

What does it take to be a good neighbour?

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On a personal level, a good neighbour is when a neighbour don't butt into other neighbour's business.

Does it apply between two neighbouring states? Yes in a way. Such state of play is known as "non-interference in domestic affairs" and the UN Charter recognizes it.

Apart from non-interference into internal affairs, a neighbouring country must have understanding and consideration of difficulties of the other neighbour. Furthermore if the neighbour is large, then respect for and equality in treatment for the small neighbour need to be manifest in its conduct.

There are certain fundamentals underpinning bilateral relations between a big neighbour and a small country and they are as follows:

First, all bilateral disputes need to be settled peacefully to the mutual satisfaction of both. There must be a good understanding of each other's interest and difficulties and an equitable decision must be arrived at. A weak neighbour lacks power to force the settlement of the issue with large neighbour. If a solution is imposed on another one, it does not last.

Second, the recognition that each country has its own view on a given issue is imperative and not to understand this perspective is to misjudge the very nature of solid relationship. Close friend does not mean that both countries must have always the same view on a given issue.

Third, no country appreciates being pushed around by a big neighbour. Good relations are built on principles of mutual trust, good neighbourliness and consideration.

Fourth, policy of a big neighbour should not be perceived as intimidating. It spoils mutual trust toward each other.

Fifth, no large country should restrict or restrain the flexibility of neighbour's foreign policy on the ground of being against its security interests.

Sixth, big neighbour's reluctance in involving a third party to resolution of prickly bilateral issues is an impediment to stability and peace in South Asia. To be a good neighbour, one does not need to keep pending unresolved bilateral issues.

Finally, a large country should appreciate the sensitivity of small country's syndrome. It means a small neighbour tends to guard its independence vigorously and any perception of dominance over it is regarded as "big brotherly attitude".

Given the above factors, let us briefly examine Indo-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is “India-locked” in the west, east and north. In Bangladesh’s foreign policy “India factor” looms large.

Both Bangladesh and India have to take into account whether its policy on a particular issue has an impact on the other. This is a wise policy.

During the last 36 years, bilateral relations had a “see-saw” relationship, sometime close and sometime not so close.

Largely this state of vacillating relationship was partly due to ideological-driven government in both capitals at some time or the other. Whenever centre-right or right wing government is constituted, mistrust on each other breeds and spoils the smooth-going relationship.

If India is willing to settle pending issues with Bangladesh, it can easily do so because it has the capability to do so. For example, within six months of the Hasina government, the Ganges Water Treaty was concluded for a period of 30 years in December 1996 and within 18 months, the Peace Agreement on Chittagong Hill Tracts was concluded with representatives of Tribal leaders in December 1997 with the support of India. It is believed that India put strong pressure on Chakma leaders (found refuge in Tripura, state of India) to make the peace deal.

The conclusion of the two agreements shows that India can take initiative in resolving complex issues. This was because the ruling leaders in New Delhi were inclined to deal with the Hasina government (1996-2001) with more consideration than they did with the Khaleda Zia government..

The major pending bilateral issues are (a) water management and sharing of water of common rivers, (b) agreement with Bangladesh on Tipaimukh electricity dam, (c) exchange of enclaves under the 1974 Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement, (d) delimitation of sea boundary, (e) settlement of ownership of Talpatty Island and (f) reduction of huge trade deficit of Bangladesh with India.

Another irritation to Bangladesh is the fencing of borders of India around Bangladesh. It manifests arrogance of power. Border movement of people cannot be stopped along the porous border, artificially created by the British Radcliffe Award in 1947, whatever fencing is erected.

As for Bangladesh, it should not be unnecessarily insular or be plagued by old-mind set of sovereignty in opening up its borders or in collective use of natural resources for economic cooperation during the days of economic globalization. The connectivity with each other in all areas is very important. Whatever Bangladesh can do to strengthen relations with India it should do so in good faith.

Good bilateral relations are not taken for granted. They need constant nurturing and care, like a new sapling that requires regular monitoring and attention. Short-term interests should not obscure long-term interests.

Once mutual trust is established and sustained democratic governments of both countries can attain their benefits to the maximum level.

Given the right spirit and desire, there is no adequate reason why relations between India and Bangladesh cannot but be friendly. Both countries require in making the same political intellectual, bureaucratic, educational, cultural, and media effort on the positive features of each other.

The bottom line of foreign policy of all countries is a one which is purposeful, result-oriented and pro-active.