

US-Bangladesh Strategic Partnership: Why has US proposed

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It is reported that a US security delegation comprising of a Congressman and military veterans has asked President Bush to give Bangladesh “high priority” as a strategic partner in US foreign and national security policies against the backdrop of its exposure to Islamist extremism.

The delegation reportedly said : “ Bangladesh is potentially a crucial player in the struggle against Islamic extremism and this is a crucial period for that country. The US has rare opportunity now to help shape the future of an important nation.”

A five member US delegation visited last month the country and reportedly met with senior government leaders, civil and military officials and businessmen. Media reports say that they came to Bangladesh to develop the framework for a major conference on homeland security issues to be held in Bangladesh later this year.

What is strategic partnership?

Strategic partnership, among others, means inter-state relationship at several levels and they are mainly as follows:

- very good and friendly relations at the top political level, which are usually institutionalized in one or another form
- intensive cooperation in the spheres of the highest strategic importance for both countries
- dynamic and mutually beneficial economic relations, intensive cultural exchange, cooperation at the level of various NGOs as well as individuals.

Empirical evidence suggests that development of this relation and its intensity can not be uniform because it depends on countries’ resources. It may be more important to underscore influence of international environment on such relationship.

I wish to provide a brief analysis of two issues: (a) what factors have influenced the US to propose a strategic partnership with Bangladesh and (b) what are the challenges to threaten this relationship.

Why has US proposed strategic partnership:

It is obvious that since 9/11, the US administration, political scientists and media have been following the signs of upsurge of Islamic militants in Bangladesh. Alex Parry of the Time magazine in its edition of October 21, 2002 came out with a story that Bangladesh became a “safe haven” for Islamic Jihadis.

He wrote: “Bangladesh has also its fundamentalists. And its southern coastal hills and northern borders with India are lawless and bristling with Islamic militants armed by gunrunners en route from Cambodia and southern Thailand to Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Central Asia and the Middle East.”

Since 2004, Bangladesh had been hit by spate of bomb attacks that have targeted judges, NGO workers, journalists and politicians.

On January 23, 2005 Eliza Griswold wrote in The New York Times about the attempt by Islamic militants to bring about Talibanisation of the country. Travelling throughout Bangladesh she concluded “ The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of regimes like that of the Talibans impossible, in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way.”

.On 17th August, 2005, the entire country was rocked by about 400 bombs exploded almost simultaneously in cities around Bangladesh. This attack had demonstrated that they had the expertise and planning to explode bombs.

Police in some of the cities said leaflets calling for implementation of Islamic law were found near the scene of the blasts, some written in Arabic and others in English.

On 30th December, a suicide attack took place in Gazipur (near capital city Dhaka) killing one person and 27 injured. This was the first time a suicide attack was made. It is reported that the banned Jamat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) had trained about 2000 suicide bombers.

On 31 March 2007 six JMB leaders were hanged for murdering two judges and they were reportedly not repentant for their militant activities.

On 1st May 2007, the militants have demonstrated their might, even though six militant leaders were hanged, by exploding bombs in three railway stations. The organization that carried out the attack was reportedly left their name as “Zadid (new) Al Qaeda”.

All these events are of great concern to US because their troops have been fighting the Islamic militants since 2001 in Afghanistan and since 2003 in Iraq.

If Bangladesh government does not deal firmly to eradicate Islamic militants, the Jihadis might find a way to Afghanistan and to Iraq.

Bangladesh is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Islam has been embedded with local customs and traditions. Many customs observed by Muslims in the country seem strange to Arab Muslims. For example, touching feet of elders as a mark of respect by young relatives and holding milad -e- sharif at times of success and adversity.

Islamic extremism is not a natural growth in Bangladesh. It has come and funded from overseas since 1998 and in 2005 it manifested its ugly heads. Overwhelming majority of Muslims in the country do not endorse the tenets of Islamic extremism and consider it a distortion of Islam. It is noted that in Bangladesh Sufis (Islamic mystics) propagated Islam and sufi tradition is the prevalent norm in the country.

In this respect, the US and Bangladesh have common policy to curb and gradually eliminate extremism in Bangladesh. This commonality has acquired a new particular dynamics between the US and Bangladesh. There were various statements made by the top leaders of both countries to demonstrate a common concern and attitude for threat to security from non-state actors.

A significant and new feature of US-Bangladesh cooperation has been the capacity building of law enforcing agencies. The cooperation embraces in the military and trans-border areas.

Challenges:

It is not uncommon among political observers to start wondering about the content of the partnership and its effectiveness. Without embarking here on an extensive discussion of the issues related to the problem, it is noted that in discussing the effectiveness of the strategic partnership and its prospects, the existing asymmetry between the two countries cannot be ignored. Even though the desire to curb terrorism coincides, there nevertheless exists considerable differences between the US and Bangladesh. There are great differences in culture, politics, and economy.

Bangladesh's geopolitical orientation is to be friendly to its neighbours, in particular India, China and distant country Russia. . Furthermore Bangladesh is a member of the Non-Alignment Movement and is not comfortable to be closely associated with the super power. Such relationship could be misunderstood by its neighbours. Bangladesh is rather inclined to perform the function of a neutralizing buffer (between India and China).

Among the impediments, the attitude of left-wing political parties and civil society in Bangladesh toward the US is significant. The US under the Bush administration is perceived as an imperial power which believes in military power in influencing politically other countries across the world. The US is also perceived as exploiter of natural resources of the country. Free market and unbridled capitalism pursued by the US multi-nationals tend to create gross disparity between rich and poor. This image does not help the US to forge a strategic partnership with Bangladesh.

Furthermore it is possible to maintain that the future development of the US-Bangladesh relations is likely to depend upon the interrelation of both external and internal factors that may confront Bangladesh. Internal factors include social, political and economic dynamics of the country, while external factor relates to changes in the international environment.

