

## **Sheikh Hasina's Visit to India: Consolidating Maritime Cooperation**

**Author:** G.Padmaja\*

**Date:** 03 May 2017

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina was on a State visit to India from 7-10 April 2017. India and Bangladesh not only share a land border, but also a common maritime boundary with both being littoral countries of Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Sheikh Hasina's visit enabled both countries to consolidate cooperation on maritime issues, which was identified during the June 2015 visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bangladesh. Interestingly, this was Sheikh Hasina's first visit to India after the Modi Government came to power in May 2014. Her last State visit to India took place seven years ago in January 2010.

A very significant development during Sheikh Hasina's visit has been the conclusion of memoranda of understanding on Defence Cooperation, Defence Line of Credit, as well as cooperation between various defence training institutes of India and Bangladesh. Its significance emerges when seen in the context that the dominant discourse in Bangladesh has perceived India as the threat against which security has to be built.<sup>1</sup> The conclusion of the above MoUs indicates that there is a shift in this narrative, being replaced instead by an environment of trust, goodwill and constructive cooperation. India and Bangladesh have already resolved their maritime boundary dispute; and the leaderships at the highest level in both countries are committed to broaden and deepen maritime cooperation. India's relations with Bangladesh is in-fact looked upon as the successful implementation of the Modi government's 'Neighbourhood First' policy.

In the above context, this issue brief spells out the maritime issues discussed by the two governments during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. However, to put issues in perspective, the essay begins by first briefly discussing the maritime

agenda identified during Modi's June 2015 visit to Bangladesh. The essay concludes by identifying the challenges which need to be addressed so that the progress in the bilateral relations is not derailed.

### **Modi's June 2015 Visit: Laying the Foundation of Trust**

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 was preceded by the historic unanimous passage of the of the 100<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Bill in the Indian Parliament to give effect to the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 Protocol. The instruments of ratification were exchanged between the two governments during the visit. Its significance was brought out by India's Foreign Secretary Jaishankar who said in June 2015, '.....what it has done is, it has really created a climate of confidence, of goodwill, of trust where a lot other initiatives which could have happened, should have happened, can now happen.... there is an enormous sense today of optimism and confidence about the entire relationship'.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, in July 2014, the dispute over the maritime boundary was also resolved.

Modi's visit reflected this positive atmosphere in the 65-point Joint Declaration titled, 'Notun Projonma-Nayi Disha, New Generation-New Direction'. Further, 22 Agreements/MoUs were also concluded. Of these, six agreements/MoUs were related to the maritime sphere. These dealt with blue economy and maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean; coastal shipping; inland waterways trade and transit; use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports for movement of goods to and from India; cooperation between the coast guards of the two countries to ensure maritime security and safety, and prevent crimes at sea; and facilitate joint study, project research and cooperation for training and capacity building in oceanography between identified institutions in the two countries.

The coastal shipping service between Bangladesh and India was launched in March 2016 as a follow up of these agreements. On 16 March 2016, the container vessel MV *Harbour 1* left Chittagong Port in Bangladesh and reached Krishnapatnam Port on India's east coast on 28 March 2016.<sup>3</sup> This historic journey inaugurated a new chapter of economic cooperation. Earlier, sea connectivity meant that goods had to be first sent to Singapore and Colombo ports and from there it would be sent in

smaller vessels to India and Bangladesh ports. This used to take 30-40 days adding to both time and costs of EXIM trade.<sup>4</sup>

Another important development took place in June 2016 in connection with inland waterways. A Bangladeshi ship from Kolkata carrying 1005 tonnes of steel rods meant for Tripura Governments Rural Development projects reached Ashuganj river port in Bangladesh on 15 June 2016. Bangladeshi trucks then carried the goods from Ashuganj river port to Tripura's Akhura check post. Follow up arrangements were made by the state government of Tripura to deliver the goods from the Akhura check post to different places in the state. This route cut the Kolkata-Agartala distance from 1600 km to 500 km.

In December 2016, senior coast guard officials of India and Bangladesh met in Kolkata and discussed matters regarding maritime safety and security in the Bay of Bengal. It is important to note that as part of capacity building, Indian Coast Guard has been imparting specialist training for Bangladesh Coast Guard personnel on maritime subjects like maritime law, search and rescue, pollution response, boarding operation, helicopter operations and anti-piracy, at their training centre in Kochi since February 2014.

It is observed that Modi's visit laid the foundation for an integrated and holistic maritime agenda. It incorporated cooperation among the coast guards of both the countries to ensure maritime security which is necessary for carrying out coastal shipping and to tap potential of Blue Economy. Most important, as seen in the above section, follow up actions were taken to implement the decisions arrived at. It has specifically helped India access its north-east states, saving time to almost more than half.

### **Sheikh Hasina's April 2017 Visit: Consolidating the Gains**

The India-Bangladesh Joint Statement of 8 April 2017; and the List of Agreements exchanged during Sheikh Hasina's visit, spells out the broad range of issues discussed. Accordingly, some of the observations made on issues which come under the maritime agenda are as follows: <sup>5</sup>

- The two Prime Ministers expressed satisfaction at the robust bilateral security cooperation that exists between the two countries. In this context, they were appreciative of the signing of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for operationalisation of the MoU on Cooperation between the Coast Guards.
- The projects to be implemented in Bangladesh under the 3<sup>rd</sup> Line of Credit of US \$ 4.5 billion being given by the Government of India would include port construction and shipping also.
- The leaders emphasised the advantages of sub-regional cooperation in the areas of power, water resources, trade, transit and connectivity for mutual benefit. It was noted that a Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India for Cooperation in the field of hydroelectric power had been worked out and would be signed when the leaders of all the three countries would be present.
- It was noted that the operationalisation of the Coastal Shipping Agreement signed in June 2015 had resulted in the desired objective of improving connectivity and enhancing bilateral trade. As a step further, the Bangladesh Prime Ministers visit resulted in the signing of an MoU and SOPs between the two countries on Passenger and Cruise services on Coastal and Protocol routes.
- The commencement of transshipment of goods through the Ashuganj River Port under the Protocol on Inland Water and Transit and Trade (PIWTT) was appreciated. Both India and Bangladesh called for the speedy construction of the Ashuganj Inland Container Port (ICP) and the inclusion of more ports of call under the PIWTT framework.
- Bangladesh proposed that the Ganges Barrage on the river Padma in Bangladesh should be jointly developed. In this context, a 'Joint Technical Sub Group on Ganges Barrage Project' was established which would look into this issue and suggest the course of action.
- Both the leaders complimented Armed forces of both the countries who had rescued a large number of fishermen from both sides by conducting Joint Search and Rescue Operations in the Bay of Bengal.
- A MoU was also concluded between the Ministry of Shipping of both the countries with regard to cooperation on Aids of Navigation.

- The Ministry of Shipping of both the countries also concluded a MoU on Development of Fairway from Sirajganj to Daikhowa and Ashuganj to Zakiganj on Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route.

The above details clearly bring out that cooperation on maritime issues which began with the Modi visit to Bangladesh was now being consolidated with Sheikh Hasina's visit to India. The institutionalisation of cooperation among the coast guards of the two countries; development of infrastructure connected with making inland waterways effective; commencing movement of passengers on cruise vessels on coastal and protocol routes and many other measures reflect the trust that has deepened since Modi's visit.

It is also observed that the bilateral relations are however being approached with a sense of realism and difficult issues are not being shunned. Modi reiterated his commitment to find a solution to the lingering issue of sharing of waters of Teesta River. Discussions are also being held on sharing of waters of other rivers too and it can be anticipated that both countries would have to approach the issue with trust. Also, both the countries would be looking forward for the findings of the report of the Joint Technical Sub Group on the Ganges Barrage Project to be built in Bangladesh. It can be safely said that while both the countries have built a relation of trust, the sharing of waters of the common rivers give rise to challenges that they will encounter in future. These issues have the potential to strain the relations unless they are honestly addressed and outcomes are both visible and measurable.

## **The Challenges**

India-Bangladesh relations are being consolidated with a rare vision and trust shown by both Sheikh Hasina and Modi. However, one needs to note that Bangladesh has cordial and constructive relations with China too. There is thus a situation wherein Bangladesh's relations with China are not necessarily directed against India but has its own logic and purpose.

In October 2016, the Chinese President visited Bangladesh, the first by a Chinese head of state in 30 years. The two countries upgraded their relationship from a Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation to a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation. Both sides also committed to the projects under OBOR (One Belt One

Road) Initiative to boost connectivity. 28 development projects with US 21.5 billion in foreign aid were agreed to<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, on 14 November 2016, Bangladesh navy took delivery of two old refurbished Chinese Type 035G Ming-class diesel electric submarines.<sup>7</sup> Bangladesh is also likely to participate in the 14-15 May 2017 Belt and Road Summit being held in Beijing. The OBOR initiative was first put forward by China in 2013. According to China, the May 2017 Summit will explore ways to address regional and global economic problems, generate fresh energy for interconnected development, and ensure that the Belt and Road Initiative delivers greater benefits to people of the countries involved.<sup>8</sup> India has not endorsed the OBOR initiative.

How will India respond to such developments? India has to increase its cooperative space with Bangladesh on maritime issues of common interest. India and Bangladesh are both littorals of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. There is a global consensus that the centre of economic and political power is shifting to Asia and in this context the Indian Ocean will assume great significance. Half of the world's container ships, one third of the bulk cargo traffic and two thirds of its oil shipments pass through the Indian Ocean. India will need to work closely with like-minded countries like Bangladesh to ensure that maritime security, freedom of navigation; and that adherence to international laws takes place. Thus, the bilateral trust will have to translate to collaborative actions at the regional and international forum on issues maritime. Outcomes play an important role in sustaining the trust in the relations.

One area which needs to be given added focus in India-Bangladesh maritime agenda is cooperation in 'Blue Economy'. This was not given much importance during the April visit of Sheikh Hasina to India. This paper argues that specific projects need to be identified and a road map outlined with regard to implementing Blue Economy so that there will be win-win outcomes. This suggestion is based on the manner in which Bangladesh is prioritising Blue Economy, brought out very eloquently during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's address at the first Leaders' Summit of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) held in Jakarta, Indonesia to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the grouping comprising 21 member states and 7 dialogue partners.<sup>9</sup> The IORA Summit had adopted the Jakarta Concord on 7

March 2017<sup>10</sup>. India is also a member of IORA and was represented at the summit by Vice President Hamid Ansari.<sup>11</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, India-Bangladesh maritime cooperation has consolidated since the June 2015 visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Bangladesh. While Modi's visit to Bangladesh took place in the context of the resolution of land and maritime boundaries; Sheikh Hasina's visit has institutionalised defence cooperation. Both the visits have deepened maritime cooperation with regard inland waterways; coastal shipping; port construction; and cooperation among the coast guards of the two countries. However, in the context of the emphasis Bangladesh is according to Blue Economy in its development agenda, India should focus on cooperation in this area too, with specific time-bound outcomes and concrete deliverables.

\*\*\*\*\*

*\*G. Padmaja is Regional Director of the Visakhapatnam Chapter of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. The views expressed are her own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the NMF. She can be reached at [sri2003ja@yahoo.com](mailto:sri2003ja@yahoo.com)*

## **Notes and References**

---

<sup>1</sup> Smruti S. Pattanaik, "Sheikh Hasina's Visit to India: An opportunity to broaden the relationship", April 07, 2017, IDSA Comment, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomment/sheikh-hasina-visit-to-india\\_sspattanaik\\_070417](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomment/sheikh-hasina-visit-to-india_sspattanaik_070417) (last accessed 10 April 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary in Dhaka on Prime Minister's ongoing Bangladesh Visit, June 7, 2015, [http://www.mea.gov.in/mediabriefings.htm?dtl/25347/Transcript\\_of\\_Media\\_Briefing\\_by\\_Foreign\\_Secretary\\_in\\_Dhaka\\_on\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_ongoing\\_Bangladesh\\_Visit\\_June\\_7\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/mediabriefings.htm?dtl/25347/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_by_Foreign_Secretary_in_Dhaka_on_Prime_Ministers_ongoing_Bangladesh_Visit_June_7_2015)(last accessed 6 April 2016)

<sup>3</sup> "Bangladesh Vessel set sail for India as part coastal shipping agreement", Apparel Resources, March 21, 2016, <http://news.apparelresources.com/trade-news/bangladeshi-vessel-sets-sailfor-india-as-part-of-coastal-shipping-agreement/> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

---

<sup>4</sup> G. Padmaja, “India Bangladesh Coastal Shipping: Opportunities and Challenges”, Issue Brief, National Maritime Foundation, 19 April 2016, <http://www.maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/635966292094541028.pdf> (last accessed 23 April 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, List of Agreements/MoUs exchanged during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India (April 07-10, 2017), [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28360/List\\_of\\_AgreementsMoUs\\_exchanged\\_during\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Bangladesh\\_to\\_India\\_April\\_0710\\_2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28360/List_of_AgreementsMoUs_exchanged_during_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Bangladesh_to_India_April_0710_2017) (last accessed 10 April 2017); Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, India - Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India (April 8, 2017), [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28362/India\\_Bangladesh\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Bangladesh\\_to\\_India\\_April\\_8\\_2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28362/India_Bangladesh_Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Bangladesh_to_India_April_8_2017) (last accessed 10 April 2017)

<sup>6</sup> “Bangladesh China sign 27 Deals as Xi visits Dhaka”, bdnews24.com, October 14, 2016, <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/10/14/bangladesh-china-sign-27-deals-as-president-xivisits-dhaka> (last accessed 21 December 2016)

<sup>7</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, “China Delivers Submarines to Bangladesh: Imperatives, Implications and Intentions”, Viewpoint, National Maritime Foundation, 28 November 2016, <http://www.maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636158955383763863.pdf> (last accessed 21 December 2016)

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Jianfeng, Xi Says China to hold Belt and Road Forum in May, 17 January 2017, CCTV (China Central Television), <http://english.cctv.com/2017/01/17/ARTIdF9i2TLb6wOkkYQNBoTg170117.shtml> (last accessed 23 April 2017)

<sup>9</sup> PM pushes ‘blue economy’ at Indian Ocean summit in Jakarta, Dhaka Tribune, 7 March 2017 <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2017/03/07/pm-maritime-cooperation-iora/> (last accessed 12 April 2017)

<sup>10</sup> Jakarta Concord, The Indian Ocean Rim Association: Promoting Regional Cooperation for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indian Ocean, 7 March 2017, [http://www.kemlu.go.id/Buku/JAKARTA%20CONCORD\\_FINAL\\_not%20signed.pdf](http://www.kemlu.go.id/Buku/JAKARTA%20CONCORD_FINAL_not%20signed.pdf) (last accessed 23 April 2017)

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Remarks by Vice President at the 1st IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta (March 07, 2017) [http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28119/Remarks\\_by\\_Vice\\_President\\_at\\_the\\_1st\\_IORA\\_Leaders\\_Summit\\_in\\_Jakarta\\_March\\_07\\_2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28119/Remarks_by_Vice_President_at_the_1st_IORA_Leaders_Summit_in_Jakarta_March_07_2017) (last accessed 10 April 2017)