

INDIA NEEDS TO HAVE CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH B'DESH

FAZAL MEHMOOD

The recent political climate in Bangladesh, under the leadership of Mohammad Yunus and his associates, has seen an increase in antagonistic rhetoric directed towards India over the past month. In response, New Delhi has taken a firm stance regarding the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh, making it unequivocally clear to Dhaka that such actions are intolerable. It is now imperative for India to establish definitive boundaries for its neighbours, who appear to be testing the limits of their relationship.

These boundaries must be articulated and emphasized as non-negotiable. In recent weeks, several officials from the ruling party in Bangladesh have called for the extradition of Sheikh Hasina, who is currently residing in India. They reference the India-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty of 2013, which was enacted during Hasina's previous administration and outlines the extradition of individuals charged with serious offences. Although External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has indicated that these demands will be addressed through diplomatic channels, it is essential for New Delhi to publicly assert that Hasina will not be extradited.

Furthermore, any continued insistence on her extradition could jeopardize the bilateral relationship. The 2013 Treaty includes a provision [Article 8(1)(a)(iii)] that allows for the non-extradition of individuals if doing so would be deemed unjust or oppressive, particularly if the allegations against them are not made in good faith or the interest of justice. The accusations of murder, mass killings, and genocide against Hasina are unjust, and she would not receive a fair trial if extradited to Bangladesh.

India must therefore refuse any extradition requests on these grounds and should communicate its intention to continue providing refuge to Hasina to Dhaka clearly, even before any formal extradition request. At the diplomatic level, officials from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should convey to their Bangladeshi counterparts that Hasina has been a long-standing ally of India, and the country will not abandon her. It is widely acknowledged that radical Islamists, who are uniformly anti-India and pro-Pakistan, have gained significant power following the ousting of Hasina. Recent reports from Bangladesh indicate that these radical elements have successfully infiltrated the current political framework and are exerting direct influence over governmental policies and actions.

Yunus, reliant on the pro-Islamist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh for his political survival, finds himself unable to counter the growing influence of Islamists within his nation. These Islamists, along with leaders of the student movement that contributed to Hasina's removal, have been vocal in their anti-India rhetoric, including outrageous calls to obstruct the 'chicken's neck' corridor in Bengal, which connects Northeast India to the rest of the country.

Notably, individuals like Jashimuddin Rahmani, who have been implicated in terrorism, have been released from prison and are now engaging in activities against India. It is imperative that Dhaka receives a clear message: the new government must take decisive action against Islamists and prevent their anti-India activities. A failure to address this issue could lead to severe repercussions, prompting India to assert its right to respond unilaterally to such threats. The current administration is utilizing the actions of the Border Security Force (BSF) against Bangladeshis involved in cross-border smuggling or border violations as a means to criticize India. This has become a contentious issue for many Bangladeshis, who believe they have the right to cross into India freely.

When confronted or halted by the BSF, they often retaliate. The expectation that the BSF should remain passive during such border violations is untenable. New Delhi must communicate to Dhaka that there is a limit to tolerance, and any further incursions by Bangladeshi smugglers or infiltrators will be regarded as hostile acts, warranting an appropriate response. International borders worldwide are inviolable and any violation can provoke severe and retaliatory measures. It is imperative that Dhaka understands this unequivocally. Bangladesh must recognize that the onus lies with its border security personnel to prevent its citizens from crossing the border under any circumstances.

The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) will be held accountable if any Bangladeshi nationals are harmed or killed by the Border Security Force (BSF) while attempting to breach the border. Historically, during the



BNP-Jamaat administrations and military regimes, Pakistan was permitted to engage in various anti-India operations from Bangladesh, including the training and arming of militant groups in Northeast India. This situation changed when Hasina assumed leadership, expelling Pakistani operatives, apprehending Northeast militants, and imprisoning Islamist extremists.

Recently, there have been indications that certain factions, including BNP-Jamaat leaders and Islamists, are rekindling ties with Islamabad and advocating for a lenient approach towards allowing Pakistan to instigate unrest in Northeast India from Bangladeshi soil. It is crucial for Dhaka to understand that such actions will not be tolerated. The current geopolitical landscape is markedly different from the past; India has significantly enhanced its capabilities to counter threats emanating from across its borders. Bangladesh must be made aware that if it permits Pakistan to utilize its territory for anti-India activities, India reserves the right to take decisive action, which could lead to considerable embarrassment for Bangladesh. Dhaka needs to recognize that it is responsible for monitoring its pro-Pakistan Islamist factions and preventing them from engaging in activities that undermine India's interests. Since taking office, Yunus has advocated for the revitalization of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization that has remained stagnant due to New Delhi's reluctance to engage with Pakistan, primarily due to Islamabad's use of terrorism as a state policy and its support for terrorist activities against India.

Yunus, along with other Bangladeshi leaders, appears to be aligning with Pakistan's interests by pushing for the revival of SAARC, a move that New Delhi is opposed to. In response, New Delhi has established new multilateral initiatives such as the 'Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal' (BBIN) framework, which excludes Pakistan from participation. Dhaka must recognize that it cannot afford to act contrary to its own interests by advocating for Pakistan's agenda in discussions with New Delhi.

Such actions could lead to negative repercussions and be perceived as unfriendly by India. Therefore, Yunus and his administration should reconsider their stance on SAARC and focus on enhancing cooperation with alternative regional groupings like BBIN and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Additionally, factions within the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, radical Islamist groups, and certain elements of the foreign policy establishment, as well as military and civil society leaders, have been calling for the termination of all trade and transit agreements with India that were established during Hasina's tenure. They argue that these agreements dispro-

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Officials from India's Ministry of External Affairs must take proactive steps to communicate to their Bangladeshi counterparts that such strategies are unlikely to yield the desired influence over India. Instead, they risk straining the historically cooperative and friendly bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Bangladeshi diplomats must relay to their leadership the importance of conducting a realistic assessment of their geopolitical position. They must recognize that Bangladesh, given its current circumstances, is ill-equipped to engage in such perilous diplomatic manoeuvres that could lead to unintended consequences.

The overarching message from New Delhi to Dhaka should emphasize the necessity of focusing on pressing domestic challenges that require immediate attention. These challenges include the rapidly deteriorating economy, the management of internal social, economic, and political tensions, the need to address radical Islamist elements, and the overarching goal of ensuring stability within the nation.

While India stands ready to offer assistance and support to Bangladesh, this support must be contingent upon Bangladesh prioritizing India's interests and fostering a relationship grounded in mutual respect and friendship rather than hostility. New Delhi must underscore that maintaining amicable relations with India is fundamentally in Bangladesh's best interest. The nation cannot afford to provoke, let alone antagonize, its larger neighbour, as such actions could have far-reaching repercussions for its security and economic well-being. In conclusion, Bangladesh must recalibrate its diplomatic strategies and focus on building a constructive partnership with India. By doing so, Bangladesh can not only enhance its stability and prosperity but also contribute to a more peaceful and cooperative regional environment.

WHAT AND WHO WILL SAVE INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES

ASHOK THAKUR

The stark reality is that, despite India's willingness to compromise and engage diplomatically, the prospect of establishing amicable relations with the interim government of Bangladesh appears bleak. This situation may come as a surprise to many who view Muhammad Yunus, the chief advisor of the interim government, as a figure who is neither an adversary of India nor a fervent fundamentalist Islamist. Yunus is often seen as a pragmatic leader, someone with whom constructive dialogue and business dealings could be pursued. His reputation as a moderate and a reformist might lead some to believe that he could bridge the gap between the two nations.

However, even if one accepts the notion that Yunus genuinely seeks to foster positive relations with India, the real challenge lies in the dynamics of power within the interim government. The influential student leaders and the coordinators of the Anti-Discriminatory Students' Movement (ADSM) are pivotal players in this political landscape. This movement was instrumental in the ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and its leaders have significant sway over the current political climate. Reports indicate that these student leaders played a crucial role in elevating Yunus to his current position of authority.

Furthermore, they have responded to the demands of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) by facilitating the appointment of Lt-Gen Jahangir Alam Chowdhury (Retd) as the

new advisor for Home Affairs, replacing Brig-Gen Shakhawat Hussain (Retd). This change was allegedly motivated by Brig-Gen Hussain's comments perceived as "pro-Awami" league, which did not sit well with the current power brokers. The student leaders and their supporters harbor a profound and seemingly irreparable hostility towards India. This animosity was starkly illustrated in August 2024, when severe flooding affected the eastern districts of Bangladesh.

Many within the student movement and the broader populace reacted vehemently, blaming India for the disaster. They accused India of opening the sluice gates of the Dumbur dam on the Gumti River, which flows into Bangladesh, without prior notification to Bangladeshi authorities. This lack of communication left the local government unprepared for the flooding's devastating consequences. The resultant outcry included widespread protests and rallies condemning India, with demonstrators issuing threats against the country. Such incidents underscore the deep-seated grievances that exist and highlight the challenges India faces in attempting to navigate its relationship with the current Bangladeshi leadership.

India has made it clear that the recent floods affecting the region were primarily the result of unprecedented torrential rainfall in both India and eastern Bangladesh, rather than any actions or negligence on India's part. This clarification has led to a noticeable decline in the fervent anti-Indian rhetoric that had previously been prevalent among certain

student groups in Bangladesh, often labelled as "revolutionaries." However, a closer examination of their past statements and actions reveals two critical insights.

Firstly, there is a deep-seated animosity towards India that is readily apparent. This hostility often manifests itself in immediate and unsubstantiated accusations against India, driven more by conjecture than by verified facts. A particularly troubling example of this is the earlier outburst from Nahid Islam, who, due to his position as an advisor, lends an official weight to his comments. His remarks not only reflect personal sentiment but also contribute to a broader narrative that is often hostile towards India, highlighting the potential for misinformation to shape public perception.

Secondly, the protests and rallies organized by these groups suggest that there is either a well-structured framework for articulating anti-India sentiments or a readiness to adopt the mobilization strategies seen in the Anti-State Democratic Movement (ASDM) to voice their dissent against India. This indicates a mindset that is perpetually on the lookout for opportunities to criticize India, a mentality that is likely to be deeply entrenched and resistant to change.

The challenge of dismantling such a mindset is significant, particularly in light of the current composition of the advisory council, which appears to be heavily influenced by individuals who harbour strong anti-Indian sentiments. For instance, the advisor for home affairs, Lt-Gen Jahangir Alam

Chowdhury (Retd), has consistently demonstrated a profound disdain for India. His animosity has been evident on numerous occasions, especially during his time as the director-general of Bangladesh Rifles, now known as Border Guards Bangladesh. A notable incident occurred during a visit to India on September 28, 2004, when he met with the then director-general of the Border Security Force (BSF), Ajay Raj Sharma. During this meeting, Chowdhury dismissively rejected the detailed information provided by India regarding the locations of training camps for secessionist rebel groups from northeast India that were operating within Bangladesh.

This incident not only underscores his dismissive attitude towards India but also reflects a broader trend of scepticism and hostility that can complicate diplomatic relations between the two nations. This political landscape is marked by a history of tension and conflict, particularly in the context of regional politics and national identity. The situation escalated dramatically during the violent protests that erupted in response to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka on March 26, 2024, which was intended to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence.

The protests, fueled by anti-India sentiment and concerns over perceived interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs, led to violent clashes. Tragically, these confrontations resulted in the deaths of thirteen individuals, with many more injured, including supporters of Hefazat, security forces, and

activists from the ruling Awami League party. The violence underscored the deep-seated divisions within Bangladeshi society and the volatile nature of its political landscape. In a bid to address the escalating tensions, Chief Advisor Yunus engaged in a constructive dialogue with Hefazat leaders on August 31, 2024. This meeting was seen as a crucial step towards de-escalating the situation and fostering a more stable political environment. However, the underlying issues remain complex and fraught with the potential for further conflict. Given these developments, India must communicate a clear and firm message to the interim government of Bangladesh. India seeks to maintain amicable relations with its neighbours, recognizing the importance of cooperation and mutual respect in the region.

However, it is equally important for the Bangladeshi government to understand that any actions that echo past support for secessionist movements in northeast India will not be tolerated. Such actions could have serious repercussions, potentially destabilizing the region and leading to a deterioration of relations between the two countries.

India must emphasize that the consequences of pursuing a path that undermines regional stability could be significantly more detrimental to Bangladesh than to India itself. The historical context of secessionist movements in northeast India serves as a reminder of the complexities involved in regional politics, and Bangladesh must navigate these challenges with caution and foresight.