

THE DELHI-DHAKA BOND

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

Dec 19, 2020-Saturday

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India's relationship with Bangladesh is arguably its most consequential relationship in the region. The 49th anniversary of diplomatic relations and the birth centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is an opportune time to recognise how far bilateral relations have progressed. Once derided as a basketcase, Bangladesh is now the fastest growing economy in South Asia; it surpasses India on many development indicators; and it has overtaken Pakistan's economy. Sustaining relations with Bangladesh — which saw a turnaround of sorts under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina — has been an important element of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "neighbourhood first" policy too.

Much of what is going on today between the two countries, including the results of Friday's virtual summit, has been about converting goodwill into tangible economic links and steadfast political relations. The two countries are now reconnecting by rail, road and water in the way they were prior to 1965. Conduits for trade and investment keep improving as the two agree to more infrastructure and less red tape. Ms Hasina's government has provided a model of security cooperation. India should involve Bangladesh more in its global initiatives such as Covid-19 and climate.

Both countries should take some time to consider how to reconcile their domestic political narratives. For example, immigration concerns would be best managed through an agreement that accepts the reality of circular migration. Indian visions of Bangladeshi hordes need to be replaced with a realisation that migrants cross in both directions. Dhaka, in turn, needs to be more honest about localised discrimination of minorities and the outward migration this has engendered. Differences over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act arise from such incomplete viewpoints. New Delhi has concerns about the Hasina government's policy of allying with Islamist groups to counterbalance other such groups. This may be politically useful, but all such groups are cut from the same anti-Indian cloth and share a desire to make Bangladesh a theological state. Beijing will continue to expand its influence but as long as Dhaka does not cross security redlines and keeps Delhi in the loop, the China factor can be managed. If these larger meta-issues can be addressed over the coming years, in part though domestic debate, the two countries can be assured of another half-century of improving relations.

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