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BANGLADESH IN THE INDIC SPHERE

Perils of the South Asian Hegemon

The resurgence of anti-India sentiment during the violent mass movement that overthrew the government of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed was cause for alarm. Yet, India had good reason to support a regime that, for all its faults, kept Bangladesh in the Indic sphere, to which it belongs historically. The author argues that India is striking a balance between the assertive Indira Doctrine that was cast in the long aftermath of the imperial Monroe Doctrine, and the benign Gujral Doctrine which was so pacifist as to fail to make much headway in South Asia. The Modi Doctrine seeks to combine power and goodwill in a calibrated strategy that leaves none of its neighbors in doubt that India is the regional power. India is indeed the indispensable power in South Asia. Employing power and persuasion, it must uphold a status quo that has served the sub-continent well since the horrors of Partition in 1947. And, Bangladesh is a test case of the responsibilities that come with India's regional role.

The dramatic but not totally unexpected overthrow of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed and her Awami League government on August 5, 2024 demonstrated the perils that India faces

in being the hegemon of South Asia. The resurgence of anti-India sentiment during the violent mass movement against her, which had begun in peaceful student protests against the “reservation policy” for Bangladesh government jobs, revealed Bangladeshi opposition to a power which had helped sustain Hasina in office for fifteen years in spite of her increasing unpopularity because of the widespread corruption, abuse of power and denial of human rights associated with the Awami League regime.

However, India had good reason to support a regime that, for all its faults, kept Bangladesh in the Indic sphere, to which it belongs historically. The foundational nature of India-Bangladesh relations was reaffirmed by the Awami League’s victory in elections in January 2024, and by the mid-year victory of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party. Hasina and her party are generally considered to be India-friendly, and Modi reciprocated those sentiments by visiting Bangladesh in 2021 to mark 50 years of the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, an outcome that would not have been possible without India’s military intervention in the civil war in erstwhile East Pakistan. Modi’s visit was met with violent protests by Islamist groups, but went ahead successfully. Hasina’s presence at the swearing-in of the new Modi government in June cemented ties between Bangladesh and India, which has been courting its neighboring countries in particular in a declaration of its credentials as South Asia’s indispensable nation. Hasina’s fourth consecutive term in office and Modi’s third signified a degree of continuity in bilateral relations that was significant for the international relations of the region.

This is so because India is striking a balance between the assertive Indira Doctrine that was cast in the long aftermath of the imperial Monroe Doctrine, and the benign Gujral Doctrine which was so



pacifist as to fail to make much headway in South Asia. The Modi Doctrine seeks to combine power and goodwill in a calibrated strategy that leaves none of its neighbors in doubt that India is *the* regional power.

Bangladesh, on its part, is what the Bangladeshi scholar-diplomat Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury calls a sated or satisfied nation. Its identity as a state was established in 1971 as a combination of the two prime facts of its demographic character: that Bengalis and Muslims be the two main adjudicators of its nationalism.¹ Hence, Bangladesh is not attracted to the Pakistani model, in which the existence of Pakistan is predicated on an acerbic degree of “Muslim” hostility towards “Hindu” India; but, equally, Bangladesh is unwilling to concede sovereign space to India even though its neighbor is the regional leader. Tellingly, there is no Kashmir issue in Indo-Bangladesh relations, and so India enjoys a peaceful eastern border with Bangladesh, which is a great blessing given the presence of its restive western border with Pakistan. Understanding the value of this crucial geographic fact, India accepts Bangladesh as a friendly buffer state between itself and the China-Pakistan combine in South Asia that seeks to contain India by bringing Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives within a revisionist Sinic fold that would displace India as preserver of the regional status quo. Bangladesh’s existence in a residually Indic orbit has empowered India.

Such equations do change, of course: Witness the Maldives, where the installation of a pro-China government has thrown Maldivian-Indian relations into a tailspin. However, it is instructive that Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu attended Modi’s swearing-in

¹ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behaviour,” ISAS Working Paper 63, June 10, 2009, p. 17, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/101961/63.pdf>

ceremony in spite of having come to power on the back of a “India Out, China In” campaign. There are advantages in being a regional hegemon. India is in that position in South Asia: China is not (yet).

Amidst these regional transitions, Bangladesh contributes to what may be called the “Indian equilibrium” in South Asian affairs, an equilibrium which (though challenged by Pakistan) sustains the stabilizing influence of New Delhi as the chief chancery in South Asia. Bangladesh is an irreplaceable Indian partner in the sub-continent in the context of New Delhi’s hegemonic power, which, after all, is what led India to assert its military supremacy over Pakistan to secure the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. This was India’s first clear military victory over its existentially-hostile neighbor to the west after the two inconclusive wars of 1948 and 1965. India secured its victory on its eastern flank and not on its western one. While Bangladesh has much to be grateful to India for its independence, India also has much to be grateful to Bangladesh for having caused the Partition of Pakistan in 1971, a mere 24 years after Pakistan had destroyed the timeless integrity of Bharat in the Partition of India in 1947.

Challenges Ahead

Riots erupted in Bangladesh in July 2024 over student protests against job quotas in the civil service that reserved as much as 30 percent of seats for the descendants of freedom fighters against Pakistani rule in 1971. The total percentage of reservations was a whopping 56 percent, but the protesters focused on the 30 percent, a percentage which, many of them argued, benefited supporters of Hasina’s Awami League, the historical party of independence led by her assassinated father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. More moderate opposing voices noted that such reservations, particularly when government jobs were scarce, were impossible to justify

two generations after independence. The Supreme Court cut down the percentage of reservations from 56 to seven (five percent for descendants of freedom fighters, one percent for tribal communities, and another one percent for people with disabilities or for those who identified themselves as third gender under Bangladeshi law). The Supreme Court decision brought to an end the anarchy that had engulfed the streets of Bangladesh for days, but not before many people had died in clashes between protesters, government supporters and the security forces.

And, then, the Hasina government fell, and she was forced to flee. From an Indian perspective, what is important is the symbolic agency of the historical metaphors that invested the student protests (whose turn to violence the government blamed on instigation by opposition political parties). Some ruling party leaders called the protesters *razakars*, a derogatory term attached to mostly Bihari collaborators with the Pakistan army who were responsible for mass atrocities against Bengalis in 1971. The students responded with catchy slogans that mocked the use of the despised term against them, and several of them protested that their forefathers had fought for independence from Pakistan. By co-opting a historically-loaded term against those protesting against a job reservations policy—an economic more than a historical issue—the discord drew attention to the raw salience of 1971 in the affairs of Bangladesh in 2024. Given that India was responsible decisively for the outcome of the Pakistan civil war in 1971, today's India got drawn into the affairs of yesterday's East Pakistan. Some videos circulating on YouTube sought to depict Hasina as an Indian stooge, thereby implicating India in the Bangladesh crisis.

This putative “guilt by association” is what New Delhi needs to be mindful of: irretrievable entanglement in the affairs of its sovereign

neighbors, who naturally act beyond its control but who nevertheless pull India into their domestic and international orbits. Perhaps such an association is unavoidable to an extent: Every hegemon is co-opted partially by its weaker partners in the very act of preserving its control over them. Witness how the United States is held hostage by the existential hostility existing between its protégé, Taiwan, and China; and the greater extent to which Israeli interests in the Middle East determine American policy towards Palestine. Taiwanese and Israeli interests are largely legitimate, but legitimacy is not the point here: The point is that Washington cannot afford to lose its leverage over Taipei or Jerusalem even if Taiwanese or Israeli actions become adventurist, which is entirely possible.

In the case of Bangladesh, India has described the current crisis as an internal affair of that country, but it will still be seen as supporting the ruling dispensation. Clearly, it is in India's abiding interests to support a quintessentially nationalist, essentially secular and somewhat left-of-centre ruling party against its opponents, which consist of a political party which shares its mainstream credentials with obscurantist religious forces and other elements which are pro-Pakistan in all but name.

Even so, however, India needs to calibrate its Bangladesh strategy further so that it is not held hostage by developments in Bangladesh that lie beyond its capacity to control, let alone direct. Hasina was an enlightened leader who continued the radical Bengali nationalist tradition within which her late father had created Bangladesh out of Pakistan. That historical continuity is gone, at least for now.

Looking ahead, India is indeed the indispensable power in South Asia. Combining power and persuasion, it must uphold a status quo that has served the sub-continent well on the whole since the horrors of

Partition in 1947. Bangladesh is a test case of the responsibilities that come with India's regional role.

Note on the Author

Asad Latif is an Indian-origin journalist in Singapore. He is the Co-General Editor of the 50-volume Singapore Chronicles series, and the author of several books, including *Between Rising Powers: China, Singapore and India* (2007), *Three Sides in Search of a Triangle: Singapore-America-India Relations* (2008), *India in the Making of Singapore* (2008), and *Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore* (2009). He graduated with Honours in English from Presidency College in Kolkata, was a Chevening Scholar in History at Cambridge, and was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Harvard. He served on the editorial committee of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and was a member of the president's committee of the Cambridge Union Society, the university debating club. He was also a Jefferson Fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i. His columns and reviews have been published in the *Rising Asia Journal*. He may be contacted at badiarghat@gmail.com