

## **1. Good Going and a Triangular Affair**

### **Why in News?**

- ▶▶ Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's four-day official visit to India recently highlights India's deepening bilateral relationship and growing interdependence with Bangladesh. She addressed the **India Economic Summit** of the **World Economic Forum**. This article highlights the growing India-Bangladesh ties and the need for India to tackle the Chinese perspective in this relation.

### **A Gist of the Historical Background:**

- ▶▶ India enabled Bangladesh's liberation in December 1971 when it militarily assisted the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to acquire freedom from its oppressive western wing which unleashed a massive genocide of its own citizens of Bangla ethnicity. More than 10 million persecuted citizens of East Pakistan fled to India.
- ▶▶ In the 1971 war, the US and China, which had begun their own rapprochement, supported Pakistan, and were opposed to Indian assistance to the East Pakistan.
- ▶▶ With tacit support from Moscow, India achieved a spectacular military victory and liberated Dhaka, handing over power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who symbolised political leadership.

### **Key Highlights of the Visit:**

- ▶▶ Agreements on expanding connectivity and transit, easing travel across the border, strengthening trade and investment ties, boosting development cooperation, putting the fledgling defence cooperation on a firmer basis and promoting regional cooperation were taken up.
- ▶▶ Commitments to upgrade port facilities, implement India's under-utilised Lines of Credit, a coastal surveillance system, and fulfilment of the regional trilateral energy sharing arrangement with Bhutan were made.
- ▶▶ Sheikh Hasina articulated points critical for the future welfare of South Asia and suggested to move beyond the majority-minority mindset and other issues hindering the growth of bilateral relations.
- ▶▶ **Line of Credit:** It is a 'soft loan' provided on concessional interest rates to developing countries, which has to be repaid by the borrowing governments. The projects under LOCs are spread over different sectors like agriculture, infrastructure, telecom, railway, transmission/power, renewable energy, etc.

### **Areas of Concern:**

- ▶▶ Growing concerns in Bangladesh over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and about its conflicting explanations by the Indian government. The problem in Assam is part of the tragic legacy of the Indian subcontinent's partition in 1947 and the movement of people across the new frontiers in the east since then.
- ▶▶ Failed river water sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh despite many efforts. Chief among them is the Teesta agreement which was inked in 2011 but has not moved forward because of tensions between the Central and West Bengal governments.
- ▶▶ Pending upgradation of the Ganga-Padma barrage project, the draft framework of interim sharing agreements for six rivers- Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla & Dudhkumar and the draft framework of interim sharing agreement of the Feni river.
- ▶▶ Anti-market orientation in Delhi's economic policy poses serious problems even if India's national strategy calls for regional integration. It shows the insensitivity of Indian economic policy makers towards the logic of interdependence and the headache generated in Bangladesh by Delhi's economic decisions.
- ▶▶ For example, beef is a staple food in Bangladesh yet India does not export it which in turn increases the illegal animal trafficking at the border areas.
- ▶▶ Continuous delay in implementation of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Initiative (BBIN).
- ▶▶ Hate mongering and incidents of lynching of Muslims in India affect public perceptions in Bangladesh.

### **About Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal-Initiative:**

- ▶▶ It is an initiative to kick-start a smaller 'Eastern' sub-regional grouping with the potential to act as a link between South and Southeast Asia. Reasons for India's willingness are threefold:
  1. To strengthen trade relations with the Eastern (Bangladesh) and North Eastern (Bhutan and Nepal) neighbouring countries.
  2. To improve the sub-regional connectivity in order to realise regional connectivity goals with Southeast Asia.
  3. To develop the North Eastern Region of India through cross-border cooperation.

### **Few Suggestions to overcome the Points of Concern:**

- ▶▶ The tasks of river water management must be taken seriously between two countries which share 54 transboundary rivers, and which is key to prosperity, and often a source of tensions and humanitarian disasters.
- ▶▶ As India rises and integrates with Bangladesh which is now one of the world's fastest growing economies, Delhi must get its economic bureaucrats to integrate the regional dimension into their national policy thinking.
- ▶▶ The leaders of both nations must try to develop a long-term joint strategy that will facilitate national identification and generate a system of work-permits for legitimate movement of labour. This may help in mitigating illegal migrants crossing the borders.
- ▶▶ The Land and Maritime Boundary Agreements, should be approached by different means so that they can be of mutual benefit.

### **Need of India to understand the Chinese Perspective:**

- ▶▶ Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has referred to the Second Informal Summit between India-China and highlighted how the strategic ties between India and China have evolved and how Bangladesh-India-China triangle is often obscured by the high visibility accorded to Pakistan in the uneasy relationship between the two Asian giants.
- ▶▶ Post Bangladesh liberation, China's strategic and security concerns over India's growing involvement in the geopolitics of the region led to its investment in Pakistan, which emboldened Rawalpindi (Pakistan army headquarter) to embark upon a proxy war against India (with terrorism as a tool) which began in 1990 and continues till now.
- ▶▶ Hence, India's abiding regional strategic objective should be to ensure that Bangladesh does not morph into another Pakistan, either by way of being compelled into choosing Beijing over Delhi or nurturing radical Islamic ideologies domestically.
- ▶▶ Currently, Bangladesh is an active partner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that Delhi has not signed up to. In the security sector, Bangladesh is also a major recipient of Chinese military inventory, including submarines.
- ▶▶ India needs to recognise evolving regional strategic calculus enabled by China's economic-trade-fiscal policies and shape its own ties with Dhaka which also has robust ties with Beijing and if this triangular relationship is managed with integrity and little diplomacy, it can unleash the positive potential of the player countries.

### Way Ahead:

- ▶▶ Pluralism has been the strength of the Indian subcontinent so that should be kept in mind to be able to celebrate South Asia's diversities in religion, ethnicity and language.
- ▶▶ India and Bangladesh must manage their geo-political realities through friendship and collaborations. They should appreciate and balance regional political realities for the interest of the people and should not trade off long-term interests for short-term gains.
- ▶▶ India and Bangladesh share a great relationship, areas of concern remain which need to be looked into holistically and ratified as soon as possible so that "best of the best" of ties between the two neighbours can be sustained forever.

