

# ISAS Working Paper

No. 167 – 6 March 2013

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)



## Dhaka-Moscow Relations: Old Ties Renewed

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On 30 May 1919, the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, following the massacre perpetrated by British troops at Jallianwala Bagh in the Punjab, renounced his knighthood through a letter written to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. Tagore stated that his action was motivated by a desire “to give voice to the protest of millions of my countrymen suppressed into a dumb anguish of terror”.<sup>2</sup> On the broad canvas of India’s struggle for freedom, it was but a small act. But Tagore shared the sentiment of another contemporary literary genius from a distant part of the globe, Leo Tolstoy of Russia, who had argued that true life is lived through tiny actions that occur. Both great men struggled against oppression through their articulations, wrote of war that savages societies, and peace that humankind constantly seeks to achieve. This was evidence of the intellectual bond that tied Russia and Bengal, then, and which continued to percolate down through ages.

Subsequently, during the height of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, another Bengali, M N Roy, became a close comrade and confidant of the Soviet revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin. Indeed

---

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

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Times of India*, 13 April, 2011.

on Lenin's invitation, he critiqued some of his leader's ideas.<sup>3</sup> Following the partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan, a segment of the left parties in East Pakistan, such as the National Awami Party (NAP) led by Comrade Muzaffar and the pro-Soviet Communist Party (Moni Singh), continued to remain linked to Moscow.<sup>4</sup> So it was not a complete surprise that as the Bangladesh war of liberation began with Indian support (following the military crackdown in Pakistan's eastern wing by President Yayha Khan, Pakistan Army's strongman, in March 1971)), the Soviet Union would come down heavily on its side. But the decision was by no means without serious political assessments.

## **Background of Soviet Wartime Role in 1971**

Several factors determined the Soviet attitude towards South Asia on the eve of the 1970s. First, following British withdrawal from the 'East of Suez' in late-1960s, it was felt in Moscow that the United States and its allies (including Australia and Japan) were casting longing glances towards the region.<sup>5</sup> This, together with the growing rivalry with China, occasioned the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to announce what came to be known as his 'Doctrine of Collective Security' at the World Communist Party Conference in 1969.<sup>6</sup> Both India and Pakistan were looked upon as potential allies in the scheme (somewhat ambitiously). An essential requirement of its success was stability in South Asia.

Second, not only did the Soviets favour South Asian stability but also saw themselves as its principal guardian. This dated back to the Tashkent Conference which the Soviets initiated between India and Pakistan following the 1965 war. The Tashkent Declaration that followed reflected the peacekeeping and mediating role of the Soviet Union, and its anniversaries were duly observed. On the eve of one such anniversary on 9 January 1971, Tass wrote: "The spirit of Tashkent Declaration confirmed that in the present conditions the only possible approach to the settlement of disputes between states is the renunciation of force and the settlement of these problems at the Conference Table".<sup>7</sup>

The initial Soviet aim, therefore, was to bring India and Pakistan together. The Soviets were pleased with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, when she credited Moscow with being more

---

<sup>3</sup> See John P Haithcox, 'The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colonial Policy: A New Interpretation', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, November 1963.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed analyses of the politics of left parties in East Pakistan, see Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> V V Matveyev, 'A Filled Vacuum', *Izvestia*, 29 May 1969. Cited in Current Digest of the Soviet Press (CDSP), Vol. XX1, No.22 (1969), p. 14

<sup>6</sup> *Tass*, 7 June 1969, CDSP, Vol. XX1, No. 21 (1969), p.16

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Asian Recorder*, 29 January-4 February 1971, Soviet Policy Towards India, p.9987.

interested in economic cooperation than in military alliances.<sup>8</sup> Indian Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh was quoted in the Soviet Press as saying that “the essence of the Soviet [security] plan is the development of cooperation among Asian countries for the strengthening of peace”.<sup>9</sup> Small wonder *Izvestia* exulted in Gandhi’s election victory in March 1971 as “another convincing evidence of the fact that the Indian people came out consistently for strengthening their national independence for social progress and for peaceful foreign policy”.<sup>10</sup> A ‘promising momentum’ in relations with Pakistan was initiated by a visit to Moscow of Yahya’s predecessor, President Field Marshal Mohammed Ayub Khan.<sup>11</sup>

Up until then, the Soviets were also happy with the political developments in Pakistan, where after the election victory of 1970, the Awami League leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of East Pakistan was poised to assume office. Over the years, Moscow had an unfavourable attitude towards the Awami League. Its one-time leader and Prime Minister, H S Suhrawardy had led Pakistan into Western anti-Soviet alliances.<sup>12</sup> But now the left-wing parties in Pakistan were leaning towards Moscow’s rival, Peking, and the Soviets were reassessing the so-called ‘bourgeois’ parties such as the Awami League as having a positive role. It was being argued that the most radical parties were objectively aiding “reactionary forces by narrowing the united front”, and that “the correct path of non-capitalist development was through bourgeois democratic reforms”.<sup>13</sup> To the Soviets, the Awami League was such a party, though a ‘centrist’ one.<sup>14</sup> It also was seen to be having reformist tendencies and desiring of friendship with the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Mujib was now seen in Moscow as “the Nehru of Pakistan – a votary of secularism, socialism, and non-alignment”.<sup>16</sup>

## **Initial Appraisal: Pakistan’s ‘Internal Affair’**

Moscow’s hopes were rudely jarred by Yahya’s military crack-down of 25 March 1971, the incarceration of Mujib, and the escape to India of the Awami League leadership. On 2 April 1971, N Podgorney, the Soviet Prime Minister, sent a message to Yahya which is quoted in full

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert H. Donaldson, *Soviet Policy Towards India: Ideology and Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974) p. 220.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Pravda’, 29 September 1969, CDSP, Vol.XX1, No. 38 (1969), p.16.

<sup>10</sup> *Asian Recorder*, 16-22 April 1971, p. 10102

<sup>11</sup> Jamsheed Marker, *Quiet Diplomacy: Memoirs of an Ambassador of Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> See Ian Clark. ‘Soviet Policies Towards India and Pakistan’, Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> I Borisov, *Pravda*, 10 October 1971.

<sup>14</sup> N Nakargakov, *Izvestia*, 12 March 1970.

<sup>15</sup> A Filipov, *Pravda*, 14 August 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Vijay Singh Budhraj, ‘Moscow and the Birth of Bangladesh’, *Asian Survey*, (May 1973), p. 489.

because of its importance. He wrote: "...We have remained convinced that the complex problems that have arisen in Pakistan of late can and must be solved without the use of force. Continuation of repressive measures and bloodshed in East Pakistan will undoubtedly make the solution of the problem difficult and may do great harm to the vital interest of the entire people of Pakistan. We consider it our duty to address you... with an insistent appeal for the adoption of the most urgent measures to stop the bloodshed and repression against the people of East Pakistan and for turning to methods of peaceful political settlement".<sup>17</sup>

The letter was significant in that, while it urged 'peaceful political settlement' which implied transfer of power to the Awami League, the use of the words 'bloodshed' and 'repression' (twice each) were calculated to transmit Soviet firmness and cognisance of Pakistan's 'repressive' policies. However, the mention of 'the entire people of Pakistan' seemed to favour a solution that would retain Pakistan's territorial integrity.

Yahya's response was sharp. He asked the Soviet Union to use its "undeniable influence" over India to prevent the latter from "meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs". No country, including the Soviet Union, could allow "anti-national and unpatriotic elements to proceed to destroy or to countenance subversion". Mujib's rival, the West Pakistani, pro-Peking, Pakistan People's Party leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto described Podgorny's letter as "blatant interference" and found it "regrettable" that "the Soviet Union could have forgotten Lenin's socialist principles, the foremost of which was to refrain from interference in the affairs of other countries".<sup>18</sup>

The Soviet Union reacted strongly to this attempt to tutor its leadership on the principles of Leninism. But this was confined to unpublished confidential notes between Moscow and Islamabad, which, according to a Minister in Yahya's cabinet, were more acrimonious than the published exchanges.<sup>19</sup> However, in the interest of maintaining the unity of Pakistan, the Soviets publicly continued their efforts to convince Yahya of the need for "a political settlement" rather than a "military solution".<sup>20</sup> Reiterating Soviet support for the "territorial integrity of Pakistan", one journal warned that "the imperialists would not be averse to taking advantage of the situation in Pakistan to further their selfish neo-colonial aims".<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *Asian Recorder*, 14-20 May 1971, p. 10160.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10158. Bhutto was taking some liberty with Lenin's position on such issues. In fact Lenin championed 'self determination of nationalities' and it would be unsurprising were he to favour the Bangladesh movement. See V V Zenin, 'Lenin on the National and Colonial Question', *Lenin: The Great Theoretician* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970) pp 316-317.

<sup>19</sup> G W Choudhury, *India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and the Major Powers: Politics of a Divided Subcontinent* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), p.205.

<sup>20</sup> I Ratnikov, *Pravda*, 1 May 1971.

<sup>21</sup> *New Times*, No. 15, 14 April, 1971, pp. 8-9.

So far, the Soviets, while disapproving strongly of Yahya's methods, were urging solutions upon only Islamabad. Implicit in this was the Soviet view that this was an "internal matter" for Pakistan. Moreover, Moscow was firm in reiterating the need to retain the unity of Pakistan as a single state, lest China and the "imperialists" (like the US) are positioned to take pickings from any situation arising out of the disintegration of that country.

### **Soviet Reappraisal: More than 'Internal Affair'**

Thus, it appears that till around May 1971, the Soviets were content to treat the troubles in Pakistan as the latter's internal affair. Little note was taken of the fact that in April 1971, the Bangladeshi leadership-in-exile had constituted a separate 'provisional government', which almost immediately had begun to press India for recognition.<sup>22</sup>

The nascent Bangladesh 'provisional government' sought and obtained the support of the pro-Moscow left-wing parties, which, in turn, were now turning towards Moscow. Muzaffar Ahmed of NAP, known to be pro-Moscow, combined his declaration of allegiance to the new government with an appeal to Moscow for such support on 20 April 1971.<sup>23</sup> A few days later, Abdus Salam, the Secretary of the Communist Party of East Pakistan, emphasised their struggle as one "against a ruthless and barbarous enemy armed to the teeth by the imperialists, and having the support of the Maoists of China".<sup>24</sup> In May, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Pro-Moscow) adopted an 18-point programme whose salient features concerned the complete 'liberation' of Bangladesh as an "independent, sovereign, democratic, and republican state with a view to advancing along the path of socialism".<sup>25</sup>

The pro-Moscow Bangladeshi parties were pointing out three things to the Kremlin: One, the newly formed Bangladesh Provisional Government-in-exile, conformed to the 'correct path' within the framework of the broad Leninist concept of the 'United Front'; two, the situation exemplified a classical Marxist-Leninist scenario that called for support to the struggle for 'self determination'; and three, China was beginning to be seen as ranging on the other side (more significant at that time to Moscow than any intellectually theoretical propositions!) These were powerful arguments for a government that claimed ideology as the basis of state-policy.

---

<sup>22</sup> In a letter dated 24 April 1971 (the government was formed in Mujibnagar, a slice of 'liberated Bangladesh territory', on 10 April, with Tajuddin Ahmed as Prime Minister), the Acting President of the Provisional Government Syed Nazrul Islam requested the Indian President V V Giri that immediate recognition be given and envoys exchanged. Indira Gandhi, *India and Bangladesh: Selected Speeches and Statements, March to December 1971* (New Delhi: Orient Longman's, 1972), p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> Bangladesh Documents (Madras: Ministry of External Affairs, India) pp 228-229.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.317.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Stromquist, *Yearbook of International Communist Affairs* (Hoover Institute Press: 1972), p. 567.

The Soviets were therefore constrained to make a concession, not directly to the Bangladesh provisional government but to India. On 8 June 1971, following a visit of the Indian Foreign Minister, Swaran Singh, to Moscow, the Joint communiqué noted that both the Soviet Union and India considered it necessary that Pakistan should take urgent measures “to stop the flow of refugees from East Pakistan” and that “... steps be taken to ensure that peace is restored for the safe return of the refugees to their homes”. Furthermore, Moscow and Delhi agreed to hold ‘exchange of views’ in the future in this connection.<sup>26</sup>

An analysis of the Joint Communiqué brings out that the Soviets now recognised the refugee issue as having drawn India into the vortex of what was earlier seen in Moscow as “Pakistan’s internal affair”. Commitments on further interactions on the subject were also pointed out. However, the Soviets, while reappraising the situation, were refusing to draw India into discussions over and beyond the refugee problem to more substantive issues. The steps to be “taken to ensure that peace is restored” were related only “to the safe return of the refugees”, in which India was involved, and not to the ultimate political solution, in which India was not. Reference to the troubled province as East Pakistan in the Communiqué was on Soviet insistence, as the Indians would have preferred East Bengal.<sup>27</sup>

The Indians, however, played their cards well. For years, the Soviets had been anxious to formalise their close ties with India, and the increasing possibility of a Sino-American entente, signalled by National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger’s secret trip to Peking in June 1971, heightened its need. India now indicated its willingness to sign a treaty, and in course of Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko’s visit to New Delhi on 9 August 1971, the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation was signed.

It is likely that in signing the Treaty, Moscow was motivated by three considerations: First, the desire to formalise bilateral links with India; second, to checkmate Chinese diplomatic and political incursions into South Asia; and third, to restrain both India and Pakistan from adventurist actions. The Soviets tried to convince Pakistan that the treaty was not directed at any third party, at least not Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Pakistani Foreign Secretary, S M Khan, while actually justifying such an agreement between two states as being sanctioned by the United Nations Charter, expressed the hope that the Soviet Union would now use its influence to prevent India from attacking Pakistan.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Pravda, 9 June 1971.

<sup>27</sup> India had by now begun to refer to the delta as ‘East Bengal’. Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 169

<sup>28</sup> Times of India, 12 August 1971.

<sup>29</sup> Kayhan International (Tehran), 25 August 1971.

But given Pakistan's strong links with China, such a view could not be sustained for long, as the pact had obvious anti-Chinese implications. Moreover, whatever the Soviet Union's motivations might have been, it was now allied to India. Pakistan needed to seek out its own allies, and the obvious candidates were the US and China. The treaty, therefore, contributed to deepening the sub-continental divide.

Any Soviet hopes for a united Pakistan under the Awami League stewardship were rapidly eroding, as were the prospects of peace in the Subcontinent. The actions of the Pakistani government were running contrary to Soviet advice. First, Mujib's trial had reportedly opened in Pakistan.<sup>30</sup> Second, Yahya installed a civilian government of his own choice in Dhaka,<sup>31</sup> making it obvious that his kind of 'political solution' did not involve the Awami League. Third, visiting the Soviet Union in September, Gandhi indicated to the hosts that a conflict in South Asia was imminent and sought Moscow's support.<sup>32</sup> Fourth, Podgorney's initiative to bring Yahya and Giri together during the 2500th celebration of the Iranian monarchy failed.<sup>33</sup> Fifth, the Bangladeshi leadership was adamant in its claim to independence and when Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolay Firubin's met Provisional Prime Minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, on 24 October 1971 to persuade him to scale down the demand, his efforts failed.<sup>34</sup> The events in the Subcontinent were rushing towards a denouement. It would be necessary for Moscow to choose sides soon. The options were now closing off fast.

## **Soviet Support to India and Bangladesh**

The last straw on the camel's back was Pakistan's public and explicit courting of Chinese support when Bhutto led a military mission to Beijing in November 1971. In a banquet speech there, Bhutto spoke of "some countries" as having succumbed to Indian pressure, which was interpreted to be critical of the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Pakistan further annoyed Moscow by refusing to permit the aircraft of a senior Soviet official, Marshal Kutakhov, to overfly its territory during his visit to India in November.<sup>36</sup> Also in the Kremlin's mind, unless the Liberation War in Bangladesh was brought to an end soon, there was a danger that more radical groups would come to the fore of the struggle.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Asian Recorder*, 17-23 September 1971, p. 10366

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-7 October, 1971, p. 19389.

<sup>32</sup> Ditto.

<sup>33</sup> *Times* (London), 18 October 1971.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 October 1971.

<sup>35</sup> *Asian Almanac*, 1972, p. 5004. Also see A Yabukov, 'Conflict in Hindustan and Mao Group's Provocation Role', *Pravda*, 28 December, 1971.

<sup>36</sup> *Statesman* (Calcutta), 5 November, 1971.

As the December 1971 hostilities between India and Pakistan commenced, the Soviet strategy came out in broader relief. In a public speech to the Sixth Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, Brezhnev analysed the conflict as being caused by the "bloody suppression of the basic rights and clearly expressed will of the population of East Pakistan". Brezhnev suggested what was to be the theme of the critical Soviet argument and action at the United Nations that made the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation possible. He called for a ceasefire and insisted that Pakistan simultaneously take effective action aimed at a political settlement, based on the will of the East Pakistani people "as expressed in the December 1970 elections". He insisted that these two points were inseparably linked [emphasis author's].<sup>37</sup>

A Soviet analyst explained this. It was a stupendous diplomatic strategy, eventually to be executed with great skill by Soviet diplomats in the Security Council of the United Nations. He stated: "It was impossible to separate the question of cessation of military operations from a political settlement in East Pakistan. These are two aspects of the same problem. Anyone who insists on resolving the first question while brushing aside the second, is, whether he wants it or not, objectively preserving the causes of the current conflict and facilitating its resumption sooner or later".<sup>38</sup>

This strategy deserves minute analysis. On the surface, it appeared that by urging cessation of hostilities and political settlement, the Soviets were happy to stop short of the complete independence of Bangladesh. But by linking the two 'inseparably', the Soviets vetoed in the Security Council the prospects of the first preceding the second. Thus, by allowing the fighting to continue, since settlement was impossible while the fighting lasted, the Soviets ensured the ultimate end of the drama: the surrender of the Pakistani troops in East Pakistan to India on 16 December 1971 and the resultant creation of Bangladesh.

This was contrary to the US stand in the Security Council which called for the ceasefire to come first. This was opposed by the Soviet Ambassador at the UN, Yakov Malik. He argued that it evaded the root cause of the fighting, that is, West Pakistan's military suppression of East Pakistan, and equated the two belligerents, India and Pakistan, which was manifestly unfair.<sup>39</sup>

While at the United Nations, the Soviets assisted the fulfilment of Indo-Bangladesh aims by preventing a ceasefire and allowing for a fight to the finish, direct support was also being rendered close to the conflict theatre. As a signal to the world, and more significantly to Pakistan's friends like the US and China, of firm Soviet commitment to the Indo-Soviet Pact, the

---

<sup>37</sup> For complete text of speech, Pravda, 8 December 1971, pp 1-2. Also see Yurig Zhukov, 'Where is the Way Out?', Pravda, 10 December, 1971.

<sup>38</sup> V Kudryavtsev, 'Flames Over South Asia', *Izvestia*, 12 December 1971.

<sup>39</sup> *Asian Recorder*, 1972, pp 5014-5015



first Deputy Foreign Minister, V V Kuznetsov arrived in New Delhi on 11 December 1971 when the war was raging in full.<sup>40</sup> Reassurance came from the Soviet Ambassador in New Delhi, N Pegov, who told Gandhi on 13 December 1971 that in case of Chinese intervention, the Soviets would open diversionary action in Sinkiang, an assurance that buttressed Indian morale.<sup>41</sup> Finally, and importantly, the Soviets reacted to the American fleet in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal with their own presence, precluding the former's intervention in Pakistan's favour, which would have doubtless triggered a conflict of global proportions.<sup>42</sup> All in all then, Soviet support was absolutely invaluable in bringing to fruition the emergence of Bangladesh in the global scene as an independent and sovereign nation-state.

## **Post-War Soviet Bangladesh Relations**

Despite such critical support, aimed perhaps more towards India than towards Bangladesh itself, the Soviet Union was circumspect in not recognising the new state too hastily. The recognition finally came on 24 January 1972, more than a month after independence. Bangladesh, on its part, did not take this Soviet delay amiss. It may have calculated that since the support of the Socialist bloc was a given, to obtain acknowledgement of the Western world China was now more essential. For Mujib, who had returned from Pakistani prison to assume the mantle of power, 'non-alignment' was more a cornerstone of foreign policy than leaning on either of the superpowers.<sup>43</sup> Quite appropriately, though, the Soviet Union was the second country that Mujib visited, in March 1972, the first, quite understandably, having been India.

Due to a variety of reasons, including global geo-political, Soviet–Bangladesh relations contained some built-in structural difficulties. First, if the Soviet grand design towards the Third World was to detach those countries from close links with either the West or China, Bangladesh posed some difficulties because of its heavy economic dependence on the former, including on such Western-led financial institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, Moscow's help was critical in clearing the Chittagong port of mines. Moreover, an attempt was under way to remove China's opposition to Bangladesh's membership of the United Nations, a primary foreign policy goal. Second, the higher priority the Soviets placed on India tended to affect at times their relations with Bangladesh, because of the fluctuating nature of

---

<sup>40</sup> Pran Chopra, *India's Second Liberation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1974), p. 199

<sup>41</sup> Basant Chatterjee, *Indo-Soviet Friendship: An Analytical Study* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1974), p. 138.

<sup>42</sup> The US Task Force 74, comprising the Aircraft Carrier Enterprise, helicopter Carrier Tripoli, and seven destroyers and frigates, detached from the Seventh Fleet, sailed through the Strait of Malacca on their way to the Bay of Bengal on 14 December 1971. They were followed three days later by six Soviet ships including one Kresta and one Kynda-class frigates. Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ninety Third Congress, Second Session, February/March 1974, p. 205.

<sup>43</sup> A L Khatib, 'Mujib Sets a Limit on Gratitude', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 April 1972, p. 14.

Indo-Bangladesh ties. Third, in spite of serious endeavours, the cultural impact of the Soviets on the Bangladeshi elite was limited; as Bangladesh middle class grew, so did its intellectual and financial linkages with the West. Because of these reasons, the Soviets may have felt that Bangladesh did not merit too great an economic and political investment. Significantly, not a single Soviet Cabinet Minister ever visited Bangladesh. As Bangladesh's ties with the West and the Middle East grew stronger, in the 1980s, Dhaka called for "the withdrawal of all foreign (meaning Soviet) troops from Afghanistan".<sup>44</sup> Bilateral relations never quite recovered till the demise of the Soviet Union, and there was not much resumption when the Russian Federation replaced it in the early-1990s.

## **Resumed Relations with Russia**

The author, as the Bangladesh Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) in the Caretaker Government, was the first Cabinet Minister from Dhaka to visit Moscow after the emergence of Russia in place of the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> He undertook the visit in September 2007 to resuscitate Dhaka-Moscow relations which had remained on the backburner, "on invitation of his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who was his erstwhile colleague at the UN in New York, where they both had served as Permanent Representatives".<sup>46</sup>

Apart from signing a Consular Agreement between Bangladesh and Russia with Lavrov, the author called on the Vice Prime Minister, S E Naryshkin, and Deputy Minister for Industry, Ivan Materov, and raised with them the possibilities of state credit for power generation and cooperation for a nuclear power plant, "which, however, since it was a complex issue needed to be discussed at national level to arrive at a final decision".<sup>47</sup>

## **Hasina Goes to Moscow**

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina became the first head of government of Bangladesh to visit Russia in January 2013, after her father, Sheikh Mujib's travel to Moscow in March 1972. She fondly recalled Moscow's support during Bangladesh's liberation war, and stated: "When we speak of Russia, we must also bear in mind that the Soviet Union had helped us greatly in the war for independence and continued to give assistance even after the war when the need arose to clear

---

<sup>44</sup> Bangladesh Observer 1 January 1980.

<sup>45</sup> 'Iftexhar leaves for Moscow', Daily Star (Dhaka), 29 August 2007.

<sup>46</sup> 'First Bangla Visit to post-Soviet Russia', Indo Asian News Service, 2 September 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Dr. Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, 'Russia willing to 'cooperate with Bangladesh in nuclear energy plant' Iftexhar, Observer Research Foundation Monitor, 13 September 2007. Also see Financial Express, 10 September, 2007.

mines at the port of Chittagong”.<sup>48</sup> She lamented that “human memory is very short and people quite often forget what roles powers friendly to us played both in the war and in peacetime, and that the Soviet Union defended us at the United Nations”.<sup>49</sup> Hasina was giving Russia the credit for the policies of the Soviet Union. Moscow was obviously not chary of reaping such benefits. Though unstated, this was also a time, as in 1971-72, when Dhaka-Washington ties were not at their happiest for a variety of reasons.

The visit was most significant in that a number of key agreements were signed. This included the one on technical and financial cooperation on the 2000-MW nuclear power plant at Rooppur, which Hasina described as a “shining example of our deeper engagement”.<sup>50</sup> Hasina met with President Putin, and during the visit, three agreements on defence purchases and the nuclear power plant were signed, as well as seven Memoranda of Understanding on different sectors.<sup>51</sup> Importantly, a US\$1 billion agreement for arms procurement was also effected, which included “orders for armoured vehicles and infantry weapons, air defence systems, and transport helicopters”.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The Bengal-Russia relations seem to have come a full circle. After a long hiatus, these appear to have now received a jump-start. For Bangladesh, even though present-day Russia is no longer the Soviet superpower rival of the US, it is still a reminder to Washington that alternatives are available if Bangladesh should ever be marginalised. The Dhaka-Moscow proximity is developing at a time when Indo-Bangladesh relations are on the whole, wholesome, and generally this has also been the pattern in the past.

One point to bear in mind for Dhaka would normally be to avoid giving Beijing any unnecessary cause for annoyance. But closer Bangladesh-Russia ties are unlikely to cause such an effect. Indeed, the new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping has chosen Moscow to be his first foreign capital to visit as President. His predecessor Hu Jintao had also done the same thing but Xi’s trip has a special significance in that some analysts see that as a part-answer to the US Administration’s current so-called pivot towards Asia.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> ‘Russia has always been true friend of Bangladesh, says Hasina’, *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 14 January 2013.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> ‘Dhaka, Moscow sign defence, nuclear power agreements’, *Financial Express*. 16 January 2013.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Hasina Returns Home’, *bdnews24.com*, 17 January 2013.

<sup>52</sup> *Straits Times*, 16 January, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Jane Perlez, ‘New Leader of China Plans a Visit to Moscow’, *New York Times* 21 February 2013.

Though such global matrix may be too large a backdrop to view the burgeoning Dhaka-Moscow relations, this does signal a renewed resurgence of Moscow's interest beyond its 'near-abroad' in the region, greater ties with major Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan and Bangladesh in South Asia, and an acknowledgment of the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal. In the global power game, in which the Kremlin now sees itself as a player, Moscow too wishes to keep up with the Joneses like Washington and Beijing.