

BANGLADESH AND CHINA: A REVIEW OF 35-YEAR RELATIONS

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Abstract

Bangladesh-China relations observed its 35th anniversary in 2010. China is a significant development partner of, and now the biggest source of import of goods for Bangladesh. Bangladesh-China defence cooperation is strong. Bangladesh-China relations result in signing of a plethora of bilateral agreements on various socio-economic issues. This paper attempts to have a review of 35-year relations between Bangladesh and China. Although Bangladesh maintains relatively stable political relations with China, Bangladesh suffers from huge trade deficit vis-à-vis China. Trade and commerce is the major area of cooperation between the two countries. Other potential areas of cooperation are water resource management, renewable energy, connectivity, foreign direct investment (FDI), maritime security, and capacity building of Bangladeshi ports. If the idea of the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) truly takes off, this 'quadrilateralism' could have enormous positive ramifications for lessening tensions and also serve as a model for other parts of Asia on how to draw China into a collaborative relationship.

Introduction

Relations between Bangladesh and China observed its 35th anniversary in 2010, with a decision to establish a closer comprehensive partnership of cooperation from the strategic point of view.¹ Ever since China extended its diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh in the mid-seventies and opened its embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh-China relations have only improved from strength to strength.² Six friendship bridges

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¹ Md Shahadat Hossain, "Sino-Bangladesh Relations: Friendship Unbounded", *The Independent*, October 22, 2010.

² Urvashi Aneja, "China-Bangladesh Relations: An Emerging Strategic Partnership?", *IPCS Special Report 33* (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies), November 2006, at pp. 1-12.

built by China over mighty rivers, the Banghabandhu International Conference Centre and other structures are the symbols of the friendship and assistance of China to Bangladesh.³ The Chinese government has agreed to help Bangladesh to build a seventh bridge, another exhibition centre and two primary schools.⁴ On the other hand, China has already extended substantial grants and loans to Bangladesh as well as technical and financial assistance to many projects of significance for the Bangladesh economy.⁵ China's extension of support to Bangladesh in building up and maintaining Bangladesh's defence capabilities is also noted with particular appreciation in the country.⁶

Over the years, the two sides have signed a plethora of bilateral agreements that range from economic engagements, soft loans, social contacts, cultural exchanges, academic interactions, infrastructure development and military sales at 'friendship' prices.⁷ Top-level state visits, both by the ruling party and the opposition leaders of Bangladesh to China have increased markedly.⁸ The cooperation on economic and military issues, culture and education, and science and technology has helped to forge ties between the two countries.⁹ On the contrary, China has emerged as the biggest source of import of goods for Bangladesh in recent years.¹⁰ It is in this context that the paper attempts to have a review of 35-year relations between Bangladesh and China as well as

³ Xiao Wang, "Neighbourly Relationship Bonds China, Bangladesh" *China Daily*, 26 March 2008, at p. 10.

⁴ Prashant Kumar Singh, "China-Bangladesh Relations Acquiring A Life of Their Own", *China Report*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2010, at pp. 267-283.

⁵ K M Rehan Salahuddin, "China-Bangladesh Relations: Friendship with Mutual Cooperation" at <http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-10/08/content_21078441.htm>, October 2010.

⁶ M. Afsarul Qader, "China-Bangladesh Relationship on Course", *The News Today*, 30 January 2011.

⁷ Sreeratha Datta, "Bangladesh's Relations with China and India: A Comparative Study", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2008, at pp. 755-772.

⁸ Arnold Zeitlin, "Bangladesh's Ambivalent Relations with the PRC", *China Brief*, Vol. 5, Issue 5, 1 March 2005.

⁹ Anand Kumar, "Changing Dynamics of Sino-Bangladesh Relations", *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper No. 1345, 21 April 2005.

¹⁰ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, "Bangladesh-China: An Emerging Equation in Asian Diplomatic Calculations", *ISAS Working Paper No. 105* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore), 31 March 2010, at pp. 1-11.

the challenges and the prospects of the relations. This paper also provides a conclusion with a set of recommendations.

This paper is mainly based on existing secondary literature such as books, journals, electronic journals, working papers, conference papers, various websites, etc. However, limitation of this paper is dearth of information, particularly on economic relations between Bangladesh and China. Consulting of published materials and accessing to various websites have not been sufficient for analyzing challenges as well as prospects of Bangladesh-China relations. Consequently, many of findings in concluding section of this paper are generalized.

Bangladesh-China relations: an overview

Although Bangladesh is almost entirely surrounded by India and has no border with China, the country too has become an arena of Sino-Indian competition.¹¹ India began with the advantages of playing a key role in Bangladeshi independence and of shared ethnicity.¹² China began as Pakistan's ally and did not establish diplomatic relations with Bangladesh until 1976.¹³ However, China has now evolved into Bangladesh's strongest friend and the largest trading partner¹⁴, while the relationship with India seems uneven.¹⁵

Bangladesh's border with India is 4,093-km long (that with Myanmar is only 193-km), and brings with it border tensions, water disputes, territorial sea conflict, refugee and rebel intrusions and so on.¹⁶ Equally, proximity, size and history have produced the *big brother* relationship that can be found in similar situations elsewhere (Russia-Ukraine, for instance), with the weaker party rather prone to take

¹¹ Vijay Sakhuja, "China-Bangladesh Relations and Potential for Regional Tensions", *China Brief*, Vol. 9, July 23, 2009, at p. 15.

¹² M Shahidul Islam, "Bangladesh-China-Northeast India: Opportunities and Anxieties", *ISAS Insights 37* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore), 8 September 2008, at pp. 1-12.

¹³ Abu Taher Salahuddin Ahmed, "Bangladesh-China Relations: An Assessment", *BIISS Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1992, at pp. 265-299.

¹⁴ Gog Chok Tong, "Managing Ties Vital in New World Order", *The Straits Times*, March 22, 2010.

¹⁵ Supra Note 10.

¹⁶ Malladi Rama Rao, "Dynamics of China-Bangladesh Relations", *Policy Research Group*, New Delhi, January 24, 2010.