

# DELHI WILL HAVE TO ACCEPT CHINA'S ROLE IN BANGLADESH WHILE SHAPING ITS TIES WITH DHAKA

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Preparations are afoot for Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) to receive Chinese President Xi Jinping at an informal summit (October 11-12) in Mamallapuram. While a formal announcement is still awaited (at the time of writing this article) and uncertainty lingers, a tweet by the Chinese ambassador to India highlighting the need to “further unleash the positive effect of Wuhan” is seen as a signal that the Modi-Xi meeting is on.

The first informal summit between the two leaders was held at Wuhan in April 2018, necessitated by the earlier military stand-off between the Asian giants at Doklam. Prudence at the highest political level enabled the two nations to arrive at a modus-vivendi in Wuhan, though the long-festering territorial dispute and an unresolved 4,000 km-plus Line of Actual Control are tenaciously alive.

The just-concluded visit (October 6) to India by Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, provides an instructive cue as to how the strategic ties between India and China have evolved and future lessons to be drawn from this bilateral relationship. The Bangladesh-India-China triangle is often obscured by the high visibility accorded to Pakistan in the uneasy relationship between the two Asian giants.

India enabled the birth of Bangladesh in December 1971 when it militarily assisted the erstwhile East Pakistan to acquire freedom from its oppressive western wing and this is still venerated as the Liberation War. At the time, the Pakistani army unleashed a massive genocide of its own citizens of Bangla ethnicity. More than 10 million persecuted citizens of East Pakistan fled to India and, as per official, post-liberation estimates in Dhaka — three million people were killed over a two-year period by the Pakistan army.

In the run up to the 1971 Bangladesh war, the US and China, which had begun their own rapprochement, supported Pakistan, and were opposed to Indian assistance to the East Pakistan political leadership — symbolised by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Yet, with tacit support from Moscow, India achieved what may be described as a spectacular military victory — it liberated Dhaka and handed over power to Mujibur Rahman.

It may be conjectured that this emphatic Indian military victory of 1971 led to a strategic reappraisal in Beijing about its democratic neighbour, whom it had militarily humiliated in October 1962. It is my argument that the seeds of the strategic-security anxiety in China about India were sown at that time. For a communist country that implicitly believed that power flowed from the barrel of the gun, an emphatic military victory that resulted in the division of a state (Pakistan) and the creation of a new nation (Bangladesh), could not be treated as one more regional upheaval. The victorious power (India) had to be fettered.

Beijing's response was to invest in Pakistan and, in the intervening decades, a deep and opaque

Sino-Pak strategic and security relationship was nurtured. This in turn emboldened Rawalpindi, the HQ of the Pakistan army, to embark upon a proxy war against India (with terrorism as a tool) that began in 1990 and has continued to-date.

Hence, India's abiding regional strategic objective ought to be one which ensures that Bangladesh does not morph into a Pakistan, either by way of being compelled into choosing Beijing over Delhi; or nurturing radical Islamic ideologies domestically.

It is to the credit of the leadership in both Dhaka and Delhi that despite some missteps and hesitation, the bilateral is currently described as the "best ever" and a template for India's ties with its other neighbours. Dhaka also has robust ties with Beijing and this triangular relationship, if managed with integrity and perspicacity, can unleash the positive potential latent to the Bay of Bengal littoral.

Currently, Bangladesh is an active partner of the Xi Jinping-led BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) that Delhi has steadfastly not signed up to. In the security sector, Bangladesh is also a major recipient of Chinese military inventory, including submarines.

India will have to accept this as part of the evolving regional strategic calculus enabled by China's economic-trade-fiscal clout and shape its own ties with Dhaka in such a manner that a truly win-win-win option can emerge.

The maritime domain, and the Bay of Bengal in particular, with Dhaka as the coxswain, ought to be envisioned at Mamallapuram.

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