political scenario in Bangladesh which has given increasing legitimacy to the pro-Pakistan section among the people in Bangladesh in recent years thus affects the nature of bilateral relations. Extra-regional imperatives have also played upon Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, marked by super-power rivalry, nuclear weapons capability and the events of September 11, 2001.

The focal point in the post-1971 history of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations is the critical event of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975, rather than the formal recognition of Bangladesh accorded by Pakistan in 1974. Some scholars interpret the sharp changes in bilateral relations generally in terms of the notion of regime compatibility. Others argue that it is actually the compatibility of individual leaders, rather than of "regimes" or "states", which is of greater influence. Added to this is 'fear of Indian domination' that the leaders of the two countries are often tempted to play upon in their domestic polities. In Bangladesh, this has enabled politico-religious forces with Islamic orientation to come to the fore, particularly under the regimes of General Zia-ur Rahman, General Ershad and the current Premier, Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of General Zia. Religious extremism has different connotations in different parts of South Asia in the wake of the post 9/11 'global war against terror', which has also added yet another new dimension to relations between the two Islamic countries of South Asia.

Militant Islamic groups in Bangladesh, find reassurance from a widely held perception among South Asian Muslims that Pakistan has the capability of withstanding India's pressures. They believe that this adds to their room for manoeuvre. Pakistan on its part encourages Islamist groups in its former eastern wing as a diversionary tactic. Two major problems, however, have delayed growth in relations between the countries even after Pakistan extended recognition to Bangladesh in 1974—the division of assets and liabilities and the repatriation of Bihari Muslims

stranded in Bangladesh to Pakistan. The close links that Bangladeshi policy-makers maintained with New Delhi (going back to the pre-independence period) was also a restraining influence on politico-military cooperation between the two states.

It was only after the coup and assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in August 1975 that Pakistan-Bangladesh relations began to develop. Pakistan extended recognition to the new regime within hours of its installation and, as a gesture of goodwill, Islamabad dispatched 50,000 tonnes of rice and 15 million yards of cloth to Bangladesh. It is evident that personal prejudices had considerable bearing upon Bangladesh-Pakistan relations. Comparing the particular goals of powerful individuals and factions in Pakistan and Bangladesh is useful for the examination of relations between Dhaka and Islamabad.

In the case of Bangladesh, dissatisfaction with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's "ineffective, autocratic and pro-Indian regime" provided considerable political leverage for his opponents, particularly the armed forces who hitherto had been denied an influential role in the polity. General Zia-ur Rahman, his successor, adopted a more independent stance towards India. In defining Bangladeshi national identity and unity, he promoted a combination of Bangladeshi nationalism and Islamic consciousness. This was well suited to an acceptance of the then Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's enthusiastic offers for rapprochement because, for Pakistan, the creation of Bangladesh had meant not only an overwhelming defeat at the hands of India but also represented the greatest ideological challenge to the basis for Pakistan's own secession from India. Bhutto also had to play down his own part in the 1971 defeat, and always took the politically expedient course of blaming India for the dismemberment of Pakistan.

General Zia-ur Rahman strengthened his tenuous position domestically and in the South Asian context by exploiting Indo-Pakistani differences, although these differences were not as sharp in the late 1970s, as they were earlier or became later. The Pakistani government also was given to interpreting regional events in terms of its preoccupation with India. Zia's moves were viewed favourably in Islamabad who saw his policy as an attempt to move away from India, so that the balance of power in South Asia was not overwhelmingly in favour of New Delhi. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh played upon the fear of Indian domination in their domestic politics, which facilitated the rapprochement between them. The 1971 war had induced Bhutto towards a foreign policy, which professed "friendship with all" but attempted to establish closer links with influential Islamic states. Zia-ur Rahman also took Bangladesh's foreign policy away from the alignment with India favoured by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. This further reinforced the change from antagonism to cordiality in Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan.

During the 1980s, extra-regional imperatives influenced Dhaka-Islamabad ties, with both countries seeking support from the United States in an effort to offset the Soviet-Indian alliance. Additional factors were the establishment of SAARC in 1985, Indo-Pakistani friction fuelled by the Afghan *jehad* and the growing nuclear threat in South Asia. From one perspective, Pakistan and Bangladesh were drawn closer together by their mutual fear of Soviet-Indian intentions. From another, both became more interested in improving extra-regional links, opportunities for which were stimulated by Soviet activity in Afghanistan. Bangladesh also began to play a much more influential role in SAARC, and its regional and international stature improved considerably, prompted by its election in 1978 for a two-year term in the UN Security Council

and its instrumental role in the creation of SAARC. As Bangladesh gained in experience and independence in the second half of the 1980s, Pakistan adopted an attitude of “cool cautiousness”.

Bangladesh under General Ershad also placed great emphasis on the Islamic fraternity (declaring Islam to be the state religion), and the 14th Islamic Conference (OIC) of Foreign Ministers in December 1983 held in Dhaka capped a year in which Bangladesh-Pakistan relations were considerably strengthened. Bestowed with the honour of hosting the conference, Bangladesh won the confidence of other OIC members. Ershad emphasised Bangladesh’s flourishing Islamic heritage and determination to “step up efforts” to promote “greater unity and solidarity” among the Islamic *ummah*.

Meanwhile, with the death of General Zia-ul-Haq in an air-crash, democracy was allowed yet another run in Pakistan and Benazir Bhutto was elected as Prime Minister in 1988. Her government’s Bangladesh policy was circumscribed by her domestic compulsions, not the least by the Pakistan Army. Pakistan was also in the midst of communal tensions and secessionist movements began to surface in the ethnically diverse province of Sindh. The alliance between the Mohajir Quami Mahaz (MQM) and Benazir’s PPP began to breakdown when the MQM pushed for the repatriation of Biharis stranded in Bangladesh, something that the sons-of-the-soil in Sindh strongly opposed. In her visit to Dhaka in October 1989, Bhutto is believed to have requested the Bangladeshi leadership to resettle them permanently in Bangladesh itself, but with financial assistance from Pakistan and other Islamic countries. There was little personal rapport between General Ershad and Benazir Bhutto, and Pakistan tended to remain regionally aloof, preferring to court more powerful external allies and exercise the nuclear option, rather than focusing on cultivating South Asian neighbours for (moral and political) support in its power game against India.

However, bilateral relations between the two democratically elected governments of Sheikh Hasina and Nawaz Sharif were cordial between the early and mid-1990s. Special emphasis was laid on regional cooperation within the SAARC framework. Nawaz Sharif visited Dhaka on 7 March 1999 where Sheikh Hasina confronted him with the demand of settling the issue of repatriation, saying, “We cannot go on supporting them indefinitely”. The stranded Pakistanis, as the Bihari Muslims were described by the Nawaz Sharif regime, were to be repatriated from Bangladesh as soon as the funds were available, but this was also not to be.

During her tenure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina initiated the first-ever three-nation business summit held on 15 January 1998, holding out hopes for a new chapter in economic cooperation between Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The summit was significant in that it proved that the historical mistrust between these countries could be overcome by political will, at least in commercial matters. However, it was not long before another dramatic change occurred. In October 1999, Nawaz Sharif’s government was overthrown by Pakistani generals, and relations between the two countries reached the lowest level for several decades. Sheikh Hasina strongly denounced the deposition of the elected government in Pakistan, making her displeasure evident by working for the expulsion of Pakistan from various international *fora*. In her address to the UN General Assembly in September 2000, the Bangladesh Premier called for action against those regimes that overthrew democratically elected governments, although Pakistan was not

mentioned by name. She also called for the trial of Pakistanis allegedly involved in war crimes in Bangladesh in the 1971 Independence War.

Following her comments, Musharraf responded by saying, “Bangladesh should forget the past and move forward.” He also noted that when they were sitting on one table during a function at the UN “she was hostile, but I was polite”. Thus, he failed to turn up at a scheduled meeting and apparently sought to have it rescheduled. This acrimonious behaviour was aptly summed up by a Pakistani commentator; “Musharraf went abroad hoping to build international goodwill, but he came back slighting one of the most important members of the South Asian alliance. Instead of gaining friends, he lost one”. Thereafter, the government of Sheikh Hasina actively used its powers for the expulsion of Pakistan from the Commonwealth, with the Prime Minister lamenting; “Unfortunately SAARC would not be able to emulate the Commonwealth as there is no such provision in the charter for such an act of suspension”. Thus, relations between Dhaka and Islamabad, from the mid-1990s, deteriorated on account of the inter-personal animosity between the leaders of the two countries as well as “regime incompatibility”.

After Khaleda Zia’s BNP (Bangladesh National Party) led alliance won the election in October 2001, however, the situation changed again. The BNP’s alliance with the *Jama’at-i-Islami*, (the party which had actively opposed independence from Pakistan), the latter now has a voice in the government for the first time. General Musharraf was invited to visit Bangladesh by the new leadership, a clear signal that closer ties between the two Islamic nations in South Asia were on the cards.

However, an influential section of Bangladesh’s freedom fighters gave a call to “resist” General Musharraf’s visit. Secular parties even asked Begum Zia to withdraw the invitation for fear that it would boost the pro-Pakistani elements in the country, and provide a fillip to ISI operations in Bangladesh. Their lack of enthusiasm for General Musharraf’s visit was not wholly unwarranted. Only the previous year, the Pakistani military strongman told a Bangladeshi delegation that neither his government nor the Pakistani military would express regret for the action taken by them in 1971. However, Musharraf’s state visit in 2002 confirmed the suspicion that a close relationship existed at the personal level between Begum Zia and the Pakistani ruling establishment. There are several key leaders in her party and government who “swear by Pakistan”. Interestingly on the eve of the state visit, the Pakistani daily *The Frontier Post* carried an article, which alleged that the ISI had given Rs. 10 crores to “ensure victory of Begum Zia’s coalition in last October’s parliamentary poll.”

In India, the Musharraf state visit to Bangladesh was viewed with a “watch-and-wait” attitude. One analyst noted that it was “a measured diplomatic initiative, serving Pakistan’s broad strategic interests determined by the immediate context of regional security and political developments”. From the Bangladeshi government’s point of view, the visit could not have had a better impact on bilateral relations. Musharraf’s visit, one writer averred, had the effect of a “catharsis” on the people of Bangladesh! Another noted that he “boldly expressed regret for the excesses committed during the unfortunate period in Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation in 1971”.

Islamabad and Dhaka mutually agreed during the visit to strengthen cooperation in the fields of trade, economy, diplomacy and culture. The two countries adopted a plan to combat terrorism, terming it “an enemy of mankind” and agreed, “it should be stopped in all its forms and manifestations”. The two sides decided to make SAARC an “effective instrument” for regional cooperation. Special focus was put on trade, including duty-free access of Bangladeshi products (jute, jute products and tea) to the Pakistani market. General Musharraf and Khaleda Zia also decided to hold regular meetings of the Joint Economic Commission between the two states. They also agreed to widen the scope of assistance in the fields of science and information technology. The issue of repatriating stranded Pakistanis was also discussed and Pakistan said that it would be taken up after the problem of three million Afghan refugees was solved.

Husain Haqqani, an influential Pakistani commentator observed: “It took a lot of moral courage on the part of Musharraf to express regret but this gesture was needed to consolidate Bangladesh-Pakistani relations, as well as to purge the Pakistani soul of a tragic blot that has, until now, either been denied or explained away. But in doing so, he has created problems for himself for there is bound to be some debate about the army’s institutional role in Pakistan’s history. Yet, if General Musharraf’s attempt at reconstructing Pakistani politics and society has to succeed, it must begin with an acknowledgement of the limitations of the armed forces as an agent of change”. The Bangladeshi newspaper, *Daily Star* was not very different in its interpretation; “While Musharraf’s words may not be thought to be sufficient by sections here, one must also take the context and conditions under which it has been said in that at this point of time, this is all that a Pakistani leader may have the leeway to say. The act of apologising will certainly provide the people of Pakistan with a moral platform that is still missing.” Begum Khaleda Zia, on her part, thanked the Pakistani President for his “candid expression of regret for the events of 1971, which will no doubt, help mitigate old wounds.”

Others in Dhaka viewed Musharraf’s visit as a means to garner support for its Kashmir policy. The President of the Communist party argued: “By expressing regret, the military President of Pakistan is trying to exonerate his former colleagues of war crimes. We are not ready to accept anything short of an unconditional apology for the genocide.” The Awami League was equally categorical in its denunciation of Musharraf’s motives for this visit, and demanded an unambiguous apology for the crimes committed by the Pakistani Army. Sheikh Hasina, the former Premier, and the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, had repeatedly asked the Pakistanis to apologise for the crimes of 1971, but was not satisfied by the tone and tenor of the Musharraf’s confessions.

General Musharraf had initiated the process of ‘atoning’ for the sins of the soldiers of his army in East Pakistan when he published almost the whole report of the Hamdoor Rehman Commission, which had extensively documented the army’s excesses and also when he “bowed his head before the people of Bangladesh he went some way in healing the wounds.” In the words of Prof. Moonis Ahmar, “with fair intentions, substantial will and determination, both countries can overcome the present stalemate” over the events of 1971.

The domestic political agendas of the leaders countries tend to influence bilateral relations between the states they lead and this is particularly so in the case of Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is still the “chemistry” of the relationship between leaders and their perception of their own

country's relationship with India that determines the nature of bilateral ties between the two parts of what was undivided Pakistan. Compatibility between leaders and the shared interest of both states to limit Indian power are, unusual as it may seem, still important factors in shaping the relationship between the two halves of Jinnah's Pakistan.

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