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Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's trip to India and the PRC



Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent visits first to India and then, two weeks later, to the PRC, the two leading Asian countries, constituted a very remarkable development in terms of the unfolding situation in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

A few words about Bangladesh

Situated on the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh has land borders with India on three sides (except for a small section of border with Myanmar, in the south-east). The country regularly suffers from catastrophic natural disasters, especially hurricanes, floods, and droughts. With an area three times smaller than the current territory of Ukraine, with over 170 million people, it has approximately ten times the population.

It is a poor but rapidly developing country, which the renowned economist Jim O'Neill, best known for coining the acronym BRIC, listed Bangladesh as one of the Next Eleven in the mid-2000s. This list featured the 11 countries that its compiler saw as future engines of global economic development. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it is too early to talk about such a role today, but, nevertheless, it is doing its best.

The political challenges faced by the country, both domestic and foreign policy-related (and these are, as always, closely connected) present a serious obstacle to its achieving this ambition. Of the domestic challenges, we should first mention the decades-long bitter struggle between the (relatively) “secular” and “nationalist and religious” (90% of the population in Bangladesh is Muslim) political currents.

The secular politicians are headed by the current prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, who is the daughter of Mujibur Rahman, one of Bangladesh's founders, and the sole member of her family who was not killed in the country's 1975 coup. The religious and nationalist group is headed by the equally charismatic Khaleda Zia. At the beginning of January this year, when the country was holding its scheduled **general parliamentary elections** the rivalry between the two groups and their ambitious leaders escalated into open confrontation. However, it was something of an absentee vote, as the opposition forces, led by Khaleda Zia, boycotted the elections. Be that as it may, the outcome was that Sheikh Hasina retained the post of Prime Minister, a position she has held continuously since 2009.

The trips to India (June 21-22) and China (July 8-10) were her first foreign visits since she was reelected as Prime Minister, the most important post in Bangladesh, which is a parliamentary republic.

Visit to India

Bangladesh's relations with India play a central role in all aspects of its nationhood. This is due to both the geographical factor, as described above, and the fact that India is now one of the members of a narrow pool of major players in the current phase of the “Great World Game”, the focus of which is shifting to the Indo-Pacific Region. During the relatively short period since it gained independence in 1971, (for which Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan, owed a great deal to both India and the USSR), bilateral relations have undergone a number of dramatic changes. In early 2001, during Sheikh Hasina's first premiership, there was even a border clash, resulting in up to 20 casualties on both sides, which almost escalated into a serious armed conflict.

Nevertheless, Sheikh Hasina's government, that has always shown a desire to maintain constructive and mutually beneficial relations with its giant neighbor. This is why the

frequent attempts by Islamist extremists to target the Hindu minority in Bangladesh have been thwarted.

Sheikh Hasina's **previous visit to India**, back in September 2022, was particularly fruitful. However, the very fact that, after less than two years, the two sides felt the need to meet again at the highest level is an indication of the rapid accumulation of new issues affecting both relations between the two countries and the evolving regional situation.

In addition, certain “long-standing” problems continue to remain an issue. One of these can be summed up by the word “water”, which for densely populated countries of South Asia affects almost every aspect people's lives. Both when there is too much of it (flooding) and too little (drought). Both situations are equally problematic, and can sometimes be devastating, as noted above.

The problem is not solely due to the vagaries of the climate, but also to unilateral interventions by one country, which do not always fully take into account the interests of its neighbor. One such a “long-standing” problem in bilateral relations related to the functioning of a dam built by India in the 1960s on the River Ganges, just 18 km from the border with Bangladesh. The Ganges also flows through Bangladesh, where it is known as the Padma. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the need to address the “water problem” **in his speech marking his recent his most recent meeting with his Bangladeshi counterpart**. The issue was also mentioned in the brief **Joint Statement**.

That speech also listed a number of bilateral projects in the spheres of transport communications, logistics, energy, which have either been completed or are in the process of implementation.

Of those issues, it is worth highlighting the **transportation project**, already discussed in a previous article. This project is designed to provide access to the Bay of Bengal for the seven northeastern states of India, which today are connected to the main territory of the country only by the narrow Siliguri Corridor (the “Chicken's Neck”). It is noteworthy here that the transport artery, after passing through Bangladesh, will end at a port on the Bay of Bengal, which is currently being modernized with the participation of Japanese companies. And it appears that this fact is motivated not only by commercial, but also by political considerations.

There is certainly a political element to the construction by a Chinese company of a giant automobile-railroad bridge over the Padma River, a project which was commissioned in the summer of 2022 in the presence of Sheikh Hasina.

China had its own reasons to take on this project, which was initially developed by a certain American company in the middle of the last decade. It seems that in essence, a similar political motivation was present in both projects.

Visit to China

The main issue is that in China the construction of the above-mentioned bridge was primarily seen as a solution to a shared, and pressing, political and strategic problem – namely its need to ensure land access to the Indian Ocean by land, i.e. bypassing the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. Three routes were selected as the most suitable options, passing through Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh respectively.

Of these, the first two are closest to completion. However, by a strange coincidence, as they approach the final stage, internal problems of all sorts are escalating in both Pakistan and Myanmar. Unfortunately, the “clarification of relations” is frequently taking the form of an armed struggle.

Moreover, in Pakistan the main targets of the terrorist acts connected to the construction of various sections of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (with its terminus in the port of Gwadar, located on the Gulf of Oman) have been Chinese workers and engineers. In Myanmar, the various warring factions have so far refrained from such actions, but the environment itself has been one **of internecine warfare, which has escalated once again since last fall** and which is presenting a serious obstacle to the development of the national economy and the functioning of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which passes through the country.

As for Bangladesh, the proposed bridge over the River Padma could serve as an important element of the transportation route from China’s southwestern provinces to the Indian port city of Kolkata. But here again, the increasingly competitive state of the relations between India and the PRC has had a negative impact. Currently, of course, there is no question of a Chinese route passing via Kolkata to the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the attempts made some time ago by the Pakistani military to sound out **the Indian leadership’s position** on connecting India to the CPEC are now unlikely to come to anything.

Here again, it seems appropriate to set out the present author’s opinion on the main challenge to both the positive development of the situation in the Indo-Pacific Region as a whole (in particular, in South Asia) and the successful functioning of various regional structures which have been formed in recent years, including the SCO and BRICS. This challenge is caused not so much by the machinations of the United States, the “leader” of the West, (a concept

that no longer corresponds to reality and which has place outside crude propaganda) as by various difficulties in relations between the two Asian giants.

The inconvenience is felt by all the countries on the continent, and first of all, of course, by the “smaller” neighbors who find themselves caught within the tensions created by the two leading powers of Asia. And this certainly not the first time that Bangladesh has suffered as a result. Therefore, Sheikh Hasina’s recent visits should be regarded primarily as a form of shuttle diplomacy aimed at relieving these tensions. At the same time, of course, a wide range of issues arising in Bangladesh’s bilateral relations with both India and the PRC were also addressed.

Sheikh Hasina was last in China five years ago and before her current visit many arguments were put forward to demonstrate the extent of the two countries’ ties. Primarily in the sphere of trade and the economy. In particular, **according to media reports**, the PRC is a major trading partner of Bangladesh. In turn, Bangladesh is China’s third most important partner among the Southeast Asian countries. It was also the first of these countries to join China’s global Belt and Road Initiative. Apart from the Padma bridge, the most important projects implemented by Chinese companies in Bangladesh include the Payra thermal power plant, with a planned capacity of 1,320 MW and a cost of \$2.5 billion.

The main event during Sheikh Hasina’s visit was undoubtedly her meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. There were also a number of other noteworthy events. The two countries are expected to conclude more than 20 documents relating to various spheres of cooperation.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to reiterate the main reasoning behind the Bangladeshi Prime Minister’s “two-stage” foreign policy exercise. Her principal goal seems to be to conduct a form of shuttle diplomacy to promote positive relations between the two leading Asian powers.

And such attempts can only be welcomed.

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