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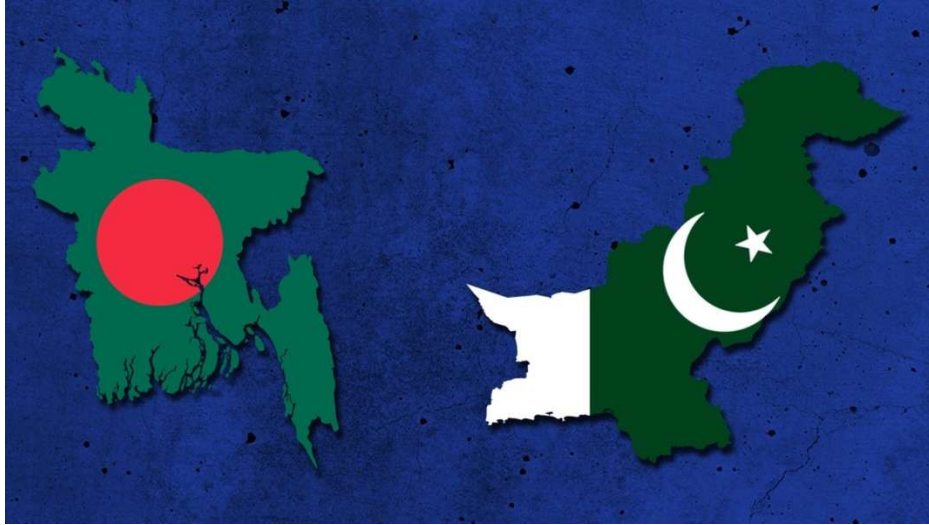
زبانهای اروپایی

Taut Bataut

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Reviving Ties between Pakistan and Bangladesh

Pakistan and Bangladesh, long-standing adversaries, are now in pursuit of mending fences.



The policy change occurred after the downfall of Sheikh Hasina Wajid's government in Bangladesh. Economic dependency between the two countries can lead to long-term and sustainable bilateral relations.

Shifting Bilateral Relations

Innovative and prudent decision-making from both sides is necessary for establishing long-term relations

In the realm of international relations, states often alter their policy decisions regarding friends and foes. As aptly said, "In international politics, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests." Pakistan and Bangladesh have recently altered their policy outlook towards each other, marking a new strategic shift in South Asia. The governments in the two countries have been hostile to each other since the

dismemberment of the Eastern Wing of Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh, in 1971. The vandalization of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's statue by student protesters in the recent uprising and the pursuit of establishing cordial relations with Pakistan by the interim government demonstrates that the public sentiments regarding the latter were contrary to the previous government's policies.

Economic Diplomacy: The Pathway to Strengthening Ties

Economic diplomacy provides significant leverage to the two countries to establish long-term relations. The recent visit of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI)'s high-level delegation to Dhaka has emerged as a breakthrough between Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and FPCCI signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) during this visit. The establishment of the Pakistan-Bangladesh Joint Business Council is also a major milestone achieved in the pursuit of strengthening commercial and trade relations between the two countries.

Pakistan also sent two cargo ships from Karachi to Chittagong to resume bilateral maritime trade. Although the interim Bangladeshi government's approach regarding establishing cordial ties with Pakistan is quite prudent and deliberate, the shift in bilateral relations is commendable. Fraternal ties between the regional countries are mandatory for a peaceful South Asia. High-level contacts between Islamabad and Dhaka are considered a remarkable milestone in this regard. In late 2024, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Bangladesh's Chief adviser Dr. Mohammad Yunus held talks in Cairo and New York, leading to a consensus to forge bilateral relations. Another significant development in this regard is the Bangladesh Army's Principal Staff Officer Lt-Gen SM Kamrul Hasan's visit to Pakistan on January 14, 2025. During this visit, he discussed the potential of bilateral collaboration and cooperation in the defense and security sector with General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, Pakistan's Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, and General Asim Munir, the Army Chief of Pakistan.

The FPCCI delegation in Dhaka also visited the International Trade Fair to explore prospects and arenas for bilateral trade relations. FPCCI and FBCCI officials identified numerous areas of cooperation during their recent meeting. The two sides agreed to cooperate in several domains, especially, cars, electronics, furniture, fabrics, ceramics, toys, industrial machinery, handicrafts, jute and plastic products, jewelry, cosmetics, sanitary products, and sports goods. The Pakistani delegation also held meetings with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority to discuss the prospects of further engagement and bilateral visits. It also agreed to

promote collective trade. The two countries have also expedited the visa approval process and have endorsed the need for providing facilities to businessmen from both countries, to promote bilateral economic and trade relations. These recent developments are reminiscent of President Pervez Musharraf's to Bangladesh in 2002. During this visit, the two countries attempted to enhance their bilateral ties. Bangladesh-Pakistan Joint Economic Commission was rejuvenated and the latter provided duty-free access for Bangladeshi tea and jute during Musharraf's visit. However, this collaboration was suspended by Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina Wajid, after assuming Prime Minister's office in 2009.

Overcoming Regional Challenges

The ongoing economic diplomacy between the two sides will assist in bridging the gulf and trust deficit between Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is a harbinger of political reconciliation, leading to collaboration in security, defense, cultural and educational domains. Bangladesh holds higher foreign exchange reserves, currency value, exports, and per capita income. Its successful economic model can provide solutions for Pakistan's deteriorating economic condition. The two countries are also planning for joint military exercises in February 2025, during the visit of the Pakistani Foreign Minister to Dhaka.

General Sahir Shamshad Mirza is also expected to visit Bangladesh sooner. However, Indian influence in Bangladesh is the biggest impediment to its strong relations with Pakistan. Bangladesh shares a long border with India, Pakistan's biggest regional rival and competitor, and the latter has surrounded it from three sides, making it highly dependent on the latter. Establishing strong economic and trade relations with Pakistan and China is essential for Dhaka to pursue an independent foreign policy. The two sides must also overcome the 1971 syndrome to establish strong bilateral ties. Innovative and prudent decision-making from both sides is necessary for establishing long-term relations. Along with economic diplomacy, the two countries should also promote people-to-people contact to minimize the trust deficit.

Taut Bataut, January 27, 2025

Taut Bataut – is a researcher and writer that publishes on South Asian geopolitics