



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

Panel Discussion

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Neighbourhood Insights Series

Rapporteur's Report

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Understanding Dynamics in Bangladesh: Elections, Geopolitics, and Relations with India

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Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) organized a panel discussion on ***Understanding Dynamics in Bangladesh: Elections, Geopolitics, and Relations with India***. The discussion featured distinguished speakers: **Professor Veena Sikri**, Former Ambassador, Bangladesh and **Professor Sanjay K. Bhardwaj**. The opening remarks were given by **Air Marshal Anil Chopra** PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd), Director General, CAPS, followed by the discussion session including an Q&A session. The session was moderated by **Dr Shalini Chawla**, Distinguished Fellow, CAPS. During the proceedings the panellists and participants deliberated on various aspects of Bangladesh's domestic politics, upcoming national election, security situation in Bangladesh, its economic conditions and its relation with India.

Discussion

In the welcome remarks, Air Marshal Anil Chopra acknowledged the significant role played by the Indian armed forces in the liberation of Bangladesh. He emphasized that despite certain unresolved issues, India and Bangladesh maintain a friendly relationship. It is noteworthy that both countries are active members of crucial regional forums such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association). Their bilateral trade is on the rise, and they stand as the largest trading partners in South Asia. Furthermore, there is a growing collaboration between India and Bangladesh in various fields, including cyber security, electronics, information technology, civil nuclear energy, and counter-terrorism efforts. India has made substantial contributions in terms of credit and investment to support Bangladesh's development.

Throughout the course of the discussion, the primary areas of focus revolved around several key aspects. These included an in-depth examination of Bangladesh's current internal situation, particularly in light of the upcoming elections. The economic landscape and the security concerns of Bangladesh were discussed in detail. Lastly, the discussion encompassed an exploration of the

external situation, Bangladesh's broader positioning in the ever-evolving regional geopolitics and India's relations with Bangladesh in the evolving dynamics.

The key discussion points of the Panel discussion are as follows:

Internal situation

Pakistan, despite being expelled from Bangladesh in 1971, continues to exert both a mental and physical influence on the Bangladesh politics and people. In contrast, India, while achieving a successful victory in 1971, faced a setback with the Simla Agreement as it did not adequately address Pakistan's crucial pressure points. Furthermore, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, India distanced itself both mentally and physically from Bangladesh. Conversely, Pakistan's persistent presence during the 15-year military rule solidified its position in Bangladesh. The anti-India sentiments that had developed in Bangladesh between 1947 and 1971 still lingers in the memories of the generations that experienced them.

An admirable aspect of Bangladesh is its peaceful transition to democracy after 15 years of military rule. However, the support for Pakistan and what it represented persisted in Bangladesh even after this transition. Despite Sheikh Hasina serving as the Prime Minister for the last 15 years, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) still commands around 35-40% of support. This raises the critical question of what will happen to BNP's support in the upcoming elections. Additionally, there is a concerning rise in religious fundamentalism in the country. Sheikh Hasina herself recognizes the need for the support of religious conservatives for her vote bank. She has earned respect for her leadership, maintaining steady economic growth, and, most importantly, preserving nonviolence in Bangladesh over the years.

There are three significant segments within Bangladeshi society: first, liberals who believe in civilizational affinities; second, radicals with parochial interests; and third realist youth driven by development goals and uninterested in carrying the legacy of either 1947 or 1971. Professor Bhardwaj, given his recent visit to Bangladesh, highlighted that there's no unified Bangladeshi identity; instead, people align themselves as pro-Indian, pro-Chinese, pro-American, or pro-Pakistani. Therefore, one could interestingly say that the elections in Bangladesh are heavily influenced by these diverse narratives of alignment with various foreign powers.

External situation

Externally, Bangladesh has experienced significant growth, with India's support playing a pivotal role in its development. Sheikh Hasina has effectively bolstered Bangladesh's standing in the global community. Bangladesh is one of India's key neighbours and has become a central player not only in South Asia but also in the broader Southeast Asian region.

Bangladesh holds immense significance for India in its efforts to engage with Southeast Asian neighbours through the "Look East" or "Act East" policy. Additionally, Bangladesh plays a crucial role in connecting with Northeast India. Two primary factors that influence the mindset of people in Bangladesh and their interactions with India and other countries are religion and culture. India-Bangladesh relations have generally fared well when center-to-left parties like the Awami League have been in power, resulting in significant agreements and constructive engagements. Conversely, during the tenure of center-to-right parties such as the BNP and the Bangladesh army, such positive developments have been limited. In fact, when the Bangladesh army held power, they cultivated closer relations with China, the United States, Pakistan, and distanced themselves from India and the USSR. However, the major issues at the micro level in India-Bangladesh relations primarily arise from a lack of effective communication about what India has done for Bangladesh within the Bangladeshi population.

Economy

At present the Bangladesh economy is grappling with rising inflation and persistent poverty, posing challenges for the nation's economic stability. However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been notably successful in steering Bangladesh's economic development, achieving a remarkable and steady growth rate. Sheikh Hasina has placed a strong emphasis on economic development, which proved to be a significant asset during her first two terms as Prime Minister. However, during her third term, the economy suffered a downturn. A significant misstep was extending undue advantage to her own supporters, which had a substantial adverse impact on the economy. Notably, the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh, particularly India supplying electricity to Bangladesh, greatly boosted Sheikh Hasina's government and the country's economy.

In the initial decade of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, Bangladesh accumulated a substantial forex reserve, exceeding \$40 billion. Unfortunately, a critical mistake was made when Sheikh Hasina used this reserve for an export development fund, leading to detrimental consequences for Bangladesh's economy. The depletion of forex reserves led to a devaluation of the Bangladeshi currency.

Moreover, a key concern in the economy is the significant outflow of money without an adequate return. Bangladesh's substantial indebtedness to China is also a major source of economic worry.

Security situation

Though in the recent past, there has been no instances of terror attacks in Bangladesh, however there has been rise of extremism and fundamentalism in the country, which has become a major security concern. During 2006, Bangladesh was often labeled as a "cocoon of terror" or the "next Afghanistan" due to a range of issues, including extremism, radicalism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and bomb blasts. Groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban mujahideen were particularly active during that phase.

Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the Bangladeshi government took significant steps to combat these challenges. They empowered the military and police forces to confront extremist and radical groups. Additionally, the government addressed various security concerns such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and counterfeit currency issues. The political establishment, under Sheikh Hasina's guidance, worked closely with the military to effectively counter extremist and radical forces within the country.

However, Bangladesh faces other security concerns, one of which is the Rohingya refugee crisis. These refugees are vulnerable to radicalization due to a lack of education, employment, and proper living conditions. Notably, there are reports of Chinese involvement in providing drugs to the refugee population and attempting to incorporate them into the drug supply chains in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Further, the joint operation of China Pakistan nexus in Bangladesh is very dangerous.

Another looming security concern for Bangladesh is the adverse impact of climate change and the prevalence of hawala activities within the country, which could pose major challenges in the future. It is anticipated that with a projected 19.6-inch (50 cm) increase in sea levels, Bangladesh may witness the loss of roughly 11% of its land, potentially leading to the displacement of up to 18 million people solely due to rising sea levels. Consequently, it is anticipated that these discussed issues, which encompass economic considerations, the proliferation of fundamentalism, internal and external security dynamics, and the effects of climate change, will undeniably assume a pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding the impending national elections in Bangladesh.