

Bangladesh Wins and Loses in China-India Rivalry

Beijing and New Delhi are hotly competing for influence in Bangladesh but Dhaka has good cause to be suspicious of both

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Bangladesh is in the middle of rising Indian and Chinese competition for South Asian influence, a position that could benefit or imperil the Muslim majority developing nation of over 161 million people.

On one hand, Bangladesh enjoys robust strategic ties with India, witnessed in just-completed joint naval exercises with India where the two sides held surface warfare drills in the Bay of Bengal.

On the other, China is bankrolling billions of dollars worth of needed infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, checkbook diplomacy that has helped to pull the two sides closer together than perhaps ever in their modern history.

Which of the two Asian giants has more sway in Dhaka these days is debatable. But with India distracted with a spiraling Covid-19 epidemic and with several unresolved bilateral sore points, China may have an upper hand, one it is now seeking to consolidate to its strategic advantage.

Bangladesh, of course, cannot escape the geographical reality that it is almost completely surrounded by India with a 4,096-kilometer shared border. Robust and cordial ties with India are thus critical for Bangladesh's economic development and national security.

Most crucially, Bangladesh's water supply is dependent on rivers that flow into the country from neighboring India. Water sharing issues have badly strained bilateral relations, a conflict that China has sought to leverage to its own advantage.

After failing to secure a water-sharing agreement with India over the Teesta river, the fourth-longest river in the country that flows from India, Bangladesh turned to China to develop a US\$1 billion agreement to prevent floods and erosion during rains and water shortages in the dry season.

At the same time, as the Bangladeshi newspaper Daily Star reported on October 7, work on almost all nine China-funded projects worth \$7.1 billion is reportedly moving ahead.

Those include a multi-purpose rail and road bridge on the Padma river (known as the Ganges in India) built by the state-owned China Major Bridge Engineering Company, a

telecom network modernization program and upgrades to the national power system.

With annual bilateral trade valued at approximately \$15 billion, China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner. Trade with India is only slightly more than a third of that amount.

Dhaka and Beijing also forged a strategic partnership when Chinese president **Xi Jinping** visited Bangladesh in 2016. On the occasion, Bangladesh formally joined Xi's Belt and Road infrastructure-building initiative.

The groundwork has also been laid for stronger strategic ties. Bangladesh's military is now equipped with Chinese tanks, Chinese-built frigates and submarines and Chinese-made fighter jets.

Bangladeshi military personnel receive training in China while Chinese military delegations pay regular visits to Bangladesh, raising antennae in New Delhi.

But China hasn't gotten everything that it wants in Bangladesh. During Xi's 2016 visit, the Chinese leader proposed 27 major infrastructure projects under the BRI but so far only nine have broken ground.

Most analysts would argue China's main interests in Bangladesh are not bridges and electric power systems but rather access to its strategic ports on the Bay of Bengal.

China is keen to build a new deep seaport in Bangladesh, as part of a wider scheme to secure its power and influence in the Indian Ocean. That is seen in China's investments in the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, the Kyaukphyu port in Myanmar, Gwadar in Pakistan and the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, China's first overseas military base.

So far, Beijing has only received a pledge made in November last year by **Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** that it may use Bangladesh's two major ports at Chittagong and Mongla for trade.

Hasina's commitment to China came just weeks after Dhaka signed an agreement with New Delhi for access to the same ports, including for sending goods to the isolated states in India's northeast known as the "Seven Sisters." Those often restive states are connected with the rest of India through a narrow strip of land between northern Bangladesh and Bhutan.



Source: Facebook

At the same time, the Rohingya refugee crisis has hampered China-Bangladesh relations. In June 2019, Dhaka asked for Beijing's support for what **Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen** termed "the safe and dignified return of Rohingya Muslims to their own land in Myanmar."

Currently, there are around a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, most of them living in squalid camps in the already densely populated nation's southeast. Momen said that "China has been playing a role in favor of Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue."

That is highly unlikely, however, given the strategic importance China places on maintaining strong relations with Myanmar, the only country that provides China with direct access via land to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar has made it abundantly clear that it does not want the return of the Rohingyas, who many there consider "illegal migrants" from Bangladesh.

Soon after the August 2017 attacks by the insurgent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Myanmar security forces, crude assaults which prompted the Myanmar military's brutal clear operations that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to flee across the border, China showed its hand.

Foreign Ministry spokesman **Geng Shuang** said:

"The Chinese side condemns the violent attacks that happened in Rakhine state of Myanmar [and] supports Myanmar's efforts to safeguard the peace and stability of Rakhine state."

Chinese officials have also warned Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations with which they have contacts to refrain from dealing with ARSA or similar outfits. That's because China believes they are or could be connected with Muslim militants in Asia, including the Uighurs

it holds in vast detention camps in western Xinjiang state.

Indeed, all that Hasina received when she visited China in July 2019 was a promise to send some 2,500 tonnes of rice to the refugees, hardly a superpower overture to help broker a solution to the still vexed issue.

It is also not forgotten in Dhaka that China supported its close ally Pakistan during the 1971 liberation war when the eastern part of the country broke away to form Bangladesh. Dhaka and Beijing did not establish diplomatic relations until 1976.

India, on the other hand, supported the movement and even sent troops and tanks to expel the Pakistan military from what later became the independent country of Bangladesh. Yet today India faces bigger problems with Bangladesh than does China.

India-Bangladesh relations deteriorated last year when India passed an amendment to its citizenship laws which made it easier for non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan to acquire Indian citizenship.

The law was passed after a program to register residents in the northeastern state of Assam, where many illegal migrants from Bangladesh live and work. Many in Bangladesh feared that the registration program and new law could spark an exodus of Muslims in India into Bangladesh.

Hasina denounced both moves and Bangladesh canceled some planned visits by Indian ministers in protest.

Then came this year's pungent onion controversy. Onions are a staple in Bangladeshi cooking but to meet all of its domestic demand Dhaka imports thousands of tonnes every year from India.

Due to Covid-19 caused shortages, India recently banned the export of onions without informing Bangladesh. It was only after loud protests in Bangladesh that India, at the end of September, allowed some exports of onions — but only to prevent China and another bitter rival, Pakistan, from filling the gap.

It is uncertain whether the recent joint India-Bangladesh naval exercise will improve broader ties. They will certainly irk China. The Indian side sent an anti-submarine warfare corvette to the exercise with the stated aim of taking "measures to stop unlawful activities."

The only foreign submarines active in the maritime region are China's. In recent years, to India's chagrin, Chinese submarines have made increasingly frequent forays into the Bay of Bengal. The anti-submarine aspect of the joint India-Bangladesh exercise was thus likely not lost on Beijing's security planners.



India and Bangladesh hold joint Bongosagar exercises in the Northern Bay of Bengal, October 2020.

Image: Indian Navy

Despite being especially hard hit by the Covid-19 crisis, India is also competing with China to deliver vaccines to Bangladesh. Here, too, Bangladesh is hedging its bets.

It is considering offers from both China's Sinovac Biotech and the Serum Institute of India. That could become an important issue as China and India seek to play health politics at a time the virus has devastated Bangladesh's economy.

The country's normally booming and export-oriented garment industry has been especially hard hit. Factories are idle and unemployment is rising as the number of recorded infections on October 11 hit 378,266 with 5,524 deaths. Most observers agree the likely actual figures are much higher.

Bangladesh, despite impressive economic growth over the last decade, is still a developing country with the vast majority of its people still living under the poverty line. And it clearly lacks the resources and facilities to handle a health crisis of this magnitude.

Bangladesh thus now finds itself in the vulnerable middle of the region's budding new Cold War. Faced with its own resource constraints, India is reportedly now looking at the possibility of cooperating with Japan to counter China's rising influence in Bangladesh.

In December 2017, premiers **Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe** established the India-Japan Act East Forum, which, according to a statement issued at the time: "aims to provide a platform for India-Japan collaboration under the rubric of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy."

The forum is focused on specific projects in India's northeast and the development of connecting infrastructure between the remote area and Bangladesh as well as Myanmar.

Indian **External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** said last month that the two sides are looking to cooperate on projects in Bangladesh to forge new partnerships "with countries across the Indo-Pacific in the face of China's growing aggressive and assertive activities."

The Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, a think tank, said similarly that India and Japan's initiatives in Bangladesh are "part of a broader move to activate the Indo-Pacific strategy" of the Quad, namely the budding alliance of India, Japan, the US and Australia.

It's not clear for now that Bangladesh desires any association with what many see as an overtly anti-China alliance. More likely, Dhaka will continue to walk a tight rope between India and China while aiming to maximize their competing offers of assistance and support.

Everything from onions to vaccines to water and Indian Ocean warfare is in play in Indian-Chinese competition for Bangladesh. Whether Dhaka can continue to strike a fine balance between the two giants could determine if it gets caught in the crossfire or hovers above the region's budding new Cold War.

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