

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > India and South Asia

India and South Asia

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 08/28/2017 - 06:01

Paper No. 6295

Dated 28-Aug-2017

By Kazi Anwarul Masud

Why, one may ask, despite common cultural heritage and long bonds of history and added to these factors was Indian humanitarian intervention during the Bangladesh Liberation War Indo-Bangladesh relations, notwithstanding public diplomacy by the authorities of the two countries, a portion of the people of Bangladesh do not like India's "hegemonic" attitude towards this country.

Lacking the resources of Pew Research Center Polls it is difficult to find out the degree of anti-Indianism in Bangladesh. The ascendancy of BJP in India (democratically elected and an entirely internal matter for the Indian people) it is difficult to remain indifferent about political developments in a country that affects others' life and no less almost every facet of the economy. Bangladesh cannot afford American "new sovereigntists" or "American exceptionalism" (neither could the USA in today's multipolarism with the rising of the rest, particularly emerging economies of China and India).

Harish Khare, a former Media Advisor of the Indian Prime Minister who remained in Prime Minister's Office from June 2009 to January 2012). wrote ("A Dangerous Arrogance of Power Is Setting on 14/07/2017) As democratic institutions – cabinet, bureaucracy, media, presidency and judiciary – weaken, the Modi establishment is riding high on overconfidence. This is bad news for the Indian polity.... Never before was such a convergence of timidity and opportunism seen as now among these three institutions; there seems to be a veritable race to reduce them to the role of a spear-carrier for the prime minister." Another critic Promod K Nayar (University of Hyderabad- The Signs of a Dystopian Democracy Are All around Us 25/07/2017) writes: "Two possible forms of the dystopian turn are visible now. In one form, there is an enhanced emphasis on homogenisation and cultural standardisation in the 'larger interests of the nation'.

This immediately brings to the fore the so-called problem of cultural differences. Ethnic, racial and cultural identities are constitutive of the

very humanity of the members of those groups.... In another form, dystopian democracy is marked not by the fear of an across-the-border 'other', which would be the well-recognised xenophobia of all nationalisms. Rather, it is marked by what can only be thought of, clumsily, as endo-xenophobia, the cultivated and constructed fear of those citizens increasingly seen as 'foreign' by virtue of their diet, their taste in sporting teams or their preference for film stars and films of certain nationalities/ethnicities".

Veteran Indian journalist Prem Shsankar Jha sees in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "grandiose" speeches a camouflage for the creation of a state " that will confront, not accommodate, its neighbours; this state will not tolerate cultural heterogeneity, but seek to replace it with a single homogenised culture that Modi mistakenly believes to be Hindutva. Muslims, and other minorities, will be tolerated in this entity so long as they know their place. Religious pluralism will be tolerated (but not accepted), as former vice president Hamid Ansari pointed out in Bangalore but cultural pluralism will not. For the minorities, the path to success will be through cultural assimilation. In sum, Modi is intent upon changing the very idea of nationhood upon which India's political identity has been based not just for the past 70, but the past 2,000 years." Jha adds that Narendra Modi is leading India into deadly peril. If he continues down this road, India's failure as a state is guaranteed (THE WIRE Modi Is Taking India to a Dangerous Place by Prem Shankar Jha on 17/08/2017). Should one assume that Bangladesh being a predominantly Muslim majority country Indian policy in South Asia will change (Nepal is predominantly Hindu and Bhutan is Buddhist while Pakistan and Afghanistan have Muslim population)? Public diplomacy does not give any credence that religion will have any impact on Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Could religion be an impediment in cementing Bangladesh- India relations? German philosopher Jurgen Habermas to the surprise of many has recently emphasized both religions' prominence in the contemporary public sphere and its potential contributions to critical thought. Habermas argues that the once widely accepted hypothesis of progressive secularization fails to account for the multiple trajectories of modernization in the contemporary world. He calls attention to the contemporary significance of "post metaphysical" thought and "post secular" consciousness - even in Western societies that have embraced a rationalistic understanding of public reason. (November 2013).

In the Indian sub-continent one could try to trace the history of India since 7th century when Islam entered in the then India with the conquest of Sindh by Mohammed bin Quasem. While early Muslim rule was from 1206 to 1398 the Mughal era was from 1526 to 1857 when the first war on independence against the British ended in defeat. Despite protestation to the contrary Indo-Bangladesh relations can only be better.

For the critics or believers in ultra-nationalism/ (Islamist terrorists) the question facing Bangladesh authorities, irrespective of the fact whichever party remains in power, is whether Bangladesh can afford to follow an anti-India policy without thwarting its socio-economic development? One can always argue that national interest should guide national policy even if the policy goes contrary to the policy of a powerful neighbor. It is easier said than done. In the case of Brexit almost half of the British people voted against the Brexit while the other half voted to remain. Each voter had the primacy of national interest in mind. Henry Kissinger defended his policy on Vietnam War as national interest dictated to him at that time. Henry Morgenthau described national interest as survival—the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nation-states. Equally Brookings Institution defined national interest as "What a nation

feels to be necessary to its security and well being ... National interest reflects the general and continuing ends for which a nation acts." In the ultimate analysis national interest may be defined as the policy adopted by the ruling elites at a particular time given a particular context.

After Pakistan's breakup consequent upon the liberation of Bangladesh India emerged as the leading power in South Asia and it has been most acutely felt by her immediate neighbors. The argument proffered that Indian intervention was not totally altruistic but to deal a death blow to its greatest enemy can be explained in terms of "realism" in that India was never so scrupulous in honoring the sovereignty of others when its vital interests were involved. But then it is the nature of both established and emerging powers to flex their muscles as the US has done since the enunciation of Monroe Doctrine. If diplomacy requires deceit and use of force or hard power as defined by Joseph Nye jr then India has been an able follower of Chanakya in her dealings with neighbors.

Disquiet in India's relations with Bangladesh had begun with the non-implementation of 1974 Mujib-Indira agreement that was further aggravated by the construction of Farakka Barrage turning a significant part of Bangladesh into a desert, affecting navigation, agriculture, environmental degradation, and hurting the livelihood of millions of people. Farakka's adverse effects have made a section of Bangladeshis suspicious of the proposed Tipaimukh Dam to be built on the river Barak in Manipur state of India. The proposed construction is controversial in both India and Bangladesh. Many people were put off by huge imbalance in trade favoring India partly due to para- tariff and non-tariff barrier erected by India on exports from Bangladesh. It is also believed that Indian bureaucracy is reluctant to open Indian market to Bangladeshi products. Non-demarcation of maritime boundary with India that had been taken to arbitration by Bangladesh has been resolved to the satisfaction of both the parties.

Many other agreements concluded recently have contributed to the strengthening of bilateral relations. A few mentionable are:

1. Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development Agreement lays down a framework for enhancing bilateral cooperation, including trade, investment and economic cooperation; connectivity; water resources; management of natural disasters; generation, transmission and distribution of power, scientific, educational and cultural cooperation; people to people exchanges; environmental protection; sub regional cooperation in the power sector, water resources management, physical connectivity, environment and sustainable development.

2. Protocol to the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement

3. Facilitating Overland Transit Traffic between Bangladesh and Nepal
4. MOU on Fisheries and MOU in Renewable energy
5. MOU in Renewable energy.

Globalization in any case has forced even introvert nations to come out in the open. If the main driver of the Arab Spring has been securing citizens political rights the civilianization of reclusive Myanmar appears to be an admission that no nation in the globalized world can remain an island- be it one of plenty or underdeveloped. Changing nature of security threats from traditional to non-traditional ones makes it

imperative for nations of the world to unite. Hence it has become necessary, more so now with the Western economies in deep trouble, to have G-20 nations to have summits and high level contacts to smooth out the wrinkles in global politics and economy.

Ever since the end of the Cold War and fleeting US unipolar moment various scenarios are being constructed for the next world order. One such scenario urges Washington, Beijing and New Delhi to consider, if a war happens in the 21st century, it will be America-China or China-India. According to this scenario NATO intervention in Libya has shown lack of coherence of Western alliance that had served the stability of the post-Second World War world. Besides neoconservatives like Robert Kagan are convinced of Europe's lack of centrality in global politics if not the soft power that is essential for global peace. This school of thought considers China and India to be globalization's lead integrating agents. Russia and Japan are not considered to be serious first tier candidates for global power. In this equation Europe too is discounted as is Brazil among the BRIC nations.

But the shining China may face impediment as in two decades or so China will lose considerable number of workers who will join the aging senior group of citizens. By contrast America will add few dozen million workers and India are expected to add 100 million to the workforce. In terms of per capita income by 2030 that of the US is expected to be \$ 60000/- while that of China will be \$ 20000/- and that of India is expected to be \$ 10000/-. The US despite its indebtedness (US Federal Gross Debt to GDP ratio updated in August 2017 was 106.10) GDP will reign over the others because both China and India will remain tethered to the proverbial ball and chain of impoverished rural poor.

Besides China may face developmental impediments in the forms of environmental damage, resource constraint, demographic aging, inequitable distribution of income among different sectors of the society, better standard of living leading people to demand greater voice in governance translated into weaker hold of the Communist Party over the people.

In case of India fractious domestic politics and inequitable division of the developmental benefit among the growing population may stay the rate of development of the economy. The inequity in the distribution of income can be gauged by the fact that both in China and India increase in per capita income has been flat between 1820 to 1950 but it increased by 68% by 1973 and 245% by 2002 and continues to grow despite global financial difficulties. The situation has been no different if we take the case of the US where between 2002 and 2007 65% of all income growth went to the top 1% of the population. The world has virtually been divided into two classes--plutocrats and the rest. Despite such skewed rich and poor equation demonstrated by occupy the Wall Street march in New York the policy makers in the Game Room of the powerful countries would be working on inclusion of China and India along with the US as future arbiters of global fate and guarantor of peace than the old alliances with Europe and Japan.

Zbigniew Brzezinski and Fred Bergsten (Petersen Institute for International Economics) had advocated formation of G-2 with the US and China (The United State and China: a G-2 in the making Brookings-Oct 2011). The essence of the proposal is that these two biggest economies working together can provide global public good that the world required. The convergence between the two at present appears to be difficult because China saves too much and the US consumes too much creating disequilibrium in their economies and imbalance in

trade. China uses its surplus cash to buy US Treasury bonds thus increasing American indebtedness. Unless the trade surplus countries like China starts buying and consuming more US made products the equilibrium will not be achieved. Politically and militarily G-2 appears to be a distant proposition because a rising power has the tendency to expand its influence, often through hard power, that an established power like the US would have to acquiesce in though such expansion may impinge on the areas of influence of the established power. So far Chinese use of influence in global affairs has not caused any ripples in the world. But there can be no guarantee that with the passage of time power transition will remain smooth.

For example in the case of North Korea the verbal exchange going on between President Trump and Kim Jung-un using nuclear vocabulary has introduced a grave security concern for the world. Besides disputed Spratly Islands remain unresolved and the world is not certain yet how the Chinese would finally react to the claims by other countries' sovereignty over the Islands. Consequently as the established power cannot be sure of the real intent of the rising power it is likely to hedge its bet by roping in-In this case, countries like India, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam to counter China.

Relations with Bangladesh was bedevilled in the past with problems relating to maritime boundary demarcation (now resolved through International Arbitration), land boundary disputes (resolved through exchange of enclaves in adverse possession), trade imbalance in favor of India and impediment imposed by India on Bangladeshi exports through para-tariff and non-tariff barrier, border killings of Bangladeshi nationals by Indian Border Security Force, Indian allegation of illegal Bangladeshi nationals entry and stay in India etc. Relations have taken a turn for the better after the assumption of power in Bangladesh by Awami League led combine of political parties. Relations with Nepal had been strained after the assumption of power as Prime Minister 2006-2009 and again 2016-2017 by Maoist leader Pushpa Kumar Dahal who openly blamed Indian machination for the downfall of his short lived government and subsequent failure to form a government. In a party conference he even urged his followers to free Nepal from Indian domination. Current Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba maintains good relations with India. In early August Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister has categorically said that Nepal would not take side on the China-India-Bhutan Doklam border dispute. He told the media that Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba will visit India from August 23-August 27 while Chinese Vice Premier will come to Nepal on August 14 on an official visit. It is not known if the Doklam issue would be discussed in Delhi or in Kathmandu. Meanwhile Bhutan has protested to China, saying the area belonged to it and accused Beijing of violating agreements that aim to maintain the status quo until the boundary dispute is resolved. India says the Chinese action to lay the road was unilateral and changes the status quo. It fears the road would allow China to cut off India's access to its north eastern states. Nepal, a landlocked country, is virtually dominated by India commercially where Indian currency can be used in the markets.

Bhutan, another landlocked country, is also heavily dependent on India but the people are ferociously independent minded and refuses to integrate with the globalized world and believe in Gross Domestic Happiness instead of GDP as is understood throughout the world. Bhutan, a country with seven hundred people, has extremely cordial relationship with India.

With Afghanistan India has developed special relationship much to the chagrin of Pakistan though it is believed that Indian efforts are

directed to counter Chinese influence and not to contain Pakistani influence in Kabul. At the moment Pak-Afghan relations are going through rough waters as both the Afghan and the US government is highly critical of the safe heaven enjoyed by the Haqqani group in Pakistan from where the terrorists launch their operations. This issue was mentioned by President Trump during the recent visit to the US by the Indian Prime Minister.

It would, therefore, appear that that it would serve Indian interest to mend her fences with her neighbors enabling the US efforts to prop up India as a counter to China as would Indian ambition for a permanent seat in the UNSC. Though not at the same economic level India could try to play the role in South Asia as Germany is playing in helping out European countries i.e. Greece to get the country out of the economic difficulties she is facing at the moment. Use of hard power by India in South Asia is going to be counterproductive if she thinks the smaller neighbors have little option but to bow down to Indian dictates. The net result may be to push the South Asian countries into the arms of China as a hedge to counter Indian efforts to dominate the region. Indian policy planners may wish to consider that Indian democratic structure is more attractive to her South Asian neighbors for establishing fruitful bilateral relations with India than with China, albeit a rising power, but with an authoritarian system of governance China yet remains inscrutable to many countries having liberal political system. In the ultimate analysis the scenario of an India countering China in Asia may be a more theoretical than a realistic proposition US wish notwithstanding. The people in South Asia would prefer both giants to have complimentary than a competitive relationship that would help millions of people of this area to get out of the poverty trap and leave a prosperous life for their children and grand children.

Tags:

[Indo-Bangladesh Relations](#) [1]

[India and Neighbouring countries](#) [2]

[India-China Relations](#) [3]

Category:

[Papers](#) [4]

Countries:

[Bhutan](#) [5]

[Bangladesh](#) [6]

[India](#) [7]

[Nepal](#) [8]

Topics:

[Political](#) [9]

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2201>

Links

- [1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1745>
- [2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1746>
- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/123>
- [4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>
- [5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/bhutan>
- [6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/bangladesh>
- [7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/india>
- [8] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/nepal>
- [9] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>