

Indo-Bangladesh Relations: Forging Better Ties

After the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), 1974 finally coming into force on the 1st of August, 2015 for the formal exchange of 162 enclaves between them, it was only advisable to further consolidate upon the historical ties by building cascading functional cooperation in other issue areas of mutual interest. The observers feel that the bilateral economic ties between the two continue to be hobbled. There are lingering barriers encouraging illegal trade in many commodities across international borders, resulting in huge revenue loss. The smuggling in cattle and many other items is one glaring example of this.

Even though there has been substantive infrastructural improvement along borders, there is still a lot to be done. The construction and improvement of Land Customs Station (LCS), setting up of Immigration Centres and further development of Land Port across international borders are emergently required along with procedural simplification for bettering the ease of doing business for the traders of two countries. Direct trade in mutually competitive commodities can eliminate the need to trade the same through a third country.

The maritime connectivity between the two countries has long been a problem area, with traders having to operate through the ports of Colombo and Singapore. The consensus reached recently on the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for operating smaller river-sea vessels between them is a path-breaking development. It is sure to give a major thrust to the bilateral trade by way of reduced transportation costs and increased trade volume. Contextualised with the recent beginning of the Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus service, this Agreement will further consolidate the gains made thus far.

Large vessels from the two countries have so far skirted trade through Singapore and Colombo because of marginal profit accruals. Being fairly long routes, the transportation charges and the cost of goods have only increased over the years. The economic ties between the two suffered all these years owing to adverse economies of scale. The movement of cargo across the extant maritime expanse straddling India and Bangladesh was impeded due to

unviable sea route. Hence, the need for such an SOP. It is now hoped that the smaller ships will directly connect India's eastern ports with the Bangladesh ports including Chittagong.

It is believed that the ensuing competitive freight rates will boost bilateral trade in addition to providing direct trading linkages rather than negotiating the same through a third country. Nevertheless, it is felt that the list of permissible commodities should be expanded to further liberate the trading potential between the two neighbours. The instant agreement opens new vistas in bilateral cooperation by committing both countries to accord same treatment to the other vessels as done to national ones.

The other highlight of the SOP is that both countries have agreed to use what they call River Sea Vessels (RSV) for coastal shipping. With one trade barrier crossed, it becomes still more imperative to implement the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) on the use of Mongla and Chittagong ports (Both in Bangladesh) and the dredging of intervening rivers. It is axiomatic that trade cannot flourish if the draft in the upper reaches of rivers is low. A positive beginning has been made but the future growth of bilateral trade will depend on the follow through which is no less critical.

A cognate subject warranting attention is the border management of common rivers and sharing of their waters including Teesta. But Teesta water sharing, of all issues, has eluded a solution due to domestic political constraints. Foreign policy observers feel that unless the two governments secure the interests of West Bengal farmers, it would be a herculean task to reach a consensus on the issue.

The menacing pace at which terrorist groups including ISIS, Al Qaida and Taliban have been spreading their tentacles, it won't be long before they reach our shores. And Bangladesh is no less affected with terrorism. Hence, it is very much advisable for the two governments to start coordinating their acts for wide-ranging bilateral cooperation.

Drug trafficking in the border areas has lately emerged as a major concern as it is this activity which finances many terror groups across the world. Such Narco-terrorism not only targets our youths, but also weakens the societal bonding by spreading disaffection. India has greatly succeeded in extirpating the menace of poppy cultivation, a major source of drug money, in its border areas but poppy cultivation in Bangladesh remains a worry. Given the regular movement of militants across their international borders, a reinforced Extradition Policy for the exchange of prisoners languishing in each other's jails will suit the security interests of both. The recent extradition of Anup Chetia from Bangladesh is a positive development in this direction.

A list of prisoners was exchanged during a recent high level meeting between the two countries. The Bangladeshi authorities handed over a list of Indians in Bangladesh jails and received a list of Bangladeshi nationals in Indian correctional homes. The two countries need to coordinate their acts to forge a common strategy including coordinated sharing of intelligence to deal with these problems.

During an Indo-Bangladesh conclave at Siliguri in January 2015, problems including poppy cultivation, cattle smuggling and management of common rivers were discussed. Survey, construction, repair of missing border pillars and continuation of periodic BGB-BSF

flag meetings on a regular basis was also discussed during the talks. The newly introduced quarterly meetings are also to be convened at the DM and DC levels.

There is yet another issue meriting attention of the two regimes namely the protection of Sunderbans. As a natural heritage site shared by India and Bangladesh, Sunderbans has long been awaiting a coordinated endeavour to avoid the ecological disaster in the offing. The rising sea level precipitated by global warming has been gobbling large chunks of lush and verdant mangroves of Sunderbans. Experts fear that a day may soon come when both India and Bangladesh will have to redraw their maps as they lose their lands to the sea. Consequently, the world will lose one of the largest biosphere reserves functioning as air purifier.

Apart from the looming territorial loss, thousands of people would lose their homes and hearths and the Royal Bengal Tiger will face extinction. The littoral cities like Calcutta and Khulna are likely to be ravaged by frequent natural disasters including cyclones, unseasonal rains or prolonged dry spells if these mangroves continue to vanish. A premonition of this was given by the cyclone Aila, which caused large-scale devastation in West Bengal and Bangladesh in 2009.

Against this background, it is heartening to know that both India and Bangladesh have started coordinating their efforts for saving Sunderbans. Reportedly, both countries have already submitted their proposals at the Climate Change Summit in Paris recently for tackling the impending crisis. Experts, who have long been voicing their concerns over Sunderbans, have welcomed the development. However, any effort to protect the heritage mangroves must begin with the local people. An inclusive and holistic approach, which addresses the ecological imperatives of the region while simultaneously cushioning the inhabitants, has to be visualised.

The exchange of enclaves was only one the many border issues resolved, but the yet undemarcated border in many sectors along their borders is another issue requiring attention. The survey, construction and repair of missing border pillars including exchange of cadastral survey (CS) records between their bordering districts are some of the tasks which need to be taken up with despatch. Be it noted that some CS records of Bangladeshi Dinajpur district are in Indian South Dinajpur and some CS records of Indian South Dinajpur district are in Bangladeshi Dinajpur. It is heartening to note that the two countries have been coordinating their acts for some time now over many outstanding issues to develop a dynamic bilateral cooperation in many issue areas of mutual interest.

Salient Points

- After the Indo-Bangladesh LBA, 1974 finally coming into force on the 1st of August, 2015 it was only advisable to further consolidate upon other areas of mutual interest.
- There are lingering barriers encouraging illegal trade, resulting in huge revenue loss.
- Direct trade in mutually competitive commodities can eliminate the need to trade the same through a third country.
- The maritime connectivity between the two countries has long been a problem area. The consensus reached recently on the SOP for operating smaller river-sea vessels (RSV) between them is a path-breaking development.

- Border management of common rivers and sharing of their waters including Teesta is an important issue.
- Drug trafficking, terror activities are the other issue which require to be coordinated for wide ranging bilateral cooperation.
- As a natural heritage site shared by India and Bangladesh, Sunderbans has long been awaiting a coordinated endeavour to avoid the ecological disaster.
- Reportedly, both countries have already submitted their proposals at the Climate Change Summit in Paris recently for tackling the impending crisis.

Glossary

Hobbled: to proceed irregularly and haltingly

Gobbling: to eat hastily