

Prime Minister's visit to China: A Timely One

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

The proposed five-day visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from 17th to 21st March to China is a timely one since the ties between the two countries have been characterized by comprehensive interaction of cooperation during the last 35 years of their diplomatic relations. This October it will be the 35th anniversary of commencement of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

China is Bangladesh's neighbour over the Himalayas –100 kilometres from Bangladesh border. The interaction between people of both countries dates back to centuries. Apart from the two Chinese travellers –Fa-Hien in the 4th century and Hue An-tsung in the 7th century, a Buddhist monk, Atish Dipankar from Bangladesh, during the 11th century, traveled to China and preached Buddhism for 17 years and he died in modern day Chinese Tibet and the Chinese government returned the ashes to his native place in Munshiganj district and built a mausoleum there.

Inter-state relations are influenced by regional and global geo-strategic realities. Bangladesh is strategically located between India and China and its importance emanates from its location.

Some of the geo-strategic realities in the region are:

- India and China have uneasy political relationship since their brief war in 1962 although economic interests are growing between them.
- China has been developing port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and it is planning to build railroad lines in Nepal, linking to Lhasa in Tibet.
- China reportedly has access to Myanmar naval base in Hantay Island and has established a monitoring station at Coco Island, north of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. China is also building a new port at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Baluchistan of Pakistan.
- These initiatives are irking India, whose government worries that China is expanding its sphere of regional influence by surrounding India with a "string of pearls" that could eventually undermine India's pre-eminence and potentially rise to an economic and security threat.
- Militarisation of Indian Ocean has added another dimension of security: Apart from the US, regional countries including India and China placed their navies to secure safety of sea-lanes and maritime resources.

Given the above realities, I would argue Bangladesh's geographical location is both an advantage and a limitation of conduct of its foreign policy. Bangladesh has to play a delicate balancing act between the two Asian giants.

The fact that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's scheduled visit is preceded early this month by a Communist Party delegation's short trip to Dhaka indicates that China has all the interest to develop party-to-party relations without keeping it limited to the state level.

The delegation called on the Prime Minister and also the Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia.

The heads of successive governments in Bangladesh visited China since 1977. Successive governments in Bangladesh concentrated on building economic and technical cooperation with China and China responded to generously primarily in sectors, such as infrastructure development, telecommunications and energy. Defence cooperation between the two countries has been developed (78% of Bangladesh's arms and equipment are from China) and chiefs of armed services visited each other's country.

Bangladesh firm stand on "One China" policy (meaning No two China, No independence to Taiwan and No representation of Taiwan to international organizations) and its firm support for the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 was deeply appreciated by China and Chinese Foreign Minister Dr. Yang Jiechi visited Bangladesh in April 2008 and offered Taka.6 million in free aid to Bangladesh's development and Taka 5 million in "token gift" to mark his visit. The two countries also signed an exchange of notes for construction of Bangladesh-China Exhibition Centre in Dhaka

China has built six bridges in the country and the last bridge was opened on 18th February 2008 over the river Dhaleswari linking Dhaka with Munshiganj district. Bangladesh may seek funds for second Padma bridge and a bridge over Arial Khan River at Madaripur to provide link with southwestern of the country.

Bilateral trade in 2009 stood at about \$4.5 billion. Bangladesh could export only \$97 million and the rest were imports from China to Bangladesh. Since China is an agent of robust economic growth, Bangladesh must take advantage of it and gradually integrate its economy with Chinese economy and one of the chief mechanisms is the inter-connectivity with multi-modal transport to China's Yunnan province through Myanmar. Furthermore, Bangladesh may link up through railroad to China through Nepal.

In this respect "the Kunmin Initiative" was developed some years ago to provide interconnectivity among Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. The Northeastern States of India may also join in this plan to make the region an economic hub of activities.

Bangladesh will build a deep sea port near Cox's Bazar and Prime Minister offered that deep sea port could be used by regional countries including China. The Prime Minister demonstrates a vision of an inclusive, plural, and rapidly developing regional countries playing their role in an interdependent economic development.

Bangladesh Prime Minister's visit to India in January was closed watched by China and it appears Bangladesh's support to India in the Joint Communique for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council was not comfortable to China because China did not support the reforms of the Council in 2005. Bangladesh needs all the diplomatic skills to remove whatever concerns China have in this respect.

Meanwhile the Italian proposal in 2009 for rotation of all regional countries to become permanent member in the Council has been widely accepted as the mechanism to expand the Security Council and the call for expansion of the Security Council is justified by the need for greater credibility, representation, effectiveness and enhanced capacity to act in defence of maintenance of international peace and security..

Bangladesh foreign policy, in my view, stands largely on two pillars: security, development. Security means not only territorial security, but also includes water security, food security, energy security, and environment security. Initiatives for socio-economic development can only be made when all such sectors are attended to. And China can help Bangladesh to achieve these goals.

What Bangladesh can ask for during the visit?

Bangladesh may request China to assist Bangladesh in the following ways:

- To invest in Bangladesh in priority sectors
- To transfer technology and funds to exploit Bangladesh renewable energies such as solar, tidal waves and winds. Bio-mass energy could also be extensively developed with Chinese help.
- To assist in restoration of river catchments areas by dredging the rivers for navigability and in flood control measures
- To integrate water resources management and water resources utilization of Brahmaputra River
- To help human resources development for skilled workers
- To assist with funds to build the deep sea port at Sonadia, near Cox's Bazar
- To extend cooperation in Jute industry
- To assist in Bangladesh's manufacturing industries
- To transfer manufacturing low- cost goods to Bangladesh in leather and ready-made garments
- To assist and provide funds for infrastructure developments (roads and bridges), energy and telecommunication
- To put pressure on Myanmar to agree to road connectivity from Chittagong to Kunmin of the Yunnan province
- To fund an oil pipeline from Chittagong to Kunmin through Myanmar to avoid thousand of miles to reach oil to land-locked provinces of southern China.