



A TALE OF TWO FRONTIERS

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(MainsGS2: India and its neighborhood- relations.)

Context:

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi travels to Dhaka this week to commemorate an important moment in the subcontinent's modern history i.e. Bangladesh's Declaration of Independence from Pakistan 50 years ago.
- Prime minister is visiting at the invitation of Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina and will participate in the commemoration of "three epochal events" – Mujib Borsho, the birth centenary of Bangladesh's father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 50 years of diplomatic ties, and 50 years of Bangladesh's war of liberation.
- There is much to celebrate and a lot to reflect upon, including the different trajectories of India's eastern and north-western frontiers.

The impressive progress of Bangladesh:

- The very impressive economic and social progress in Bangladesh is a source of inspiration not only for South Asia but also the entire developing world.
- From being one of the world's poorest countries in 1972, Bangladesh is now racing to be in the world's top 25 economies by the end of this decade.

Two partition and two different ways:

- Inability of the region to come to a closure after two Partitions of the subcontinent, nearly 75 years after the first in 1947 and 50 after the second in 1971, shows different stories all together.
- In the east (Bangladesh), Delhi and Dhaka have started finding ways to overcome the tragedy of the Partition to chart a new course of bilateral and regional cooperation.
- Over the last decade, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has invested much in the transformation of Dhaka's bilateral ties with Delhi. India has reciprocated in good measure.

- In the north-west (Pakistan), however, positive changes in India's relations with Pakistan have been elusive.
- Hopes have been rekindled by the agreement late last month between the two military establishments to a ceasefire on the border and to address each other's concerns.
- The expectations for change have been reinforced by Pakistan Army Chief's speech last week at a conference in Islamabad, when he called on India and Pakistan to "bury the past and move forward".
- Reconciliation is harder between Islamabad and Dhaka.
- Pakistani leaders will not be present in Dhaka this week underlines the bitterness that lingers in Bangladesh and a deep reluctance in Pakistan to come to terms with the separation.

The concerns:

- While India celebrates its role in the second Partition, the lingering issues from the first Partition continue to cast a shadow over Delhi's relations with Dhaka.
- These include the rights of minorities, cross-border movement of people, and river water sharing.
- Meanwhile, Bangladesh continues the struggle to reconcile competing domestic political perspectives about 1971.
- There are deep differences in the interpretation of the nation's history, the nature of its ideology, and preferred ties with India and Pakistan.
- Delhi will be unwise to underestimate the depth of these domestic contestations or to take the relationship with Bangladesh for granted.
- Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has provided strong leadership in advancing ties with India over the last decade and more.
- Her success in providing domestic political stability and generating rapid economic growth were critical in providing the enabling environment for the construction of robust bilateral ties with India.
- The steady improvement in bilateral relations over the last decade has reflected in growing trade volumes, expanding trans-border connectivity, mutual cooperation on terrorism, and widening regional cooperation.
- Thus Prime Minister Narendra Modi was right to proclaim a golden age in bilateral relations. We are only at the dawn of that age— there is much that remains to be done to realise the full potential of the bilateral relationship.

Lessons from the east to be applied in the west:

Political stability:

- Political stability and policy continuity helped Delhi and Dhaka deepen bilateral ties over the last decade.
- In contrast, the political cycles in Delhi and Islamabad have rarely been in sync.

- Pakistan's mainstream civilian leaders have all supported engagement with India. In fact, it is the military that is yet to make up its collective mind.
 - Example: General Pervez Musharraf had negotiated a framework for settling the Kashmir dispute with then PM Manmohan Singh.
 - But General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, despite his association with Musharraf's peace process, chose to distance himself once he became the army chief.
 - Many in Delhi ask if Gen Bajwa's successor will abide by any agreement that India might negotiate with him in the days ahead.

Mutual security:

- Cooperation in countering terrorism built deep mutual trust between Dhaka and Delhi.
- That trust helped deal with many complex issues facing the relationship.
- In the case of Pakistan, its army has sought to use cross-border terrorism as a political lever to compel India to negotiate on Kashmir.
- If sponsoring terror seemed a smart strategy in the past, it has now become the source of international political and economic pressure on Pakistan.
- In any event, Delhi has no reason to negotiate with a gun pointed at its head.

National economic interest:

- Countries need to depoliticise issues of enlightened national economic interest for growth and prosperity in the region.
- Delhi and Dhaka have steadily moved forward on issues relating to trade, transit and connectivity by dealing with them on their own specific merits.
- Pakistan, on the other hand, has made sensible bilateral commercial cooperation and regional economic integration hostages to the Kashmir question.
- It is not clear if Pakistan is ready to separate the two and expand trade ties while talking to India on Kashmir.

Conclusion:

- The big idea in Pakistan's army chief speech was about the new desire to put geo-economics above geopolitics.
- He also underlined the importance of pursuing national well-being through regional cooperation.
- That is exactly what Bangladesh has done in the last decade to generate major gains at home, transform the eastern South Asia, and elevate Dhaka's global standing.

