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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## **Bangladesh-China: An Emerging Equation in Asian Diplomatic Calculations**

**Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>**

### **Executive summary**

The paper traces the evolution of Bangladesh-China relations over time and seeks to demonstrate that it symbolises an emerging equation in Asia's diplomatic calculations. These are the fruition of a consistent pattern in China's policy, entailing its pursuit to secure an ally in the South Asian region. They also pertain to the imperatives driving the forging of this alliance of a geographically smaller and strategically weaker, yet very active and potentially important, international actor, Bangladesh, seeking to buttress its sense of 'reinsurance' with regard to its twin goals of security and development.

It is a new model in the sense that the Sino-Bangla amity is not designed as a traditional 'balance of power' counterpoise to India, unlike the Sino-Pak strategic relationship. Rather, in this case Bangladesh can be seen as a conduit or bridge connecting China with the other rising power in Asia, India.

This becomes evident in the Joint Statement that was issued at the end of a recent visit (17 March to 21 March 2010) of the Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, to China. It contains at least two important and novel initiatives or measures that lend credence to such possible role for Bangladesh. One is the agreement to exchange data on the Brahmaputra river project, something that involves India very deeply as well. If China and India can set up a mechanism for exchanging data on the Brahmaputra (China is said to be planning an upstream diversion of its waters that would adversely affect the lower riparian India and Bangladesh), India would also stand to benefit, given its close links with Bangladesh. The other is the establishment of a

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He was the (Foreign Advisor) Foreign Minister of Bangladesh from 2007-2009. He can be contacted at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg). The views reflected in this paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

‘quadrilateral’ grouping, comprising Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM). This ‘quadrilateralism’ could have a very positive impact in the reduction of tensions in the region. Paradigmatically, it reflects a new type of grouping being created in a rising Asia to enhance interstate collaboration, a model different from the one offered by the European Union, as pointed out recently in a speech in New Delhi by the Senior Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong. There is scope for emulating this kind of arrangement, or grouping, in other parts of Asia in order to be able to constructively associate China in a collaborative framework, if not comprehensively, at least in some specific and critical ‘issue- areas’.

Finally, this essay is also a study of how the Chinese foreign policy works; its strategic consistency despite occasional tactical shifts that do not affect its long-term vision and perspectives, its friendly but persuasive posturing in negotiations, its reluctance to have its ‘red lines’ crossed in any situation, and its long time frame in looking for results. On the other hand, it also shows how a country, Bangladesh, once written-off by Henry Kissinger as a global ‘basket-case’ is slowly but surely positioning itself, poised to play an active regional and international role. The world of foreign relations is always in a flux. In contemporary times, pragmatism, not ideology, has been key.

## **Introduction**

The unmistakable signs of the strengthening of ties between Bangladesh and China, as evidenced in the recently concluded five-day visit by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Beijing, is a demonstration of the fact that in this case pragmatism is the principal *primum movens* guiding interstate relations. This implied the ignoring of uncomfortable historical facts, or at least, a revision of the perceptions of the events. For instance, China had been seen to have opposed the creation of Bangladesh. Thereafter it appeared to have blocked for many years the aspiration of the nascent state to be a member of the United Nations (UN). During this period Bangladesh nudged closer to China’s principal global rivals, India and the Soviet Union, much, at that time, to China’s discomfort.

These now appear to be long-forgotten facts of the past. China today publicly recognises Bangladesh as an “all-weather friend”,<sup>2</sup> a phrase usually reserved for its closest allies such as Pakistan (it was a level of relationship that justified a “comprehensive partnership of cooperation”). How has this come about? What are the exigencies of circumstances that led to this remarkable turnaround? Indeed, was there really a ‘turnaround’ since China’s posture towards Bangladesh’s independence was more subtle and less ‘cut-and-dried’ than what is generally the received wisdom. This paper will seek to respond to these queries and examine the nature of this new emerging equation in Asian diplomatic calculations, the burgeoning relations between Bangladesh and China.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase was used by the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi during his visit to Bangladesh on 24-25 April 2008, when he was hosted by the author, then Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of the Bangladesh Caretaker Government.

## The Historical Backdrop

During the period when the present-day Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan (East Pakistan), that is, between 1947 and 1971 the relations between the province and its people, and China and the Chinese, were traditionally close. Even though President Ayub Khan of Pakistan was seen as the main inspiration of Pakistan's pro-China policy in the 1960s, the process was actually initiated earlier by H.S Suhrawardy, the Awami League Prime Minister of Pakistan, a Bengali, who had visited China in the mid-1950s.<sup>3</sup> In 1956, the Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai paid a successful visit to Dhaka during the office of an Awami League-led government in East Pakistan headed by Chief Minister Aaur Rahman Khan. It was on that occasion that Zhou declared, using Bengali words to the great delight and rapturous applause of a huge audience at the Dhaka Stadium, 'Pak-Chin *bhai bhai*' and '*Bishwa shanti omor houk*'.<sup>4</sup> This early relationship with the Awami League was the key to enabling a return to amity even after, and indeed in spite of, China's perceived opposition towards Bangladesh at its founding.

There was a strong left tradition in East Pakistani politics with several key personalities having marked pro-Beijing leanings. Foremost among them was Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, the leader of the National Awami Party (NAP). The party he headed was viewed as pro-Beijing as opposed to the pro-Moscow NAP led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. There was also the East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) led by Mohammad Toaha and Abdul Huq. These radical parties were not generally supportive of the Bangladesh movement as they viewed this as an extension of 'Indo-Soviet expansionism'.<sup>5</sup> These views were in line with the position adopted by Beijing as the struggle for Bangladesh unfolded. However, Bhashani fell in line of the Awami League after his initial approaches towards Beijing for not supporting Pakistan appeared to be ignored.<sup>6</sup> The point made here is that Beijing's posture on the issue was not totally without a support base among Bengali politicians.<sup>7</sup> It is true, however, that an overwhelming majority of East Pakistanis resented their neglect by the Pakistani central authorities, who appeared to view their province, then 56 per cent of the country in terms of population as 'an investment opportunity or a source of foreign exchange'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Awami League was at the vanguard of the Bangladesh movement, that found fruition in the emergence of that independent State in 1971, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

<sup>4</sup> 'Pakistan and China are brothers', and 'long live global peace', the former slogan addressed to the public in general, and the latter designed to resonate with the sentiments of Bengal's strong leftist traditions.

<sup>5</sup> A good assessment of this attitude of radical Bengali parties is provided in, Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> These appeals can be seen in, *Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashan's Appeal to World Leaders* (Dacca: Public Relations Department of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh u.d.), pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Toaha, more extreme in this position than others, along with the Indian Calcutta-based far-left politician, Ashim Chatterjee, was quoted in broadcasts on Radio Peking and its ally, Radio Tirana. See, Tariq Ali, 'Pakistan and Bangladesh: Results and Prospects', in Robin Blackburn (ed.) *Explosion in a Subcontinent* (Penguin, 1975), p. 318.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2004), p. 74.

## Beijing and the Bangladesh Movement

China was Pakistan's most ardent supporter and viewed the Indo-Soviet support to the Bangladesh movement with the highest suspicion. Nonetheless, the Chinese leadership sought to restrain Pakistani authorities following the crackdown by its military on East Pakistan, beginning on 26 March 1971 that led to the war ending in Bangladesh's severance from Pakistan and independence in December 1971. Indeed as early as in April 1971, Premier Zhou addressed a letter to the Pakistani President General Yahya Khan to resolve the problems in East Pakistan through 'consultations' (rather than through military action as Yahya was obviously seeking to do) with 'leaders of *various quarters*' [including those of the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Mujib) who was then incarcerated in Pakistani prison].<sup>9</sup>

This advice by the Chinese to Pakistan, to settle the differences with the Bengali leadership politically, was tendered on several occasions, as stated by a senior Pakistani Army General, who was soon to become the Commander-in-Chief and who had visited Beijing that summer along with the Pakistani Foreign Secretary S. M. Khan with the aim of seeking material assistance from China.<sup>10</sup> A higher level mission led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, later to be Pakistan's President and Prime Minister did not meet with any greater success.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Chinese position, a subtle one, was that while withholding support for Pakistan's domestic stratagem of a military solution to the East Pakistan imbroglio, it was providing it support at an international level by opposing Indo-Soviet plans that seemed to be leading to a break-up of the Pakistani state. Such support was based on fears that countries other than Pakistan (China?) could also be threatened with dismemberment through 'Indo-Soviet collusion'.<sup>12</sup>

When the Indo-Pakistan war broke out in December 1971, China's military support to Pakistan was not forthcoming. The Pakistani troops on the ground in East Pakistan actually expected such support, and Gohar Ayub Khan, son of former President Ayub Khan, who himself in due course became Pakistan's Foreign Minister writes that some Pakistani officers took the approaching Indian soldiers to be Chinese troops coming to assist, went forward to greet them, and were subsequently captured!<sup>13</sup> It was also noted among officials of the Bangladesh government in exile that the Pakistani Ambassador in Beijing, K. M. Kaiser, a Bengali and friend of Sheikh Mujib, who was close to the Chinese leadership, was briefing Zhou sympathetically about Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup>

China's position on the Bangladesh movement, thus, was not one of opposing the independence of Bangladesh *per se*. It was far more subtle than that and was executed at two levels. At one

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<sup>9</sup> *Pakistan Times*, 13 April, 1971. Since there has been some controversy surrounding some of its contents, and allegations that the Pakistani media did not publish it in its entirety, for the full text see, J.A. Naik, *India, Russia, China and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1972), Appendix 7, p. 138. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Lt. Gen. Gul Hassan Khan, *Memoirs*, (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 282. Also see, G.W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1974), p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> Kalim Siddiqui, *Conflict, Crisis and War in Pakistan* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 14

<sup>12</sup> Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1979), p. 906.

<sup>13</sup> Gohar Ayub Khan, *Glimpses into the Corridors of Power* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> *Crisis in Bangladesh Movement*, Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, Mujibnagar, 25 September 1971), pp. 5-6. It may be noted that this was a publication by the government-in-exile while the movement for independence was ongoing.

level China was urging calm on Pakistan and encouraging its leaders to resolve the issues politically. At another, it was extending strong verbal opposition to ‘Soviet hegemonism’ and ‘Indian expansionism’,<sup>15</sup> but not sufficiently forcefully (that is, not militarising the opposition) to prevent the birth of Bangladesh. It is true that China had difficulties in countenancing the dismemberment of its close ally Pakistan; but if the result was an additional friend in another sovereign state on India’s flank, the situation was far more palatable from the Chinese perspective. The problem for the Chinese here was two-fold: one was the accretion of the dreaded Indo-Soviet influence in the reshaping of the regional map; and the other was the fact that the new state clearly close to India, the country to which it owed its independence in large measure.

The thrust of Chinese diplomacy thereafter was on consolidating its own strengths in the body politic of Bangladesh, and trying to wean Bangladesh away at a later date from the Indian fold. So, when China vetoed Bangladesh’s UN membership, the reason assigned was the presence of Indian troops on Bangladeshi soil (“foreign military occupation”). While Dhaka initially saw the Chinese action as a disappointment, it was also viewed as beneficial by some quarters to the extent it expedited Indian withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> Following mutual recognition of each other by Bangladesh and Pakistan, China withdrew its objections and welcomed the settlement.<sup>17</sup>

## **A Partnership Begins**

Once the war-related issues between Bangladesh and Pakistan were laid to rest, there was no major impediment to the development of the Sino-Bangladesh partnership. It now appeared that Bangladesh, in many ways, inherited as a legacy from Pakistan its connections with China.

However, there was one major difference. Pakistan viewed China as a clear counterpoise to India. For Bangladesh it was more complex and largely depended on how the party in power perceived India: the ‘counterpoise-to-India paradigm’ was more applicable to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whereas the Awami League favoured a parallel relationship along with that of India, nonetheless seeing China as a kind of ‘reinsurance’. This was applicable not only vis-à-vis India, but also with regard to Myanmar, and indeed the global community as China was the only big power which could be said to be an ally of Bangladesh. This was also unlike Pakistan which could count on such linkages with the United States (US), for instance. In many ways, therefore, the China connection for Bangladesh was even more critical than it was for Pakistan. Hence, it was no surprise that regarding China there was a measure of consensus among Bangladeshi political parties. This was not so vis-à-vis India, with regard to which the Awami League was clearly positive, and the BNP was not.

In the late 1970s, General Ziaur Rahman (the founder of the BNP and husband of the current BNP leader Begum Zia) was strongly supported by Beijing in the dispute with India on the

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<sup>15</sup> The Chinese chief delegate to the United Nations, Huang Hua, vehemently criticised the Indo-Soviet collaboration as ‘song in duet’. *Peking Review* (10 December 1971), pp 8-10.

<sup>16</sup> Jamsheed Marker, *Quiet Diplomacy: Memoirs of an Ambassador of Pakistan* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> *Kiesing’s Contemporary Archives* (14 July 1974), p. 26610

Farakka barrage (at which India was alleged to be diverting the Ganges water upstream). He was feted in Beijing, where the Chinese Vice Premier Li Hsien Nien declared: “China firmly supports the government and the people of Bangladesh in their just struggle to safeguard national independence and state sovereignty, and resist foreign interference”.<sup>18</sup> Shortly thereafter the Chinese Charge d’affaires in Dhaka stated, even more explicitly: “We firmly support the reasonable stand taken by Bangladesh on the question of sharing of waters of the Ganges River”.<sup>19</sup> The language used in the two statements was very similar to the kind used by the Chinese in the case of Pakistan. Ideally the Chinese would have looked to support from Bangladesh against Soviet ‘hegemonism’, but given that Bangladesh’s strategic weakness precluded it from taking on the Soviet superpower which Beijing appeared to understand, had to remain content with support on lesser issues like Kampuchea.<sup>20</sup>

The relationship continued through all governments in Bangladesh. After Ziaur Rahman, President Ershad was warmly received in Beijing in the 1980s. During the 1990s, Bangladesh governments belonged in turn to the BNP, led by Begum Zia, and the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina. Both developed strong links with China. Begum Zia signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Beijing in 2002. Considerable arms procurement by Bangladesh from China began taking place, in a manner similar to Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> Some Indian analysts saw this as China’s “intrusiveness” in South Asia. In another development signifying stronger ties, the year 2005 was declared the ‘Bangladesh-China Friendship Year’.

The camaraderie continued during the period of the Caretaker Government in Bangladesh whose head Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed was made a Guest-of-Honour at the Paralympics in Beijing in 2008, and during whose visit President Hu Jintao described bilateral relations being based on “comprehensive partnership for cooperation”.<sup>22</sup> But it is also noteworthy where Chinese *red lines* were concerned, China was unbending. For instance, it would not allow Bangladesh’s opening up with Taiwan, and reacted adversely to one such effort, forcing Bangladesh to ultimately relent.<sup>23</sup>

Defence procurement by Bangladesh from China became a core component of bilateral ties. It also produced in the Bangladesh armed forces – a powerful element in the policy-making stream – a key lobby for closer links with China. According to a report submitted by China to the UN Arms Transfer Register (for the first time in nearly ten years) in 2007, China appeared to have made significant arms sales to Bangladesh. These were said to have included, as sales in the

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<sup>18</sup> *Bangladesh*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Dacca; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 15 January, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> At a Non-Aligned meeting in Havana in September 1977, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Shamsul Huq, in line with the Chinese position, stressed the right of the Kampuchean people ‘to freely choose a government without any external interference or foreign military presence or intervention’. *Bangladesh Observer*, 3 September 1979.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Dr Subash Kapila, ‘Bangladesh-China Defence Cooperation Agreement’s Strategic Implications: An Analysis’, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No. 582 (14 January 2003).

<sup>22</sup> *Asia Pulse News*, 17 September 2008.

<sup>23</sup> See Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, *A Method in the Dragon’s Moods: Why China Behaves as it Does*, ISAS Working Paper No. 75, July 2009, pp. 12-13.

previous year, 65 large calibre artillery systems, 16 combat aircraft, and 114 missile and related equipment, rendering Bangladesh that year the prime purchaser of weapons made in China.<sup>24</sup>

While China has emerged as Bangladesh's largest trading partner with bilateral trade reaching US\$4.58 billion in 2009 (despite a 2.2 per cent negative growth vis-à-vis 2008 when the trade was US\$4.8 billion),<sup>25</sup> its trade deficit with China has also reached a high of US\$4.3 billion. Bangladesh would prefer to reduce this imbalance for both political and economic reasons. But the problem lies mostly in the limited items that Bangladesh has to offer to China as exports. The latter are currently confined to raw jute and finished leather products. Despite the fact that ready-made garments (RMG) constitute Bangladesh's principal exports (worth approximately US\$13 billion annually), its sale to China of this is valued at only US\$20 million, as against China's import of US\$2 billion, indicating that an untapped market for Bangladeshi traders exists in China. To offset the trade imbalance, China granted tariff-free access to 84 Bangladeshi commodities within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement.<sup>26</sup> This was obviously insufficient. But as far as enhanced market access is concerned, much would depend, not so much on preferential market-access, but on the entrepreneurial spirit of Bangladeshi exporters, by their own admission.<sup>27</sup>

On the aid side, however, the disbursements have not been very large from China. To-date, China has provided Bangladesh US\$1.5 billion, of which US\$978 million have been as hard loans, whereas Bangladesh had hoped for softer terms.<sup>28</sup> At a meeting of the Joint Economic Commission (JEC) in 2009 in Beijing, the Chinese side showed interest in financing only five projects worth a little over US\$1 billion as opposed to the US\$5.14 billion assistance requested by the Bangladeshi side for 28 projects.<sup>29</sup> However, during the recent visit of Prime Minister Hasina to Beijing in March 2010 (discussed in greater detail in the following section), China was far more forthcoming, indicating the efficacy of high level political contacts in the breaking of economic impasses, particularly when it relates to China. However, the fact remains that despite the lack of obvious 'conditionalities', Chinese assistance does involve '*quid pro quos*', on a case-by-case basis.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pranab Dhal Samantha, 'Breaking 10-year silence, China reveals it is now No 1 arms supplier to Bangladesh', <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/breaking-10year-silence-china-reveals-its/215320>, 9 September 2007. Accessed on 20 March 2010.

<sup>25</sup> This was mainly because of a drop in Chinese exports to Bangladesh in that year of recession. The comparatively much smaller Bangladeshi exports to China actually increased 7 per cent to US\$141 million in 2009 from US\$132 in 2008. These and other statistics are cited from article by Kazi Azizul Islam, 'Bangladesh's trade deficit with China at \$ 4.3 bn', *New Age*, 17 March 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdury, *A Method in the Dragon's Moods*, op cit, pp. 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> Anisul Huq, a leading exporter said: The size of China's domestic market for apparels is huge and Bangladesh has *unused* capacity to supply many categories of garments at competitive prices', *New Age*, 17 March 2010. Emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Rejaul Karim Byron, 'China offers \$1bn for 5 projects', <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2009/08/04/75246.html>. Accessed on 6 September 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> For an interesting study of the opacity and 'hidden' conditionalities of Chinese aid, see Christopher Walker and Sarah Cook, 'The dark side of China aid', *International Herald Tribune*, 25 March 2010.

## Hasina in Beijing

It was on such a matrix of bilateral relations, that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, who had assumed office in January 2009, visited China (17-21 March 2010). She had already travelled to a very warm reception in New Delhi earlier in January 2010, possibly indicating a higher pecking order for India in her calculations. Nonetheless, too much should not be deduced from that since it was expected that Delhi would come on her list first, and the timings were close enough to signal a wish for balance. Dhaka also views relations with China as an important alliance in terms of linking a South Asian state with a global power in much the same way as India has been linked to the US strategically. Indeed, a senior Awami League politician, Obaidul Quader, a member of the party's Presidium, said that he believed that 'a pro-active and *balanced* (a key expression, as it has ramifications for India) diplomacy', like that between Washington and New Delhi, could be established by the visit.<sup>31</sup> Given regional and global sensitivities, some sharp Bangladeshi analysts indicated wariness about emphasising too much upon a positive outcome: "We should be careful enough not to advertise more than our gain from the visit", noted a writer on Bangladesh's foreign relations, Masum Billah.<sup>32</sup>

Through its spokesman, Qin Gang, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced that Beijing 'highly values' Hasina's visit, and hoped that it would 'contribute to the *steady* development of Sino-Bangladesh ties'.<sup>33</sup> By describing the ties as 'steady', the spokesman was underscoring the fact that it was a 'process' rather than an 'event' and a gradual evolution. This point was further illustrated in the Joint Statement issued during the visit which referred to a "*Closer* Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation",<sup>34</sup> the term 'closer' denoting an incremental advance over the earlier phrase 'comprehensive partnership of cooperation'. This is an interesting element in China's diplomatic style.

In line with China's preference for funding landmark iconic projects, infrastructure received high focus during the visit. The two sides signed four major documents. These were (1) an Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation; (2) Framework Agreement on Providing Preferential Loan; (3) the Protocol on Remitting the Bangladesh Interest-free Loan due in 2008; and (4) the Exchange of Letters on the Construction of the Seventh Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge. They agreed to 'intensify' efforts for the start of further infrastructural projects such as the eighth Friendship Bridge (across the Meghna) and the construction by China of the Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Centre.

A major concern for environmentalists in India and Bangladesh had been the proposed diversion by China of the waters of the Brahmaputra River, flowing into India, and thereafter into

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<sup>31</sup> 'Indo-US ties a model for Bangladesh and China', [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/indo-us-ties-a-model-for-bangladesh-and-china\\_100325300.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/indo-us-ties-a-model-for-bangladesh-and-china_100325300.html). Accessed on 25 February 2010. Also see, Hasan Jahid Tusher, 'Dhaka eyes \$3b aid from Beijing: PM goes to China March 17; connectivity top agenda', *Daily Star*, 24 February 2010. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> M. Masum Billah, 'Boosting ties with China', *New Nation*, 17 March 2010.

<sup>33</sup> K.J.M. Varma, 'Sheikh Hasina meets Wen Jiabao', *Press Trust of India*, 19 March 2010. [http://www.ptinews.com/571159\\_Sheikh-Hasina-meets-Wen-Jiabao](http://www.ptinews.com/571159_Sheikh-Hasina-meets-Wen-Jiabao). Accessed on 19 March 2010. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> 'Dhaka-Beijing joint statement outlines closer cooperation', *Daily Star*, 20 March 2010. This article is also the source of other data cited from the joint statement. Emphasis added.



Bangladesh.<sup>35</sup> The river, with an average altitude of 4000 metres, is the highest in the world, and runs 2057 metres in Tibet before entering India. It is now apprehended that China may divert the waters to the parched Yellow river. India should be pleased with the fact that Hasina took the issue up with the Chinese, and both sides “discussed the need for regular exchange of information and consultation on the use of the water resources of river Yarlungzangbu/ Brahmaputra to ensure sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperation in this regard”.<sup>36</sup> The two sides also agreed to examine the possibility of the setting up of an institutional mechanism for such consultations including *all* co-riparian countries. The Indian reaction to this would be interesting, because in the past, vis-à-vis Bangladesh, India had been less keen on similar projects (for instance, with Nepal included). But this time India should be pleased that Hasina was able to perform a task from which benefits may accrue to them, and which they would perhaps have liked to perform themselves, only that, in their case, much less Chinese sympathy would have been forthcoming.

Another very interesting development during the visit was the discussion on the shapes of a potential new regional arrangement. The statement read: “The two sides agreed to actively participate in and promote the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) regional economic cooperation process”.<sup>37</sup> The endorsement of this idea found immediate resonance in the Bangladesh media. An editorial in the *Daily Star*, a prestigious and influential daily noted: “That Dhaka and Beijing have agreed to carry the process forward only adds another dimension to bilateral relations as well as reshaping perspectives in the region”.<sup>38</sup> Such an arrangement would have profound regional and even global ramifications. India and China would be in a single regional forum, a rarity to say the least. The four countries have many issues between them – economic, strategic and political. If the idea works it would certainly help lessen tensions and enhance stability in the region. Given that Hasina is so closely linked to the idea, New Delhi would be expected to pay it close attention.

At a lunch at the Bangladesh-China Business Forum, Hasina sought Chinese cooperation to construct a deep-sea port in Chittagong. Just so that this is *not* misconstrued in any way a part of the so-called ‘string of pearls’ strategy that India holds with suspicion,<sup>39</sup> Hasina appeared to invite India to benefit from it, by stating: “China can benefit from using the deep seaport, while *all neighbouring countries* can also use it”.<sup>40</sup> She called for what appeared to be ‘friendship investments’ (that is, beyond what is purely dictated by the market), by urging that these would be both ‘lucrative’ and also ‘further strengthen our two countries’ relations’.<sup>41</sup> As of January 2010, 186 Chinese investment proposals worth US\$320 million had been registered with the

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<sup>35</sup> See Brahma Chellaney, ‘Sino-Indian Water Divide’, *Lhasa Post*, 25 August 2009.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Star*, 20 March 2010.

<sup>37</sup> As in 34.

<sup>38</sup> ‘After the PM’s visit to Beijing, healthy new dimension comes into bilateral ties’, Editorial, *Daily Star*, 21 March 2010.

<sup>39</sup> For a study on this strategy, see Christopher J. Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College. <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs?display.cfm?Pubid=721>. Accessed on 9 July 2009.

<sup>40</sup> As in 34. Emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Bangladesh Board of Investment.<sup>42</sup> This was clearly an insufficient reflection of the close bilateral ties. Hasina was seeking to utilise political sentiments for economic benefits, testing its effectiveness in a *new* China where the preponderant value now is the ‘profit-motive’.

Hasina’s schedule included a key stop in the city of Kunming in the Yunnan province. It may be noted that the ‘Kunming initiative’ in 1999 included a proposal for a road link between China and Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s keenness in it lies in the fact that once it is established, Bangladesh would be connected to the ASEAN’s lucrative market that would include such countries as Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>43</sup> Since cooperation of Yunnan would be essential in the implementation of such plans, Hasina sought to boost the ego of the Yunnan leaders by announcing at a banquet hosted by Li Jiang, the Vice Governor of Yunnan: “I believe the leaders of the Yunnan province can play an important role in establishing (regional) road and rail links”.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

A study of Bangladesh’s relations with China is interesting in that they provide an example how politics between nations can overlook historical perceptions, or even revise them, in pursuit of mutually beneficial pragmatism. In the case of China, it demonstrates a remarkable consistency, a slow, deliberate, calculating and ‘brick-by-brick’ construction of a partnership, with a country, which even though once seen as a ‘basket-case’, is one whose potentials China appears to have recognised and encouraged. Bangladesh today is a huge market of 150 million people, an active member of several key global for a, and one of the largest Muslim countries. For China this linkage would be useful as it slowly rises and grows in power and influence, readying to play its due global role, but not in haste.

For Bangladesh, too, the connection is critical. Its current government has the best possible relations with India. But all countries look to ‘reinsure’ to buttress their key foreign policy aspirations, which in the case of Bangladesh, remain the twin goals of security and development.<sup>45</sup> China, a big power on the ‘rise’, provides that necessary sense of confidence. If ever that sense was seen to be available in Pakistan at the other end of the subcontinent, it is no longer so, given Pakistan’s current travails. Indeed, the prevalent extremist sentiments in that polity are a contagion that a professed liberal, progressive, and pluralist community that values secularist sentiments like Bangladesh would seek to avoid. Bangladesh does not attract that kind of attention from the other major global player, the US. But it fits into China’s futuristic vision,

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<sup>42</sup> “China’s help sought for deep-sea port: PM invites more Chinese investment in Bangladesh”, *Daily Star*, 20 March 2010.

<sup>43</sup> The subject of road connectivity between Bangladesh and China had also featured during official talks between the author and his counterparts, the Chinese and Myanmar Foreign Ministers in 2007 and 2008. Indeed, Bangladesh had agreed to build a strip of road within Myanmar. The proposal was that China could fund yet another portion connecting it to the Myanmar road system linked to China, which would mean Bangladesh and China would be connected by road.

<sup>44</sup> ‘PM for direct road, rail links with China’, *Daily Star*, 21 March 2010.

<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth study of Bangladesh’s early foreign policy challenges, many of whom have remained constant, see Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, ‘Strategy of a Small Power in a Subsystem: Bangladesh’s External Relations’, *Australian Outlook*, April 1980, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 85-98.

and Beijing's embrace lends Dhaka not just courage, but also dignity to press its intellectual resources into new ideas and concepts reshaping the region as is evident in the proposed BCIM grouping. This would be in line with what the Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested recently – a new kind of 'Asian regional architecture', more fluid than others elsewhere such as the European Union, and 'with many overlapping layers and mechanisms'.<sup>46</sup>

The Bangladesh-China relationship is a new model of partnership in the sense that it is not designed as a 'counterpoise', or as a traditional 'balance of power' arrangement in search of an equilibrium, or even a 'tilt' against another power, as the China-Pakistan relationship was (or as some would insist, still is) vis-à-vis India. Rather in this case, Bangladesh is happy to be a conduit, or a bridge connecting China to India. The role that Bangladesh could play, facilitated by the language of the Joint Statement, to secure an understanding between China, India and Bangladesh on the Brahmaputra could be significant. Also if the idea of the BCIM truly takes off, this 'quadrilateralism' could have enormous positive ramifications for lessening tensions and also serve as a model for other parts of Asia on how to draw China into a collaborative relationship.

The China-Bangladesh relations are, therefore, a new equation in the diplomatic calculations in Asia, that will not show for it tomorrow, nor the day after, but in the long run in a continent where time, for many, is *not* of the essence!

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<sup>46</sup> Goh Chok Tong, 'Managing ties vital in new world order', *The Straits Times*, 22 March 2010.