

RAJA MANDALA: THE CENTRE MOVES EAST

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In focusing on the scale of Sheikh Hasina's victory in the general election a few days ago and the allegations of rigging by her opponents in Bangladesh, it is easy to miss the significant structural change unfolding in Bangladesh and its long-term implications.

As she begins her third continuous term as prime minister, Sheikh Hasina is destined to go down as one of the Subcontinent's most consequential leaders. Combined with an earlier term as PM during 1996-2001, Sheikh Hasina could eventually become one of the longest serving political leaders in South Asia and beyond.

While many other regional leaders have had the fortune to stay in office for long, few have had the privilege to advance their nations like Hasina has. Even fewer have the opportunity to help restructure their regions. Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic improvement of the country's economic prospects. The stability and continuity provided by Hasina has been critical for this transformation.

Under her leadership, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Its per capita income has doubled over the last decade. It is all set to leave the category of "least developed countries". Hasina's ambition is to accelerate the annual economic growth rate from the current 7 per cent to nearly 10 per cent by the time Bangladesh celebrates its 50th birthday in 2021.

What does this economic transformation of Bangladesh mean for the Subcontinent as a whole? For one, it has begun to change the economic hierarchy in the region, by displacing Pakistan in the second spot. The per capita income of Bangladesh, \$1800, is now larger than that of Pakistan's at about \$1600. The aggregate GDP (\$275 bn) is poised to overtake Pakistan's at \$310 bn in the coming years.

More than mere numbers, it is also a question of direction, momentum and national purpose. In contrast to the widespread international scepticism about Pakistan's economic future, there is pervasive economic optimism about Dhaka's economic prospects. If Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) is travelling round the world to stitch together yet another bailout of Pakistan's economy, Sheikh Hasina talks of reducing reliance on aid focusing on trade and investment.

The transformation of Bangladesh is altering some perceptions in Pakistan. The traditional Pakistani condescension towards Bangladesh is yielding to a measure of admiration. Some in Pakistan are urging Islamabad to adopt the “Bangladesh model” — where the focus is on economic development rather than political adventurism and promoting religious moderation instead of extremism. No one, of course, is holding their breath for such a change in Pakistan. For, its military and civilian leadership finds it hard to break from the policies it has embraced for so long.

Second, as Bangladesh rises, it alters the balance within South Asia by tilting the region’s economic centre of gravity towards the east. The economic advancement of Bangladesh helps lift up the whole of the eastern Subcontinent, including India’s Northeast as well as Bhutan and Nepal.

Geography has positioned both Pakistan and Bangladesh as natural “bridge states” within South Asia and between the Subcontinent and the abutting regions. Rawalpindi has chosen destabilisation of its neighbours through cross-border terrorism and insurgencies, while Dhaka has chosen the path of regional cooperation.

It was Dhaka’s initiative that helped found the SAARC in the mid-1980s. Today, the SAARC remains dysfunctional thanks to Pakistan’s reluctance to engage in economic cooperation with India. Rather than criticise Pakistan, we must recognise the sovereign choice that Islamabad has made.

An unintended consequence of Pakistan’s choice has been the fillip to sub-regional cooperation in the eastern Subcontinent involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. Equally important has been the re-vitalisation of the BIMSTEC forum that is pursuing trans-regional cooperation between five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand).

Bangladesh is also critical for the success of Beijing’s plans to integrate its Yunnan province with Myanmar, Bangladesh and eastern India. Unlike the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, where India has concerns over sovereignty, there are fewer problems with the development of the so-called BCIM corridor. There is no doubt that tensions over the Rohingya have cast a shadow over the future of regionalism in the east. But the rapid growth of both Bangladesh and Burma and the weight of the three large economies — China, India and the [ASEAN](#) — flanking them will continue to strengthen the imperatives of regionalism.

Third, thanks also to the initiative of Bangladesh, its maritime territorial issues with India and Burma have been peacefully resolved through arbitration. That opens up significant room for maritime economic and security cooperation within the Bay of Bengal. That in turn will deepen the integration between eastern Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

For far too long South Asian geography has been viewed through the prism of India-Pakistan relations. Unsurprisingly, then, the narrative about South Asia has been largely negative. Consider, for example, descriptions like a “nuclear flashpoint”, the “most dangerous place” in the world and the ‘least integrated region’.

To be sure, Pakistan remains important but mostly for negative reasons. It is a challenge that must be managed. But the rise of Bangladesh and the expanding regional cooperation centred around it allows us to imagine a positive future for the Eastern subcontinent and its integration with the dynamic East Asian region.

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