



China-Bangladesh Relations: Adversaries to Trusted Allies

Speaker: Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee

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Exploring political/military/economic relations between China and Bangladesh is an interesting area to look into. Roughly forty years ago, both the countries had their own share of differences, and relations between China and Bangladesh were not as prospering as they are today. When Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971, they had much stronger ties with India, which ultimately did not allow Bangladesh to establish close ties with China. Moreover, in 1972, China exercised its veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and subsequently blocked Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations. This in turn strained the relations between both the countries further. Forty years down the line, the situation has changed and now Bangladesh sees China as an "all weather friend" and as a "trusted ally" according to Sheikh Hasina, the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh relations with India have now taken a back seat. Thus, the speaker through her presentation makes an attempt to study the present political, economic, military, and social relations between Bangladesh and China.

When Bangladesh got independence from Pakistan in 1971, the world order was divided between two superpowers: United States and USSR. While some countries were backed through the support of the capitalist form of the government in United States, others were given support through communist Soviet Union. China following the socialist model of the Soviet Union only recognized Bangladesh in 1975, when Mujibur Rahman was assassinated and when military rule was established under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh. During the time Ziaur Rahman was in power, relations between Bangladesh and China started to flourish. Ziaur

Rahman also visited China in 1977 in order to sign various cooperation economic and military agreements. Ziaur Rahman had the view that extending a hand for friendship towards China; a strong Asian military power will ultimately reduce Bangladesh economic and military dependence on India. Even when democracy returned to Bangladesh in 1991, the ties between both the nations remained strong as ever.

According to Sheikh Hasina, “China has always maintained friendly relations towards Bangladesh”. China in the meantime has also reacted very smartly, and has managed to establish friendly relations with both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and with Bangladesh Awami League (AL), the two major political parties in Bangladesh. The situation now is that it does not matter to China whichever political party comes into power in Bangladesh, their strong relations with Bangladesh in the past will always allow them the access to get an entry into the huge consumer market in Bangladesh. This is mainly the reason why China is now the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh

The year 2015, will mark the Golden Jubilee celebration of the establishment of the strong relations between Bangladesh and China. Moreover, the Government of Bangladesh is planning to celebrate this event in a large scale. Bangladesh tends to rely on the support of China at the international diplomatic stage, and through China’s assistance, Bangladesh was able to resolve its long-standing maritime dispute with Myanmar. In return, Bangladesh has always been vocal in order to grant full membership to China in SAARC.

In terms of military cooperation between Bangladesh and China, Bangladesh has been importing arms and ammunitions from China on a very large scale. In 2012, Bangladesh became the second largest market for Chinese arms exports behind Pakistan. Both the nations are also involved in joint military exercise programs through the Defence Cooperation signed in 2001, which allows high-ranking Bangladesh military professionals to visit China in order to learn the strategies and techniques used by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In 2010, the Bangladesh Government announced a military modernization plan, through which they will be importing two Ming-class submarines from China for the cost of \$203.3 million. The submarines are likely to arrive by the year 2019, while the training of the Bangladeshi sailors will be conducted by China.

In the field of economics, the relations between Bangladesh and China are steadily growing also. China’s investment in the infrastructure structure within Bangladesh has been huge. By the year 2013, China has given roughly \$1 billion of aid to Bangladesh for the development of many of the infrastructure projects. China is also trying its level best to make the idea of the BCIM economic corridor to work, so trade between Bangladesh and China can reach to newer heights in

future. One matter of friction between both the countries was recently surfaced, when Bangladesh did not allow China to build Sonadia deep-sea port, due to the differences in the design and over the idea of China bringing its own labourers to build this port. Nevertheless, business activities between the two nations are still thriving, and people to people contact is growing.

In education cooperation, relations are also improving between Bangladesh and China. The momentum in the field of education cooperation started in 1978, when Vice-Premier Li Xiannian of China visited Bangladesh in order to sign an agreement to cooperate in the field of science and technology. Ziaur Rahman further visited China in 1980, and two more agreements were signed. These agreements provided hard loans in order to establish various education institutions in Bangladesh. Moreover, China is also providing various educational scholarships, in order to encourage Bangladeshi students to study in China.

In conclusion, a question can be raised on how India perceives Bangladesh close ties with China. Some scholars raise the argument that China is using the support from Bangladesh in order to gain an entry into SAARC as a permanent member. On the other hand, some scholars tend to share the view that Bangladesh is trying to balance out its relations with India, by establishing better relations with China. The speaker tends to share the view that India is definitely not comfortable seeing Bangladesh getting close to China, nevertheless India in future is very likely to keep a close watch on this.

During the discussion, certain questions were raised by the participants. One question raised was to provide more information on China's investments in the garment industry of Bangladesh: China sees huge opportunity in the Bangladesh garment industry, and this is mainly due to the availability of cheap and efficient labour class. The issue of Bangladesh's reaction towards the revival of maritime silk route by China was also discussed. It appears that Bangladesh is excited about this prospect, as they would want a route where they can connect with East Asia, which will ultimately help them to increase their trade also. Another question raised was which part of the Bangladesh military (Army, Navy or Air Force) is more dependent on the Chinese military for expertise: All military personnel in Bangladesh, whether in the Army, Navy or Air Force generally look towards China for import of arms or for military guidance.

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