



Course: 402

Bangladesh-Myanmar Bilateral Relations: A Short Overview

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Introduction

Bangladesh-Myanmar relations have gone through period of collaboration and conflict. Conflict means the sense of conflict of interest and result of diplomatic problems. Bangladesh-Myanmar relations formally started from 13 January 1972. On that day Myanmar gave recognition Bangladesh as a sovereign country. But, throughout the years the situation has experienced unwelcome change and the relations between these two neighbors was not been so friendly as expected due to some uncertain disputes like Rohingya refugees and maritime boundary division.

Aside this main tension now a day's Myanmar can be a great option for Bangladesh to maintain bi lateral relations. Myanmar is our main neighbor that we have borders beside other country India. It can give certain vital preference to Bangladesh. Other than the sea it is more noteworthy as it has potential gateway of land rout towards China and South east Asia. It could be a great link between Bangladesh and other south Asian countries including Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

Myanmar itself was a good potential country with resource. Bangladesh can be greatly benefited from the natural resources of Myanmar such as gas, oil and stones. And this natural resources are in huge amount of stock in Myanmar. Therefore, it is more in Bangladesh's interest to maintain good relationship with Myanmar for the reasons of national security. Unfriendly relations with Myanmar can cause benefit to small insurgent groups of hill tracks, which can cause national security. By the way, this question is less important now a day as the Rohingya issue has immerged as international concern. Very recently Myanmar argued that Saint Martin Iceland is actually in their land and they draw a map including the Iceland but after pressure from Bangladesh they removed it.

However, before Rohingya issue the relations between these two nations encountered an unpleasant taste in 1991. Myanmar assaulted and ransacked bordering Rejupara border out post BOP. 3 members of Bangladesh Rifles (now BGB) were killed by Myanmar force and all the arms and ammunition were looted. Bangladesh was put on a high military alarm and both of the states came to in a breaking point. War was almost to occur. However a major clash was able to avoid by newly elected government. Since then the relationship has never been smooth.

There are a bunch of factors which has been making problem in the normal relationship between two neighbors. Among them the Rohingya refugee problem is the most complex one and now days it is the burning issue all over the world. Maritime dispute was solved anyway in 2012 but Myanmar has attitude to violating it several times. Before the recent Saint martin's Iceland problem there was another disputes back in 2008 when Korean ships guarded by Myanmar navy started searching for natural resources in south west of saint martin within the area of 50 nautical miles in Bangladesh's water. Though Myanmar withdrew their activities later facing strong challenge from Bangladesh but they didn't stop. Back in 2 years with Rohingya issue they violated the border peace and settled situation many times. So it can be said that the relation is not smooth anymore, hardly can in future.

Historical context

Myanmar-Bangladesh relation is not threatening or closed however, there are critical variables that decide the relation being unfriendly or close. Particularly The distinctions of operating the state of both countries are viewed as the defining moment of their two sided relations. To understand the relation we can study the past initiatives that both countries have made to develop bilateral relations.

The official relation between two countries began off after recognition of Myanmar to Bangladesh on 13 January 1972. It is to state that Myanmar was one of the primary few countries in the world to recognize Bangladesh. Bangladesh foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad visited Myanmar in May 1972. That was the first official visit of the foreign minister of the Bangladesh in any country after India. Following that visit a joint communication started at the same time from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Closer ties and development of bilateral relations on the basis of peaceful co existence, non-alignment and mutual respect for sovereignty and national dignity was emphasized.

Three agreements were signed between two countries within the time of 1972 and 1985. These were; i) General Trade Agreement (3 August, 1973), (ii) Repatriation of Refugee Agreement (1978), and (iii) Land Boundary Agreement (1979). For the relations between two nations these agreements were milestones. Since then many visit from the top level took place from the both side to develop the bilateral relationship. Even in the most complex Rohingya dispute situation this visit is being continued.

On 1st June 1989 the two countries signed three more MOUs on border trade and economic cooperation providing for joint ventures at the government-to-government, government-to-private, and private-to-private levels and also on cooperation between private sectors like FBCCI and UMCCI. Premised upon these, the border trade protocol was signed on 18 May 1994. But, border trade formally began on 5 September 1995.

Before a long time Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1948 Myanmar got their independence from England. In 1966 an agreement to separate border was signed with the Myanmar while Bangladesh was a part of independent Pakistan. So it can be said that the official relations with Bangladesh started before getting independent.

Border agreement for cooperation was signed in 1980 and in 1988 for deviation of Naaf River another agreement was signed between two countries. Foreign secretary level annual conference to place addressing trade and economic communication. To discuss the trade matter a joint trade commission was initiated. To understand the bilateral relations these agreement can be important.

On 14 March 2012 the longstanding maritime dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar came to an end after the International tribunal for the Law of the Sea gave its final decision. The judgment was final and without appeal, which Bangladesh won by 21 votes to one. In the history of the relation between two states this ocean debate had been remained a major issue. Both states complained against each other to have extra spaces in sea than they have. But Bangladesh got the victory for their claimed

maritime area according to the international law of the sea. It was a decent sign that Myanmar's acknowledgment of the decision.

Things have been changing somehow about the Rohingya issues for past few years. The issue of ethnic cleansing and mass genocide in the bordering Rakhain state has got international concentration. Major Powers have been involved in the matter. So bilateral relations have gone in a crucial situation. Though both countries are trying to maintain the trade relation normal but it's a matter of question with more than 10 million refugees how Bangladesh can deal with Myanmar and keep a normal trade relations.

Geographical Proximity and its Significance to Bangladesh-Myanmar

Myanmar is one of the two nations that have common borders with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is surrounded by India to the west, north and northeast, Myanmar to the southeast, and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Bangladesh-Myanmar has a common border of 271 kilometers. But for Bangladesh, Myanmar relations things are different. Beside India, Myanmar is Bangladesh's only other bordering neighbor.

Myanmar and Bangladesh are the two geographically adjoining Third World developing countries. These two nations share a decent arrangement of history, topography, culture and politics of both colonial and post-colonial perspectives. Post-independence slipped democracy alternated history is also common in them. Obviously, Myanmar shares a greater amount of this legacy than Bangladesh. In spite of such an extensive amount shared traits it is in reality it is indeed unpleasantly surprising that these two neighbors are not as close and as interactive as they should have been.

Regardless of her little size, Bangladesh has certain geological points of interest that make her essential to regional and extra regional powers which may drag her into a complex strategic scenario created due to rivalries between big powers. Bangladesh might be viewed as a key player in vital courses of action of India, Pakistan, the U.S.A and China.

Myanmar has potentials in this region with its size and huge natural resources. Myanmar became one of the key player in the strategic game due to its geographical location and resources. has turned into the fascination for superpowers in the international politics.

Bangladesh has tremendous geographic points of interest for its proximity to Myanmar and other South East Asian nations to promote interregional economic, political and security cooperation. She has being also as a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN. The two countries can be used as the main transit point to increase economic communication amongst them by connecting via Asian highway and Trans-Asian highway. Bangladesh and Myanmar can play a vital role between two emerging regional power with suitable politics and infrastructural development. Chinese navy is making quick progress in developing relation with coastal nations such as Myanmar and Bangladesh with the goal to protect the oil

transshipment and trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Thus they can gain access to their port facilities so as manage maritime operations in the sea.

The significance of Bangladesh and Myanmar has been expanded as they are located at shores of Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. Profitable marine assets like hydrocarbon, fishes etc lies in the sea area of this two country. Land surrounded countries like Nepal, Bhutan and also India can utilize the port facilities to increase trade with its land locked north east region. As well as other South East Asian states such as Laos and also China will use the same opportunities to accelerate trade communications. The well developed sea port of Bangladesh and Myanmar can offer this huge opportunity.

Trade and Economic Relations

Bangladesh exports to Myanmar various items like pharmaceuticals, ceramic, cotton fabric, raw jute, kitchenware, and cosmetic. On the other hand Myanmar exports such items as marine products, beans and pulses, and kitchen crops.

As being close neighbors the trade relations of Bangladesh and Myanmar are not as good as expected. In 1996, a border trade agreement was signed between the two governments. This allows businessmen to open letters of credit up to US\$ 5000 dollars per day. But now days the situation has changed.

According to The Daily Star February 2, 2018 report , The ongoing crisis has impacted Bangladesh's exports to Myanmar as operations at the Teknaf land port, the main gateway to the neighbor, have almost come to a halt for the influx of refugees, businessmen said.

Since August 2017, more than half a million s have arrived at Cox's Bazar from the northern Rakhine province of Myanmar after troops and Buddhist mobs burned down their villages and killed civilians.

Between the months of July and December last year, exports to Myanmar declined 12.08 percent year-on-year to \$10.04 million, according to data from the Export Promotion Bureau.

The previous reports were different. A report shows that, during the fiscal year of 2011-2012, Bangladesh exported goods to Myanmar worth US \$ 13.45 million and imported goods worth \$ 65 million. In the 2012-2013 fiscal years, the average amount of border trade was US \$ 6.3 million. The export amount was \$ 6.2 million and the import amount was \$87000. (Sonia Farhana Rahman, 19 December 2017, dailyasianage)

Problems and challenges

Bangladesh Myanmar bilateral relations beside the issue have some more other problems and challenges. Such as border crisis. It's an important challenge of cooperative relations. There are complain from Bangladesh that Drug smuggling is been occurring by bordering states through the Bangladesh. Government's Department of Narcotics Control has reported 'Yaba' a drug originates from Myanmar seizure in recent years-from approximately 4,000 tablets in 2009 to more than 150,000 in 2013. Recently government has noted this drug as level 1 drug which can accused death penalties if its been found to be smuggled.

Rohingya Issue

Violence against the in Myanmar's north-western Rakhine state has generated a massive influx of refugees to Bangladesh that will test bilateral relations. According to a report published in The Diplomatic Envoy October 8 2018, 'As of October 2018, more than 90 percent of Myanmar's Rohingya population has fled to Bangladesh in search of a safer life, reports Aljazeera. Since violence broke out over a year ago, roughly 700,000 individuals have crossed over Bangladesh's Southeastern border. With a small portion settling in Bangladesh beforehand, the total number now exceeds 960,000 refugees. According to Human Rights Watch, Myanmar's authorities have continuously brutalized Rohingya refugees. This has occurred in the form of extreme discrimination and police brutality. In addition, widespread sexual violence has slowly become a norm in this conflict.'

Crisis was faced by Bangladesh since the independence. In East Asia Forum journal Syeda Naushin Parnini, University of Malaya has written an article 'In the 1970s, an anti-insurgency campaign of Myanmar's then military government in Rakhine state saw widespread violations of human rights and brutal acts against the Muslim-minority . Nearly 300,000 s were forced to cross the border at that time. During 1991-92, a second wave of over 250,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to escape the ongoing military crackdown. Since the 1970s, more than one million Rohingya have taken refuge in Bangladesh. The influx of refugees has been continuous, even as relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar have undergone frequent ups and downs.

Previously the largest influx of refugee into Bangladesh took place in 1990-91. The UNHCR subsequently facilitated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Bangladesh and Myanmar in April 1992 under which Myanmar agreed to the return of those Rohingya refugees who could prove residency in Myanmar prior to their departure for Bangladesh. But the UNHCR withdrew from the repatriation process in December 1992 due to concerns over the forceful repatriation of some Rohingya refugees, which jeopardized the broader repatriation framework.

The United States has called the treatment of the ‘ethnic cleansing’ and threatened sanction against those responsible. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, while visiting Dhaka in November 2017, proposed a three-phase plan for resolving the crisis, starting with a ceasefire followed by bilateral dialogue.

At an Asia–Europe Meeting summit on 13–14 November 2017, the foreign ministers of member countries called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, halting of refugee outflow and early return of the displaced from Bangladesh. They also called for the implementation of recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Rakhine State, which was a joint initiative between the Myanmar government and the Kofi Annan Foundation.

Amid this mounting pressure, Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to sign a MOU on 23 November 2017 with Bangladesh based on the 1992 agreement which would enable the two countries to start repatriating the verified in Bangladesh. But Bangladesh signed the MOU without specifying deadlines for the initiation and completion of repatriation, hoping that the forcibly displaced would start returning to their homeland within two months.

Still, there is some cause for optimism that Bangladesh–Myanmar relations are ripe for cooperation to solve the Rohingya crisis. Myanmar has partially democratized and peacefully settled maritime disputes with Bangladesh through the demarcation of maritime boundaries.

In November 2017, Myanmar’s Minister for the Office of the State Counselor, U Kyaw Tint Swe, visited Bangladesh. He exchanged with Mahmood Ali, Bangladesh’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, the long-awaited ‘instrument of ratification’ of a 1998 agreement demarcating the land north of the Naf River that separates the two countries. Myanmar and Bangladesh also formed a Joint Working Group on 20 December 2017 to oversee the repatriation of the Rohingyas .

But there are stateless and not protected by any government. Resolving the crisis will require coordinated local, regional and international diplomacy to urge the Myanmar government to cease its atrocities against minorities.

Uncertainties over the statelessness of the mean the international community has not seriously considered humanitarian intervention. International relief agencies such as the UNHCR, World Food Program and various NGOs are involved in the provision of aid to refugees.

But the crisis is fundamentally a human security issue (though encompassing non-traditional security concerns). The UN, ASEAN, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and other key players such as the United States, China, India and Russia must — in keeping with their own responsibility to protect — place pressure on Myanmar’s government to stop these mass atrocities.’ (*UMCEDEL*)

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has urged India to contribute more to the crisis, because of its close relations with both Myanmar and Bangladesh, reports The Daily Star. Mr. Guterres emphasized, “There should be accountability to those crimes. To keep a population in such a discriminatory situation is an invitation for terrorist groups.” (The Diplomatic Envoy October 8 2018)

Conclusion

The current situation of Myanmar Bangladesh bilateral relation is very sensitive. Without any doubt the bilateral complexities are increasing on the basis of national interest and national security. Specially Rohingya refugee problem has become not only national security threat it has created a humanitarian alarming situation all over the world. Myanmar is responsible to create Rohingya refugees. So it is Myanmar's responsibility to take necessary steps to according to international law and rules in order to solve the problem. Bangladesh is not bound to bear the extra pressure of Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh needs strong Diplomatic activities to solve this problem and enrich bilateral relations if it is possible.

On the other hand, Bangladesh also needs to be serious about Myanmar's secret military ambitions. Policy makers should remember that diplomacy is a helpless orphan unless backed by force (Patwary, BIPSS). The policy towards Myanmar should be formulated with more careful combination of effective diplomacy as well as safe guarding the national interest.

Policy makers never viewed Myanmar as close neighbor but if they can try some day it may be close and many problems can be solved then. Finally, based on realities Bangladesh has to make up mentality sooner rather than later how the geopolitical goal can be achieved with optimum gain for the sake of national security. The burden of refugees cannot be bared for years. There is no time for thinking. It's the time to act seriously.

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