

COMMENTS TO AVOID IN LONG-STANDING TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

The Chief Minister of Delhi last month warned the Union government about a new strain of the novel coronavirus that has been observed in Singapore that was said to be extremely perilous for children and could visit India as part of a third wave. This triggered a strong denial from the authorities in Singapore that there was any 'Singapore variant', and they reserved the right to invoke against the Chief Minister a domestic law, the [Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act](#), against the online circulation of fake news. During this excessive over-reaction to a comment by the Chief Minister, India's External Affairs Minister, [S. Jaishankar, declared](#) that "irresponsible comments from those who should know better can damage long-standing partnerships" — a wise and pertinent observation.

It is improbable, however, that Mr. Jaishankar similarly cautioned his Cabinet colleague, the Home Minister, against the latter's many derogatory statements with reference to Bangladesh prior to and during the Bharatiya Janata Party's unsuccessful campaign in the election for the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The Home Minister had described illegal Bangladeshi immigrants as vermin that he would push into the Bay of Bengal, and then implied that poor people in Bangladesh were starving, which drew a stinging public rebuke from the Bangladesh Foreign Minister. In this year, the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's liberation and the birth centenary of the father of the nation Sheikh Mubibur Rahman, irresponsible comments from those who should know better are profoundly inappropriate.

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India's relations with Bangladesh, one of the most populous Muslim countries in the world, are acutely sensitive. As a neighbour nearly surrounded on all territorial sides by India, there are the inevitable bilateral problems of long duration, including a perennially favourable balance of trade for India, drought and flood in the 54 transboundary rivers flowing from India to Bangladesh, and the smuggling of goods and vulnerable human beings across the approximately 4,100 kilometre land border.

The turbulent history of Partitions; East Bengal that became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, attended by enormous bloodshed and the abuse of human rights, has left emotional wounds that will take many generations to heal. There are those in Bangladesh who believe that separation from Hindu India in 1947 was more significant than the break with Pakistan in 1971, there remain about three lakh 'Biharis' in Bangladesh who have failed thus far to be resettled in Pakistan, and there is the presence of militant Islamist groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, that have linkages and support from outside Bangladesh.

In contrast to these circles, who take confrontation with India as part of their basic credo, are those who regard their Bengali roots and traditions as being of equal validity as their religious affiliation, and treasure the linguistic and cultural ties with adjacent India. It will take time for these inherent fractures in Bangladeshi society to be resolved, and it is for India to show patience and sympathy to this entirely internal process of healing.

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As *quid pro quo* for India's benign attentions and support, New Delhi's expectations are that a neighbour will keep India's concerns in mind when devising and pursuing its policies, and this understanding is implemented with severity or laxity depending on the regime in New Delhi.

After decades of pro-Pakistani military and civilian governments following 1975, Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina, elected for a third consecutive term since 2008, has consolidated her position as unquestioned leader in Bangladesh. She has maintained vigilant supervision over Muslim fundamentalist terrorists as well as on Northeast militant movements sheltering in Bangladesh, with the result that the pacification of India's Northeast has been greatly facilitated.

She has permitted a considerable degree of connectivity between India and its Northeast by land, river and the use of Bangladeshi ports, and Indian investments in Bangladesh have been encouraged. There are at least 100,000 Indian nationals now living and working in that country. To complete the ties of economic integration, the day will come when, along with free movement of commerce and capital, the movement of persons on the lines of Nepal and Bhutan will have to be considered.

As the leading mid-wife of Bangladesh's liberation struggle and its sole economic supporter in that nation's early years of independence, New Delhi should view with satisfaction Bangladesh's coming graduation in 2026 from 'least developed' to 'developing country' status, and its steady progress as one of South Asia's leading performers in human development indicators. Its eventual membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership cannot be ruled out.

To a certain degree, both India and Bangladesh depend on each other for security and stability. Responsible individuals on both sides of the border, whether in government or the Opposition, must be actively discouraged from words and actions detrimental to the consolidation of the existing cordiality. This is where Mr. Jaishankar's dictum is applicable to members of his own party as well as the Opposition. What is sauce for the goose is equally sauce for the gander.

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