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Bangladesh in 2015

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IPCS Forecasts

Bangladesh in 2015

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Bangladesh in 2015: A Forecast

Contrary to its violent beginning and potential of political instability, the year 2014 was generally marked by peace and tranquility in Bangladesh. The new government led by Sheikh Hasina was able to consolidate its power and authority through the year. The international community extended cooperation and support to the new government to a great extent, defying the conventional wisdom of political analysts at home and abroad. Sheikh Hasina demonstrated her diplomatic acumen to garner global support for Bangladesh as well as her new government. Starting with back-to-back high profile visits to the Asian power houses, Japan and China, Bangladesh continued strong relations with India despite the change in political regime in the latter. The major actors in the Western world -the US and EU - continued strong bilateral relations with Bangladesh while maintaining their basic positions about the need for inclusive and participatory elections in Bangladesh. Although the Hasina regime sailed through the first anniversary of its rule following the 5 January elections, the year 2015 has brought with it surprise and uncertainty in the political landscape of Bangladesh. In looking ahead, some critical issues are likely to dominate the discourse in Bangladesh politics.

Return to Political Violence?

Bangladesh has once again been drawn into a quagmire of political violence. The country has been witnessing a renewed spell of mindless violence due to confrontational and cynically partisan politics. It is true that the BNP failed to organise an effective movement against the 05 January elections, or rally people to force the government to follow through its pre-election statement - that the election was only to address the constitutional compulsion and there would be a talk regarding the 11th Parliament. But following the denial to the opposition alliance to hold a public meeting in a town near Dhaka, the script of current political violence was written. Subsequently, in 2015,the BNP was prevented from celebrating the “demise of democracy day” on the occasion of the first anniversary of the 05 January elections. The former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia could not move out of her office in the presence of heavy security forces at the entranceto her political office. On the surface, this has led to the announcement of a political programme, called a ‘blockade’ by the opposition parties.

It has already been amply proved that the people of Bangladesh have shunned the politics of ‘hartal’ and ‘blockade’ and other violent means of politicking by the so called mainstream political parties. However, this time the blockade has come with an unprecedented scale of violence tantamount to ‘terrorism’ against the common people in the country. An editorial in a national daily in Bangladesh termed it as the “most anti-people, unimaginative, cruel and destructive programme that the BNP is embarking on.” The indefinite call for blockade has been associated with gruesome violence that has already killed many people and burned more than

600 motor vehicles and other properties. More importantly, it has generated panic among the people about their safety and security in daily life. Bangladesh has never faced such violence except the Liberation War in 1971. In the name of politics, the lives of common people have been placed under constant threat. Previously, political violence was targeted mostly against the law enforcing agencies and political activists. Now it is indiscriminately targetting ordinary people and their resources. The big question is when and how these violent and terrorist attacks will end - people do not appear to know the answer.

No party- in the government and the opposition - appears to be nearing a deal to end this political violence. What is becoming evident each day is the instability, uncertainty and insecurity of the Bangladeshi political process. Although the political programmes of the opposition may end at some point, political violence may continue to dominate the political landscape of Bangladesh, making the relations between the opposition and government more confrontational and destructive. The ultimate price is being paid by the common people at the expense of their security, safety and livelihoods. People continue to remain disappointed and disillusioned. In fact, the animated political process has been tracing its own course, paving the way for more intolerance and violence. One can see the attempts atcreating political capital through violence and anarchy to serve the purpose of extremist and non-democratic elements. But history will follow its own lesson - no extremist and autocratic forces last long.

Continuing Thrust towards the East

In the foreign policy arena, Bangladesh carefully crafted its diplomatic thrust towards the east in 2014. Bilateral visits and development partnerships have substantively strengthened Bangladesh's ties with China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Myanmar, Malaysia and Vietnam and others. It is worth mentioning that within three months of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Tokyo at the end of May 2014, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Bangladesh. Notably, Abe's visit filled up the fourteen-year gap in a Japanese head of State's visit to Bangladesh, which can be termed a milestone in Bangladesh-Japan relations. Bangladesh has always attached a great deal of significance to its relations with Japan. The Japanese contribution to the economy of Bangladesh is well known. In the last forty years approximately, Japanese economic assistance to Bangladesh recorded at US$ 12 billion. It will not be wrong to claim that there is now a qualitative shift in Bangladesh-Japan relations from aid dependence to interdependence.

In a rare show of diplomatic moves the Hasina paid a six-day official visit to China from 6-10 June 2014 with a strong 70-member business delegation immediately after her visit to Japan. The much discussed China visit produced five deals, including Chinese assistance for the construction of a power plant in Patuakhali and building a multi-lane road tunnel under the Karnaphuli River. Chinese President Xi Jinping described Bangladesh as an important country for the 'maritime silk road' (MSR) project he has been championing. The MSR envisages deepening connectivity, building ports and free trade zones, and boosting trade with littoral countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and in Southeast Asia. China made it clear that it attaches great importance to the Beijing-Dhaka bilateral and regards Bangladesh as an important development and cooperative partner in both South Asias and IOR contexts. As a demonstration of strong security cooperation between two countries, Bangladesh procured a new type of frigate from China built especially for the Bangladesh Navy.

Based on the spirit of friendship and cooperation for mutual development and benefits, Bangladesh has been building strong bilateral ties in the East, from Myanmar to Russia. The 2014 IMF Global Outlook, ranked Bangladesh as the 35th largest economy in the world in terms of GDP in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Due to the size of economy and sustained growth of

GDP, Bangladesh requires huge infrastructural change throughout the country that demands support from the development partners. Besides, as the 10th largest populated country in the world Bangladesh provides a huge domestic market with its growing middle class. In this context, Bangladesh's Eastward emphasis for mutual development continues with new initiatives in 2015. In fact, 2015 would see a period of consolidation of engagement with China, Japan, Russia and South Korea.

Enhancing Global Image

Bangladesh's pro-active role in global forums achieved new heights in 2014. Bangladesh was elected to the top leadership of two highly reputed multilateral bodies – the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU). These two global parliamentary bodies that exchange knowledge, practices of parliamentary democracy in the member assemblies and encourage parliamentary dialogue worldwide are very influential in the global arena. In yet another diplomatic accomplishment, Bangladesh became a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the period of 2015-17. The country was also elected as an executive member to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for the second time. The achievement of global support could boost the country's image abroad – which is critical for national development, particularly for attracting foreign investors.

Undoubtedly, it has been a rare diplomatic success in the history of Bangladesh that the country has been elected to four global bodies via secret votes of member nations. Bangladesh's ruling regime termed it a success in creating global leadership. They attribute these achievements to the global recognition of the country as a role model due to its stunning success in the socioeconomic development. The country maintained its diplomatic influence in regional fora, such as SAARCs. In the 2014, Bangladesh played a key role in salvaging the SAARC Summit. As widely appreciated by SAARC members, Dhaka initiated hectic efforts during the Summit to sign at least the energy cooperation agreement. This resulted in the foreign ministers of the eight countries SAARC countries signing the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) during the concluding ceremony of the 18th SAARC Summit,

Re-engaging the West?

The historic engagement of the West in Bangladesh's development and progress has often been questioned in the backdrop of West's perceived attempt to influence domestic politics. Despite strong and historical ties, domestic politics in Bangladesh and bilateral issues did create some irritants between Dhaka and the West, represented by the states and multilateral agencies (2009-2013) culminating in the 5 January, 2014, elections. The Western diplomatic community was concerned with the electoral process in Bangladesh as the country was then moving towards the 10th parliamentary elections. The evolving political dynamics marked by confrontational politics, the issue of the war crimes trials, the legacy of extremism since 2005, and the abolition of the caretaker government system determined a negative role of political parties in establishing a workable democratic system. The US, EU and other European powers openly expressed their concerns and frustrations over the prevailing political situations in Bangladesh. But the 10th parliamentary elections went as scheduled much to the surprise of the West vis-à-vis inclusive and participatory elections.

In the post poll context, the Western diplomatic community demonstrated a better understanding of the complex domestic politics in Bangladesh. Issues of war crimes trials, rise of political violence, militancy, the threat of fundamentalist politics, and the vulnerability of minority communities to vested quarters matter for democracy and governance in Bangladesh.

They matter seriously against the backdrop of massive destruction and heinous attacks on the lives and properties of common people seen before and after the poll. These were all done in the name of political agenda, that cannot justify such actions in its remotest sense. The post-poll European Parliament resolution (16 January 2014), the Hearing on Bangladesh by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (11 February 2014), and the statements of several development partners of Bangladesh show a lot more wisdom and pragmatism of political situations in Bangladesh. As analysts argue, in the realm of foreign policy it is not the priority of any government to influence domestic politics for the sake of domestic politics. Rather it is national interests that dictate the terms.

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited the UK and Rome in 2014 in connection with multilateral diplomacy. Several delegations from the EU too visited Bangladesh in connection with issues of mutual concerns including the readymade garments (RMG) industry. Bangladesh continued its security dialogue with the US. The third Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue was held in Washington DC on October 21, 2014, and it focused on the expansion of security, trade and development ties between the two countries. Bangladesh and the West have been moving forward to expand ties and rediscover the past warmth and depth as development partners. Yet again, it's the Bangladeshi domestic politics, particularly the present spell of gruesome and systematic use of political violence, that comes in the way.

The Bangladesh government has already briefed the diplomatic community and clarified the position of the regime. Meanwhile, the European Parliament (EP) Delegation for South Asia has expressed its deep concern at the outbreak of political violence in Bangladesh culminating over recent days. The Chair of the delegation for Relations with the Countries of South Asia of the EP, Jean Lambert, termed the current situation as "profoundly disturbing". In this context, 2015 may be marked by new tensions over holding inclusive and participatory elections as a means to resolve the crisis. However, considering national interests, Bangladesh and the West have abiding national interests to consolidate the process of re-engagement in 2015.

Maintaining Strong Ties with India

The continuity of strong ties between Bangladesh and India will feature critically in Bangladesh's 2015 foreign policy agenda. Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government in India and the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh made it clear in 2014 that both the countries consolidated their bilateral relationship only to be cemented further. The first sign of such an understanding came in during the Swearing Ceremony of Modi as the Indian Prime Minister in May 2014. Bangladesh's participation led by the Speaker of the National Parliament at the event clearly signaled the need for continuing friendly ties. Following the event, the Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, made an official visit to Bangladesh as her maiden standalone overseas tour from 25-27 June, 2014 – that was termed by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs as "extremely fruitful and satisfying." The Indian MEA added that Swaraj was returning with an understanding that "it is an excellent beginning in addressing each others' concerns and work together with the spirit of good neighbourliness".

The Hasina-Modi Summit on the side lines of the 2014 UNGA is the most significant achievement of Bangladesh's UN diplomacy. It was important for two major reasons. First, it was much-awaited against the backdrop of several high level contacts in recent days between the two friendly nations. Second, this was the first ever meeting between the two leaders. It was important to get to know each other to promote bilateral relations in the coming days. During the talks, Modi lauded the Bangladesh government's fight against terrorism as he said 'Bangladesh is a model for fighting terrorism'. During the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal, Hasina's meeting with Modi was critical as the two leaders met for the second time in

three months – a rare happenstance. Both leaders exchanged highly positive views about further strengthening bilateral relations. In 2014, another game changing moment in their bilateral relations came when a verdict from the UN's Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) based in the Hague was delivered on 7 July 2014. The verdict resolved the long standing maritime dispute between Bangladesh and India.

In 2015, Bangladesh will be looking forward to resolution of two outstanding issues: the ratification of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) by the Indian Parliament and the conclusion of the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement. Both the leaders discussed the issues of ratifying the LBA and the Teesta water sharing treaty in a spirit of friendship. Regarding the LBA, Modi emphasised that it is just a matter of time – which is a very positive gesture to reach a resolution on the most vexing outstanding bilateral issue. Regarding the Teesta water sharing issue, Modi assured of a serious pursuit of a consensus-building process that must have a positive impact on the improvement of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Both Bangladesh and India now wait for huge diplomatic strides to take ties forward and embark upon a solid foundation for mutual development and security. The prospective visits of Modi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to Bangladesh are expected be a reality in 2015 as watershed developments towards deeper engagement in the areas of trade, connectivity, investment, culture and security

Bangladesh in 2014: A Review

I
DOMESTIC POLITICS

Bangladesh: Domestic Politics and External Actors[1]

Following the general elections held on 5 January 2014, a new government was formed by Sheikh Hasina. The new cabinet has received positive responses from different groups in Bangladesh for inducting veteran politicians. As many as 30 members of the outgoing cabinet were dropped, allegedly for their linkages with corruption or poor performance. The first session of the 10th National Parliament was called on 29 January 2014 in a new political environment. The parliamentary democracy of Bangladesh has entered its third phase. In the first phase, immediately after the Liberation War in 1971 Bangladesh adopted the Westminster system of government. The first Constitution, known as the 1972 Constitution, is still lauded by the centre, centre left, centre right and left elements of Bangladeshi politics. In 1975, the country was brought under the the presidential form of government which lasted until the fall of the Ershad regime on 6 December 1990.

The twelfth Amendment to the Constitution on 6 August 1991 re-introduced the parliamentary form of government in Bangladesh. The introduction of the Caretaker Government system through the 13th Amendment in 1996 added a new dimension to parliamentary democracy in

[1] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 17 February 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/bangladesh/bangladesh-domestic-politics-and-external-actors-4313.html

Bangladesh. After more than two decades, the parliamentary system witnessed a new phase marked by the absence of the Caretaker Government system, and more importantly, absence of a major political party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in the Parliament. BNP ruled the country for more than 14 years. Now the main opposition party in the 10th Parliament is the Ershad-led Jatiya Party. Understandably, BNP with its allies will remain engaged in street politics while in the parliament the government will face its former ally as the main opposition party.

This is a script not written by any pundit or by any political astronomer - rather it is the inevitable outcome of the high stakes zero-sum-game in in Bangladeshi politics. The main players are obviously the two main alliances – the BNP led 18-party (now 19- party) alliance and the Awami League-led grand alliance. The people continue to be disillusioned and disappointed. The political process moved in its own course, paving the way for formal democracy to continue as the last resort for a stable and peaceful society. The constitution has been upheld. Bangladesh with its high performing economy, growing middle class and promising social development cannot remain hostage to confrontational and violent politics. It is an abiding reality that gives a strong message to political actors in the country and their friends and well-wishers at home and abroad.

A major feature of post-poll Bangladeshi politics has been the role of external powers. Unquestionably, these external powers are friends and development partners of Bangladesh. It is a common trend today that development partners, known as the diplomatic community, tend to get involved in domestic politics in the developing world. In South Asia, Nepal, Maldives, and Pakistan have faced this in different degrees. Bangladesh is no exception. It is generally perceived that parties in opposition often invite active involvement of the diplomatic community in domestic politics, making it part of their anti-government movement. While the diplomatic community could not resolve any single violent political dispute between the two major political parties in Bangladesh, there is no sign of their diminishing role. In 2013, it reached in its peak when the UN-supported Taranco mission made several attempts to strike a deal between the warring political parties.

This time, surprisingly, almost all major development partners attempted to get involved in the unfolding political situation in Bangladesh. The US, EU, India, the UN, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Australia all played a role. Of course, some were more visible than others. What is interesting is their common spirit – one of idealism for holding credible and inclusive elections. No doubt, every state has their national interest to serve in the foreign policy arena. Diplomats from all these countries and groups are to defend their national interests, and they have been doing so. Yet, it appears that many of these external players were guided by ideals rather than the reality in Bangladesh. The diplomatic community was solely concerned with the electoral process without giving much consideration to the evolving political dynamics in Bangladesh.

However, in the post poll context, the same actors have been demonstrating a better understanding of domestic politics in Bangladesh. Issues of war crimes trials, rise of political violence, militancy, threat of fundamentalist politics, and vulnerability of minority communities to vested quarters matter for democracy and governance in Bangladesh. They matter seriously against the backdrop of massive destruction and heinous attacks on the lives and properties of common people as seen before and after the polls. The post-poll European Parliament resolution (16 January 2014), the Hearing on Bangladesh by the US Senate Committee on

Foreign Relations (11 February 2014), and statements of several development partners of Bangladesh show a pragmatic view of the political situation in Bangladesh. Any misperception or subjective view of Bangladeshi politics would not be of any help to the 160 million people of Bangladesh nor democracy in the country.

Bangladesh Post Elections 2014: Redefining Domestic Politics?[2]

The 10th Parliamentary elections were held in Bangladesh on 5 January 2014 against the backdrop of the opposition alliance's boycott and blockade programme, amidst a whirl of apprehensions, tension and violence. The boycott of the major opposition party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami, has emerged as the key determinant of election outcomes and its aftermath.

Three views are particularly discernible about this boycott. According to one view, this boycott was self-imposed and was part of a larger strategic move by the opposition parties. Riding on popular support and ascendancy of hard-line leadership in parties, they took an unyielding stance on elections. Another view is that it was inevitable due to the lack of a conducive environment for participation since the caretaker government (CTG) system was scrapped by the 15th amendment of the Constitution of Bangladesh. They believe that no elections could be acceptable to them without CTG. The third view is focused on the process of holding elections under the current system, but with a new poll-time administration and a bigger and more substantive role of the Election Commission. Of course, this has to be based on political settlement by the two major political parties – the Awami League (AL) and BNP. The United Nations-brokered initiative led by Oscar Fernandez Taranco emphasised the third view to resolve the impasse. Ironically, no political settlement was reached. Both the ruling and opposition alliances opted for absolute gains.

Having no option as per the constitutional provision as well as political 'common sense', the government and the Election Commission organised the elections. In fact, the unique political environment in the country has produced an unprecedented election both in its process and outcome. A total number of 153 members of Parliament were elected uncontested and the remaining 147 were up for voting. With a poor voter turnout (40 per cent by the Election Commission) by Bangladesh standards (87 per cent in the December 2008 elections), the ruling Awami League bagged 232 seats. The Jatiya Party, made up of former military dictator Ershad, won 33 seats, becoming the second largest party in Parliament. Members of Parliament have already sworn in and a new Cabinet has been formed with Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Despite some reservations, the international community has recognised the government. The US and EU are continuing their diplomatic parleys to bring all political parties to a dialogue, and are working on the possibility of a mid-term election.

Although the elections have been questioned by various quarters in Bangladesh and beyond due to non-participation of the main opposition parties, a critical aspect of this election is the unleashing of widespread violence before, during, and after the polls. Since the early 1990s

[2] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 16 January 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/bangladesh/bangladesh-post-elections-2014-redefining-domestic-politics-4261.html

Bangladesh witnessed four general elections held under a caretaker (CTG) system. Interestingly, all defeated political parties and alliances seriously questioned the credibility of these elections too. A short-lived election was held in February 1996 under the party-run administration which lasted for about forty five days. In 2014, for the second time, an election was held under a non-caretaker government (officially known as an all-party government) in the post-mass upsurge era. Unlike the past, the main opposition party was invited to join the poll-time government, but it was rejected. It became clear at the end of 2011 that politics in Bangladesh was turning into a 'zero-sum-game' primarily on the question of 'election administration', which was changed by the ruling alliance with their brute majority in the national Parliament.

While the quality of the 10th Parliamentary elections has been questioned in terms of credibility, inclusivity and participation, domestic politics demands special mention to understand the elections and its outcome. Domestic politics in Bangladesh started to transform into a new and difficult shape when the ruling alliance announced the trial of war criminals. The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) was set up in 2009 as a war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide and crimes against humanity committed in 1971 by the Pakistani Army and their local collaborators,*Razakars*, *Al-Badr* and *Al-Shams*. The formation of ICT jolted the opposition camp. The second largest party in the opposition camp, Jamaat-e-Islam is directly linked with war crimes during the Liberation War in 1971. Top leaders of Jamaat have been charged with war crimes over the past four decades. The triggering incident was the verdict against a central leader of Jamaat, Moulana Delwar Hossain Sayedee. Following the verdict in February 2013, the Party unleashed massive violence throughout the country especially in their strongholds – mainly border districts.

Violence has become a political weapon of opposition politics, spearheaded by the war crimes-charged party. The subsequent *Hefazat* phenomenon has added impetus to this rising spree of political violence. The intermingling of extremist violence and the political movement led by the opposition alliance has emerged as the body blow to Bangladesh's nascent democracy. With capital punishment being awarded to to one of the leading war criminals – Abdul Kader Mollah - politics in Bangladesh needs to be redefined and re-conceptualised. The 10th Parliamentary elections were held in the evolving parameters of Bangladeshi politics, where political stability and democratic governance have been traded with violence and extremism for absolute

II
BANGLADESH & INDIA

India-Bangladesh: Sushma Swaraj's Visit[3]

Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made an official visit to Bangladesh as her maiden standalone overseas tour from 25 to 27 June, 2014 – which was termed by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as "extremely fruitful and satisfying." The spokesperson of the MEA added that Swaraj was returning with an understanding that "it is an excellent

[3] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 21 July 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/india-bangladesh-after-sushma-swarajs-visit-4569.html

beginning in addressing each others' concerns and work together with the spirit of good neighbourliness." It was one of the rare comprehensive visits by any Indian External Affairs Minister to Bangladesh.

There was an extraordinary effort to reach out to the people of Bangladesh. Swaraj held a series of meetings with the top leadership in Bangladesh including the President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Leader of the Opposition, Raushan Ershad, and the former leader of the opposition and the President of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Khaleda Zia, and held delegation-level talks with her Bangladeshi counterpart A. H. Mahmud Ali. Her meeting with Khaleda Zia has been a notable event considering the troubled nature of domestic politics in Bangladesh.

Despite her high profile official meetings and engagement, what has become extremely significant during her visit was her speech to the civil society audience organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). It drew attention of the elite across the sections of society in Bangladesh. She was able to communicate with the people about the new Indian government's view on Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh have enormous interests about the perspectives and strategies of the new Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Quite rightly so the current Bangladesh government has worked with India's Dr. Manmohan Singh administration in its last term when both Dhaka and New Delhi went an extra mile to reduce gaps and embark upon new and bold initiatives to strengthen bilateral relations. The people of Bangladesh want to see a smooth journey to stronger ties between the two nations based on the existing friendly relations.

Political circles in Bangladesh are sharply divided on the impact of Sushma Swaraj's visit on domestic politics of the country. Experts and activists leaning towards the opposition parties termed the visit as a paradigm shift in India's role in the matrix of political forces in Bangladesh. One analyst argued that the visit outlined the parameters within which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government will conduct bilateral relations with Bangladesh. It is marked by a major step away from the way the Congress did. He further adds that New Delhi will not play any favorites and relations will be between country-to-country and government-to-government.

Conversely, pro-government elites claim that the visit was hugely positive for the current government. The emphasis on government-to-government relations or focus on building strong institutions and promoting a culture of tolerance, inclusion and respect for differences strengthen the ruling political regime's positions. More importantly, in the realm of foreign policy it is not the priority of any government to influence domestic politics for the sake of domestic politics. Instead, it is national interests that dictate terms. Therefore, the visit rightly prioritised on the issue of boosting bilateral ties where both the government and the opposition have stakes.

Swaraj's speech on "India-Bangladesh Relations: A Framework for Cooperation" at the BIISS gathering has been widely discussed in Bangladesh's civil society. In her speech, Swaraj emphasised on comprehensive and equitable partnership, mutually beneficial relations, youth development and youth-led development, people–to-people to contact, and inter-linkages to move forward in South Asia. She referred to the fact that both India and Bangladesh shed blood together in 1971 and she did not forget to mention Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the

architect of Bangladesh. The Minister enthralled the audience in Dhaka as she spoke, "I come to Bangladesh with a message of friendship and goodwill from the newly elected Government in India. I come with the goal of enhancing our relationship and mutual understanding. I come with the belief that the potential of our partnership is vast. I come with the faith that the people of both our countries desire and deserve closer relations and concrete results…. Our desire is that India and Bangladesh should flourish together as two equal partners. We share not just our past but also our future."

It is less than a month since Swaraj visited Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the two nations witnessed another game changing moment in their bilateral relations when a verdict from the UN's Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) based in The Hague was delivered on 7 July 2014. The verdict resolved the long standing maritime dispute between Dhaka and New Delhi. The sharing of the disputed maritime region has been the essence of the verdict which both the nations have already identified as a new step towards building strong partnership between the two countries. However, a section of people in Bangladesh have been out to malign the verdict by raising the issue of the South Talpatti Island. They argue that Bangladesh has lost its claim on this historic island that was quickly dismissed by the maritime law experts in the country. Following Swaraj's visit, the PCA verdict on maritime boundary dispute is another milestone in consolidating Bangladesh-India bilateral relations.

India-Bangladesh: Enhancing Ties through a 'Power Corridor'[4]

The issue of a 'power corridor' has sparked a new debate in Bangladesh-India bilateral relations. Bangladesh has agreed in principle to provide India a 'power corridor' to help its neighbour link its north eastern and north western parts with electricity transmission lines passing through Bangladeshi territory. Bangladesh and India reached agreements on this issue during the seventh meeting of the Joint Steering Committee on Power Sector Cooperation between the two countries. It is expected that India would transmit around 6000 MW of hydro-electricity from Arunachal Pradesh to Bihar.

This is the third concrete step between the two nations to strengthen energy cooperation since the Awami League-led Grand Alliance government came to power in January in 2009 in its last term. The first inter-country power grid in South Asia was commissioned in October 2013 between Baharampur (India) and Bheramara (Bangladesh) to facilitate the transmission of 500 MW electricity from India to power-deficit Bangladesh. The second initiative came in 2013 when under a joint venture, Bangladesh and India set up a 1320 MW coal-fired power plant at Rampal Upazila in Bagerhat district.The Ramphal project was opposed by different sections in Bangladesh particularly the environmental activists who argued that the project would inflict permanent damage to the forests of Sundarbans in the nearby area.

Now with the announcement of a 'power corridor', Bangladesh and India have taken the issue of bilateral energy cooperation to a new level. Though it will take time to implement the project, the rationale behind the decision has been questioned in different circles. Why has Bangladesh agreed to sign this agreement? There has not been any official statement from the government

[4] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 21 April 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/india-bangladesh-enhancing-ties-through-a-power-corridor-4394.html

about the need for signing the agreement. The Bangladeshi Power Secretary mentioned that the electricity transmission is a part of the government's plan of promoting regional connectivity. Besides, as a proposed concrete gain for Bangladesh, India has agreed to provide 30 MW of additional electricity to ensure the import of 500 MW of electricity from India – currently, Bangladesh is able to get only 470 MW due to transmission losses under the current contract. India has also agreed to provide 100 MW of electricity to Bangladesh from Paltana power project in Tripura. It may be mentioned that Bangladesh facilitated the transportation of heavy equipment to build the Paltana plant. A 450 metre-long embankment-cum-road across the Titas River was erected to dispatch over-dimensional cargo (ODC) carrying heavy equipment to Paltana power station in Tripura from Kolkata via Brahmanbaria. It vertically cut across the river, navigation through the point snapped and a serious decline in the river flow caused silting. This caused a huge hue and cry in Bangladesh leading the matter to the apex court of Bangladesh.

One can certainly belittle Bangladeshi gains from the proposed power corridor project by comparing them to the total volume of transmission of electricity through the corridor. It is reported that the network will be able to transmit some 6,000-7,000 MW of electricity to India with huge potential for the future. As the Indian Power Secretary asserts, "Arunachal Pradesh alone has a 50,000 MW of hydroelectricity potential." Considering the growing demand for electricity India needs to tap the unexplored natural resources of its Northeast. Bangladesh has the potential to offer multiple electricity corridors for transmission. It is highly unlikely that the government of Bangladesh would be able to justify its stance on the deal with the possibility of buying only 130 MW of electricity, which may jeopardise the entire project.

Predictably, the opposition political parties particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamat-e-Islami criticised the initiative. In a senior BNP leader's words, "The government's actions show that it is incapable of negotiating with India to protect the interests of the country." He demanded that the basis of the agreement be made public. Another senior leader of BNP argued that India would deploy its army in Bangladesh in the name of guarding its power corridor. The acting Secretary General of Bangladesh Jamat-e-Islami called upon the government to reassess its decision. The BNP and its 19-party alliance have staged protests against the decision and termed it a 'self-suicidal move'. There is a mixed reaction in civil society. Some argue that the idea suffers from the lack of India's political will to resolve the outstanding bilateral disputes with Bangladesh, notably water and border conflicts. It touches upon the bilateral trust deficit despite a significant improvement in relations under the Hasina regime in Bangladesh and Dr Manmohan Singh's government in India.

Despite the reservations of the opposition political parties and flaws in the deal, the issue of a 'power corridor' opens up a new vista of cooperation between Bangladesh and India. The possibility of sub-regional energy cooperation could also become a reality given that a joint meeting between India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan would be held in New Delhi in May 2014. It can be a genuine step towards regional connectivity in the power sector. It also clearly demonstrates that India's Look East Policy in its true sense would cause fault-lines with adverse consequences on the bilateral and regional fronts without having Bangladesh on board.

III
BANGLADESH AND THE REGION

Bangladesh and the BIMSTEC Summit[5]

The third Summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), held in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw from 3-4 March ended with the call to achieve collective prosperity for the region. BIMSTEC was expanded into a new transnational structure of cooperation following the inclusion of Nepal and Bhutan in 2004. It now encompasses states from both South and Southeast Asia, with over 22 per cent of the world population and a collective GDP of nearly $2 trillion.

The group commands enormous geopolitical and geoeconomic significance for regional and extra-regional powers. Although the Summit was held belatedly, the organization demands attention owing to its overwhelming thrust on trade, energy and agriculture. Notably, it offers an opportunity for inter-regional cooperation as a vital ingredient of new regionalism in the age of globalisation.

The Summit was particularly significant to Bangladesh and the current Government for both bilateral and multilateral tracks of diplomacy. As one of the founding members of the group, Bangladesh has always supported the BIMSTEC. This year's summit was the first occasion where the recently re-elected government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina marked a strong diplomatic presence. Hasina led a 54-member delegation to the Summit.

On the multilateral front, Bangladesh actively participated in the BIMSTEC proceedings to advance the goal of regional development, peace and stability. During this Summit, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister strongly pushed for advancement on issues such as regional security, prosperity and counter-terrorism. Bangladesh identified poverty as the "main and common enemy" of the region and stressed the need for inter-state connectivity for the development of the people of the region.

Another major achievement was the decision to establish the permanent secretariat of BIMSTEC in Bangladesh, with all member-countries sharing costs – and India will be the biggest contributor, footing 32 per cent of the costs. Although the decision to establish the secretariat in Dhaka was taken in January 2011, the process was put in place this year, and according to the 14th ministerial meeting, the permanent secretariat would start functioning in Dhaka from May 2014.

On the bilateral front, the Summit had been an occasion of intensive diplomatic efforts to strengthen ties with Myanmar and India. The Bangladeshi prime minister met the heads of governments of Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. It was a pleasant occasion for Sheikh Hasina to meet Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Bangladesh and India have come a long way over the past five years, in improving and then strengthening bilateral ties. Both prime ministers met twice at summit level meetings in their respective countries resulting in them developing a strong mutual understanding.

[5] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 17 March 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/bangladesh/east-meets-west-bangladesh-and-the-bimstec-summit-4343.html

Sheikh Hasina and Manmohan Singh met on the sidelines of this year's BIMSTEC Summit and the two prime ministers discussed issues of bilateral interests including cooperation in the areas of the power sector, trade, investment, and the implementation of the previously agreed decisions between the two countries. Both the leaders held discussions in an environment of fraternity and termed their bilateral relations as a "tested friendship."

However, despite the camaraderie, it was a huge disappointment for Bangladesh, for the country could not ensure progress on the two key agreements – the Land Boundary Agreement and the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement. Sheikh Hasina raised these issues in her talks with the high-powered Indian delegation and emphasised on more balanced and equitable bilateral relations. Bangladesh also made a much-needed and genuine observation that Bangladesh, India, Bhutan and Nepal could resolve their domestic electricity demands via joint endeavours by constructing hydropower plants. Though the current Indian government is at the end of its term, these issues remain critical for a genuine bilateral friendship.

Furthermore, India and Bangladesh presented their respective 'look east policies' to achieve goals of mutual interest. Bangladesh demonstrated substantive engagement with the Myanmarese leadership at this Summit. Sheikh Hasina met the President of Myanmar, Thein Sein, the Speaker of the Parliament of Myanmar, Thura U Shwe Mann, and the Chair of the National League for Democracy and Member of the Parliament, Aung Saan Suu Kyi, on the sidelines. The two leaders identified the importance of connectivity via land, water and air to pave way for increased trade and investment and people-to-people contacts. President Thein Sein offered the use the Myanmar's port facilities to Bangladesh, if required. He apprised Sheikh Hasina of her government's initiative of constructing a seaport in Sittwe and Kyakpyu.

At present, the Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral trade stands at $100 million, and both the nations hope to reach a $500 million mark by introducing the shipping line. The Bangladesh-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce and Industry predicts that the trade volume between the two neighbors may reach $1 billion by 2020.

Both nations emphasised road connectivity as a key element. Myanmar proposed that Bangladesh could become a partner of an Indian initiative of connecting, Thailand and Myanmar by establishing road connectivity. Sheikh Hasina also added that the Bangladesh-Myanmar-Kunming road could be critical for improving road connectivity. Bangladesh raised the Rohingya refugee issue, which has remained unsettled for nearly three decades. The absence of any concrete promise or effort from Myanmar to repatriate the Rohingya people not only causes endless sufferings to them, but also creates irritants for bilateral ties. Predictably, both sides agreed to resolve the Rohingya problem through peaceful and amicable talks between the two countries.

The meeting with Aung Saan Suu Kyi was crucial in view of the ongoing democratisation process in Myanmarr, for Suu Kyi will have a major stake in the future leadership of the new Myanmar.

The BIMSTEC summit offered a real opportunity to combine the 'look east' and 'look west' policies of South Asian and Southeast Asian countries in a spirit of new regionalism. In all respects, Bangladesh is well placed to advance this process through bilateral and multilateral initiatives. The country is a natural partner for any initiative in the direction of deepening cooperation on trade, energy and connectivity. Ironically, bilateral irritants pose roadblocks to

these much-needed multilateral initiatives at sub-regional and inter-regional levels. At the BIMSTEC level, the member nations are in advantageous positions to resolve bilateral disputes efficiently and amicably.

The establishment of the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka will contribute in bringing the East and the West together for mutual benefit in the region.

Bangladesh and the 18th SAARC Summit[6]

After a three-year gap, leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) met in a Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 26-27 November 2014. It was an occasion to assess SAARC's efforts to consolidate regionalism in South Asia, and Bangladesh's role in the context. SAARC as the premier South Asian regional organisation has completed the 29th year of its establishment and has already witnessed 18 summits with declarations and programs of action of far reaching significance for approximately 1.4 billion people living in the region (1/5th of the world's population).

SAARC was born and developed via the adoption of a 'functional approach' of cooperation in non-controversial areas like society and culture. Since 1985, SAARC has evolved slowly but continuously both in terms of institutions and programs. That the organisation has provided a sense of regional identity within South Asia and beyond may be celebrated as its major contribution.

While the 17th SAARC Summit was held with the slogan of "Building Bridges," the 18th Summit was themed on "Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity." It gives a clear indication of the resolution and vision for effective regional cooperation in South Asia. There were high hopes and expectations vis-à-vis the 18th SAARC Summit, particularly for the prospect of signing three important agreements: two on regional transport connectivity, and one on energy cooperation. Despite the clarity on the first day of the Summit that no agreement was going to be signed due to reservations of some SAARC members who cited incomplete 'internal processes', Bangladesh kept hope and pressed for signing the agreements.

Dhaka maintained its diplomatic maneuver to salvage the Summit by signing at least one deal if not all. Bangladeshi Foreign Minister AH Mahmud Ali confirmed that Dhaka initiated a hectic effort during the summit to sign the energy cooperation agreement at the least. Finally, the foreign ministers of the eight SAARC countries signed the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) in the presence of their heads of state and governments during the concluding ceremony of the Summit.

Perhaps as the lone member, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina categorically stated in her speech that, "Bangladesh will appreciate the early signing of the Regional Motor Vehicles Agreement and the Regional Railways Agreement." Overall, Hasina's speech at the Summit reflects Dhaka's strong determination to move ahead with South Asian regional integration. She has emphatically called upon the member states to go for more realistic, result-oriented and

[6] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 15 December 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/18th-saarc-summit-a-perspective-from-bangladesh-4776.html

mutually beneficial partnership for cooperation to prosper together. She has also appealed to the SAARC members to move forward, leaving behind all discords. In her words, "What is needed is to set aside our differences and work on collective strength for bringing real progress to the people in the region."

The 36-point Kathmandu Declaration 2014 has accommodated Bangladesh's new vision for collective development in the region bounded by the waters of the Bay of Bengal. According to the 15th point in the Declaration, the SAARC leaders recognised "the manifold contributions of ocean-based Blue Economy in the SAARC Region and the need for collaboration and partnership in this area." It may be emphasised here that the current government in Dhaka has been pushing this idea of establishing a 'blue economy' in the backdrop of peaceful resolution of bilateral maritime disputes with Myanmar and India.

Bangladesh has taken the full advantage of corridor diplomacy of the SAARC Summit which is a major feature of SAARC's role in improving bilateral relations via a multilateral forum. While SAARC is constrained by its Charter from discuss bilateral disputes and contentious issues, the Forum has contributed significantly to diffuse tensions and improve bilateral relations through informal meetings between the leaders. In this context, Hasina has scored diplomatic gains both for her government and the state. She met all SAARC leaders, including representatives from some observer members. Hasina's meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is critical as the two leaders met for the second time in three months – which is a rare occurrence. Both the leaders exchanged highly positive views on further strengthening the bilateral relations and, more importantly, the ratification of Land Boundary Agreement by the Indian Parliament and conclusion of the Teesta Water Sharing Agreement. Sheikh Hasina's brief meeting with her Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif and other leaders boosted the image of her government in the South Asian neighborhood.

While it is true that skeptics and optimists are equally unhappy with the SAARC's performance, one has also to reckon with the reality that today, South Asia observes multiple processes and dimensions of regionalism. However, the fact remains that one can hardly think of the future of regional cooperation in South Asia, or for that matter regionalism, without SAARC. The new vision of SAARC to promote regional cooperation and solidarity in South Asia must start with a concrete plan of the restructuring of the organisation and implementation of the decisions of SAARC.

IV
BANGLADESH AND THE WEST

Bangladesh-US: Towards New Engagements?[7]

The third round of the 2014 Bangladesh-US security dialogue was held in Dhaka on 22 April. It focused on issues such as peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, disaster-management, maritime security and regional security. The security dialogue is part of a larger dialogue process that

[7] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 19 May 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/us-south-asia/bangladesh-us-towards-new-engagements-4446.html

encompasses defence-to-defense dialogue; military-to-military dialogue; security dialogue; and partnership dialogue between Dhaka and Washington. This security dialogue has been taking place annually since 2012.

The first two-day meeting to bolster bilateral and regional cooperation between the two countries under the Joint Declaration of the Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue took place in Washington, in September 2012. On the economic front, the first meeting of Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA) between Bangladesh and the US was held in April 2014. The TICFA seeks to further bolster the annual bilateral trade – that exceeded $6 billion in 2013 – between the Dhaka and Washington.

Amid conflicting positions of Bangladesh and the US over several domestic, bilateral and global issues, one may interpret these meetings as puzzling developments. In the post-election period, at the bilateral level, both the countries have continued with old discords on issues such as labour rights, the Yunus factor, the duty-free, quota-free market access, and the suspension of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) facilities to Bangladesh, among others. From a Bangladeshi perspective, the US' stance on domestic political changes in the former is a major irritant to smooth bilateral relations. The US' insistence on holding credible and inclusive general elections in Bangladesh afresh – after the January 2014 elections – has created a diplomatic challenge for the incumbent Sheikh Hasina government. Globally, the Kosovo and the Crimea questions clearly demonstrate Bangladesh's different foreign policy priorities.

However, despite the continuing discord, Bangladesh and the US have remained engaged – as demonstrated via the dialogue process and the maiden meeting of TICFA. A strong view prevails in the policy community that these meetings will put US –Bangladesh relations on the path to recovery. Unlike in the past, the US has made it clear that preventing the spread of global terrorism and strategic understanding are its foremost agendas vis-à-vis Bangladesh. Both countries have developed three structured fora for mutual engagement. They are: the US-Bangladesh Dialogue on Security Issues; the Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue; and the US–Bangladesh TICFA. The US recognises that Bangladesh has a vital role in ensuring security and stability regionally and globally.

As the head of the US delegation to the Security Dialogue, Tom Kelly, observes, "A strong bilateral partnership and improved defense ties between Bangladesh and the United States are in both of our interests…. In a broader perspective US values Bangladesh's geographical location. It sees an important role for Bangladesh in the overall security context of the Middle East, and Indian-Pacific-Oceans region. This is why US wants Bangladesh by its side in its strategic pursuits." Thus, for the US, geostrategic developments in the South Asian and the Asia Pacific regions have accorded Bangladesh a degree of importance. This is also linked to the shift of the 2010 US defence strategy, that the US cannot go solo, and in its attempt to address primary security issues, countries like Bangladesh matter.

Interestingly, Bangladesh appeared to be shy of expressing much optimism and enthusiasm, specifically regarding the outcomes of the meetings, and on bilateral ties in general. The head of the Bangladesh delegation mentioned that the dialogue was "very fruitful" and appreciated the US for the institutionalisation of the process of talks for intensive bilateral cooperation. The apparent lack of buoyant attitude on Bangladesh's part reflects frustration about the US for its continuing emphasis on holding fresh elections in Bangladesh. It is also a reflection of

Washington's denial of the GSP facilities and duty free-quota free access. However, in reality Bangladesh shows a degree of pragmatism while dealing with the US in the current context. The benefits of Bangladesh-US bilateral ties – from trade to investment, and from culture to development – are substantive for both the nations.

Although the rules of engagement for Dhaka and Washington have been crafted in a new regional environment in South Asia, the issue of the security dialogue may generate disquiet among regional powers such as China and India. Simultaneously, the US may also find it little troubling when Bangladesh joined the naval exercise with China along with India and Pakistan. In April 2014, ships from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India reached the Chinese port of Qingdao to partake in a rare naval exercise. On the Sino-Bangladesh naval cooperation, Tom Kelly asserts that the US fully respects Bangladesh's sovereign right to establish cooperation with any other country. Similarly, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Pankaj Saran, maintains that "It is up to you [Bangladesh] to choose a strategic partner. India has nothing to say in the matter."

The first TICFA meeting may vindicate the critics that the US would use the platform to create a new regime for protecting its economic interests in Bangladesh, thereby undermining the latter's development needs. Bangladesh's opposition to form a women's economic empowerment committee and a labour affairs committee in the first Meeting is an example. The TICFA and/or the Security Dialogue may open new avenues of bilateral talks, but Dhaka and Washington need to deal with major issues of mutual discord. Under the Westphalian order, attempts to use domestic politics as a diplomatic instrument may undermine gains of bilateral cooperation between the two nations.

Bangladesh in Global Forums: Diplomacy vs. Domestic Politics[8]

Perhaps for the first time Bangladesh has achieved a new feat in the conduct of its diplomacy. This time it is not successful bilateral visits to major powers such as Russia or China neither the pursuit of Look East Policy, nor the Dhaka-Washington Security Dialogue. Bangladesh has been elected to the top leadership of two highly reputed multilateral bodies - the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU). These two global parliamentary bodies that exchange knowledge and practices of parliamentary democracy in the member assemblies and encourage parliamentary dialogue worldwide are very influential in the global arena.

Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, the Speaker of the National Parliament of Bangladesh, was elected as the Chairperson of the 35-member strong executive committee of the CPA that promotes parliamentary democracy in the former British colonies. She has become the first Bangladeshi to be elected to this office. She defeated her lone opponent Julianna O'Connor-Connolly, Speaker of the Cayman Islands Legislative Assembly. The Cayman Islands are a British overseas territory. It has a 20-seat legislative assembly elected by the people. The election to the

[8] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 17 November 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/bangladesh-in-global-forums-diplomacy-vs-domestic-politics-4739.html

Chairperson of the executive committee of the CPA was highly competitive as reflected in the voting pattern. Bangladesh's candidate got 70 votes while Julianna bagged 67.

Within a week of the diplomatic success in the CPA, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, a member of the National Parliament, made a significant achievement. He was elected as the President of the IPU, an international organisation of parliaments, by defeating his opponents in a fierce battle of ballots. He defeated three other candidates: the Speaker of Australia's House of Representatives Bronwyn Bishop, Indonesian MP Nurhayati Ali Assegaf, and former Speaker of Maldives' Parliament Abdulla Shahid, in anelection held on the concluding day of the 131st IPU Assembly in Geneva. Saber got 169 votes while his nearest rival Bishop managed to secure 95 votes. IPU was established in 1889 and has emerged as the focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and cooperation among people and for the firm establishment of representative democracy.

Shirin and Saber both defeated their opponents in ballots to win the chairs of the CPA and IPU. The government has not wasted a single moment to celebrate these two victories and has suggested that the victory is a response to those who have been criticising the 05 January general elections in Bangladesh. To the government, it is a demonstration of global recognition.

While this success is celebrated by the government, unlike in other countries, the opposition in Bangladesh has shied away from congratulating the two Bangladeshi politicians who have brought laurels to the country. The opposition has termed the achievements as events where voters (member countries) cast their votes independently, which does not mean that the international community had accepted the 05 January polls. There has been every attempt from the opposition to put down the diplomatic success of the government.

In another diplomatic accomplishment, Bangladesh has become a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the period 2015-17. In an election held on 21 October in New York, Bangladesh won by 149 votes to become a member. Bangladesh contested for the post from the Asia Pacific region. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Qatar were the candidates for four member posts reserved for the Asia Pacific region in the election. India came out on top with the most votes in the group, followed by Indonesia. Bangladesh secured 149 votes - the third highest votes in the group - while Thailand was eliminated. Within a few days, Bangladesh was elected to another international organisation. Bangladesh has become an executive member of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for the second time. A total of 17 countries took part to elect members of the 13-member union for the Asia and Oceania zone of the ITU. Bangladesh got 115 votes - 176 votes were cast out of a total of 193.

That Bangladesh has been elected to four global bodies through secret votes by member nations is undoubtedly a rare diplomatic success in the country's history. It becomes more critical at a time when the government is apparently struggling for international recognition of its leadership. This becomes evident in the words of the ruling political leaders. Following the victory in the UNHRC elections, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Mahmod Ali, declared, "This win again proves that Bangladesh is absolutely on the right track under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina." According to the foreign minister, Bangladesh won the elections against the aggressive campaign of some international human rights organisations. The prime minister of Bangladesh termed it a success in creating global leadership. She attributed these achievements to the

global recognition of Bangladesh as a role model, based on its stunning success in socioeconomic development.

The proactive role of Bangladesh in global forums and its achievement of global support could boost the image of the country abroad, which is critical for national development, particularly for attracting foreign investors. But the attempts by the government to celebrate this success for narrow regime interests and the opposition's move to undermine it are puzzling. Perhaps, the international community would also observe with surprise how confrontational domestic politics can belittle major successes in the global diplomatic arena when it matters for national interest.

Bangladesh: Diplomatic Manoeuvres at the UNGA[9]

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina led a 184-member delegation to the 69th UN General Assembly (UNGA) meeting. Significantly, this year has marked the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's membership at the UN. Bangladesh was admitted into the UN in its second attempt on 17 September 1974 as its 136th member. Dhaka's UN membership practically silenced all opponents of the country that was born in 1971 against the backdrop of the Cold War. It was a turning point for the statehood of Bangladesh in the global arena. So the UNGA always bears a special significance for Bangladeshi foreign policy.

Apart from partaking in the UNGA and the Climate Summit at the UN, Hasina participated in a number of other meetings and events – including ones with heads of governments and states of various UN member states and chiefs of various international organisations on the side-lines. Among those she met were UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Commonwealth Secretary General Kamalesh Sharma, US President Barack Obama, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail V. Myasnikovich and Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala. Additionally, Hasina also joined a discussion of the Commonwealth Heads of Government and attended a high-level summit on 'UN Peacekeeping' at the UN headquarters. Furthermore, met US business leaders and finally, attended a reception accorded by expatriate Bangladeshis in the country.

Hasina also discussed bilateral issues during the meeting with her Norwegian counterpart and sought the latter's investment in the booming ICT sector in Bangladesh. Bilateral issues were also discussed with her Nepalese counterpart to promote Bangladesh-Nepal relations. During the meeting with US investors, Hasina urged them to take advantage of the liberal investment policy in Bangladesh and to invest in the country.

There are mixed interpretations of the outcomes of this visit in Bangladesh. While one group claims that the Bangladesh's UN Summit diplomacy was highly successful, the other group claims it was more ceremonial and does not bring about much substance to national interests. The UN Summit diplomacy has a number of implications. However, reportedly the Belarusian prime minister has expressed interest in providing $15 million to Bangladesh as long-term assistance for the development of country's readymade garment sector, including the training

[9] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 20 October 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/bangladesh-diplomatic-manoeuvres-at-the-unga-4702.html

for the workers. Belarus also expressed interest in importing pharmaceuticals and agricultural products from Bangladesh and export Potash to Bangladesh.

Another important issue is the strong voice of Bangladesh in the UN Peacekeeping Summit and UN Climate Change summit. Bangladesh has been championing the cause of global climate change for the least developed countries (LDCs). Issues of global funding and adaptation have been highlighted in Bangladesh's global efforts. Besides, Dhaka's role in peacekeeping missions was strongly reflected in her participation in the 'UN Peacekeeping' Summit. Significantly, Bangladesh was able to emphasise the graduation of its role to a leadership position due to the enhanced capacity of the country's peacekeepers given their experience and skills.

The Hasina-Modi meeting on the side lines of the UNGA is the most significant achievement of Bangladesh's UN diplomacy. It was important for two major reasons: first, it was much-awaited against the backdrop of several high-level contacts between the two friendly nations in the recent days. Second, this was the first ever meeting between the two leaders. It was important to get to know each other to promote their bilateral relations further in the upcoming days. During the talks, Modi lauded the Bangladesh government's fight against terrorism and said, "Bangladesh is a model for fighting terrorism."

Notably, they discussed the issues of ratifying the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and the Teesta Water Sharing Treaty. Regarding the ratification of the LBA, Modi emphasised that it is just a matter of time before it happens. This is a positive gesture towards a resolution on this outstanding bilateral issue. Regarding the Teesta water-sharing issue, Modi assured of a serious pursuit of the consensus-building-process that must have a positive impact on the improvement of India-Bangladesh relations. Needless to say, there is no alternative but to promote Bangladesh-India relations based on mutual understanding and respect for mutual interests. Thus, Dhaka's UN Summit diplomacy was an occasion to bolster the country's image as well as to strengthen its role in the global fora. Bangladesh has demonstrated strong determination to project its achievements to the world.

However, the critical issue is to actualise the diplomatic gains via concrete efforts on the domestic front where the government has been struggling to win over the hearts and minds of people after the 2014 general elections.

Girl Summit Diplomacy and Bangladesh-UK Relations[10]

The first ever Girl Summit took place on 22 July 2014 in London, UK. The event was co-hosted by the government of UK and the UNICEF, and the summit was dedicated to confronting child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK and across the world. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, attended the summit on a special invitation from her British counterpart, David Cameron, and Anthony Lake, Executive Director, UNICEF. The UNICEF's figures indicate that around one in three married women globally – aged between 20 and 24 – were child brides, with the highest rates of child marriage found in South Asia – a region where nearly half the girls are married before they turn 18. The summit also

[10] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 18 August 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/girl-summit-diplomacy-and-bangladesh-uk-relations-4610.html

focused on FGM, a procedure that can trigger horrific long term implications for girls' health, child-bearing prospects, and psychological states. It is estimated that 125 million women and girls worldwide have suffered FGM, with 66,000 in England and Wales alone.

The Girl Summit was a truly significant event to mobilise global public opinion and resources in combating the two major social evils against girl children around the world. The event drew together some 700 participants – ranging from heads of state, NGOs, and victims – who represented 60 countries. Speakers at the Summit included the Prime Minister of UK, David Cameron; the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina; the Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Demeke Mekonnen; the first lady of Burkina Faso, Chantal Compaoré; activist Malala Yousafzai; and numerous ministers of health, social affairs and international development, as well as civil society advocates and campaigners. Cameron made a strong case for ending these evil practices in the society. He described FGM and CEFM as a violation of girls' rights and "preventable evil" that calls for a "global movement." The charter adopted at the Summit affirms that "these practices violate the fundamental rights of all girls and women to live free from violence and discrimination" and sets out ten actions to end them, ranging from legislation and policies to data, research and investment in education and health.

Bangladesh's participation in the Summit has been particularly significant, considering the fact that Hasina was the only head of the government other than that of the host nation who was present at the event. She led a 57-member high powered delegation to the UK on this occasion. Hasina reported on a full set of measures, from strong legislation, free textbooks, stipends for girls through secondary school and beyond and community based innovations to fight early marriage. Bangladesh has widely been praised by the international community for its achievements in improving the conditions of women and children despite being a least developed country. Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has significantly increased the primary school enrolment of girls to 95%. More girls than boys complete primary education in the country now. The country has introduced employment opportunities for high-school girl graduates whereby 60% of our primary school teachers are now young girls – giving them a choice of livelihood.

However, one may raise the question as to whether such a high profile visit by Bangladesh Prime Minister was executed merely to attend the Girl Summit or to use the occasion for diplomatic gains for the government suffering strong criticism from the West following the 5th January 2014 elections in Bangladesh. The UK is one of the front line EU members expressing disappointment over the process and the conduct of the last general elections and hence propagating dialogue for holding new elections – which is always a matter of embarrassment for the incumbent government. The British minister of State for International Development, Alan Duncan, during a visit, once termed the January 5 general elections in Bangladesh as 'unusual' but 'legitimate'. The Girl Summit has created another occasion for the Bangladeshi prime minster to meet her British counterpart and to reach out the British political elite to embolden the image of her government. The bilateral meeting with David Cameron was a big success for the Sheikh Hasina, given the distance created with the Western countries earlier this year.

The number of delegates and the range of meetings the Bangladeshi prime minister took part in clearly reflect that Sheikh Hasina made full use of her visit for diplomatic gains. More

significantly, it was the Hasina' first visit to any Western country after the 2014 elections. It also came against the backdrop of her recent back-to-back successful visits to China and Japan. While discussing bilateral relations, David Cameron said, "We want to look at the future and continue working as a development partner." Upon her return from the UK, Hasina emphasised the Bangladesh-UK bilateral relations to explain the positive outcomes of her participation in the Girl Summit. Interestingly enough, the Bangladeshi prime minister highlighted her government's legitimacy to the UK government in her post-London visit press conference in Dhaka, making it a major gain from Girl Summit diplomacy.

V
BANGLADESH AND THE EAST

Bangladesh and Japan[11]

In 2014, in a span of three months, the Japanese Prime Minister and his Bangladeshi counterpart met twice, first in Tokyo (May 2014) and recently in Dhaka (September 2014).

This commentary analyses the nature of bilateral visit and the extent of Japanese investments in Bangladesh; and two political challenges facing the two countries on further cooperation.

In general, both the countries have emphasized the visit for building a 'comprehensive partnership' with a promise of boosting bilateral ties. On the economic front, Japan has come forward with a new level of commitment unlike the past. Japan has committed to pump US $6 billion in the next four to five years for infrastructure development in Bangladesh. The number of business delegates in Abe's entourage is a significant indication of Japan's serious thought about her investment in Bangladesh.

Although the number of Japanese companies investing in Bangladesh has increased over the years, it requires a jump to match with development of Bangladesh economy as well as Japan's plan for relocation of its industries. Therefore, Japanese investment in Bangladesh was widely discussed. Another significant issue was the opening of Japanese market for readymade garments (RMG) products from Bangladesh which would provide a huge financial boost; this would also reduce Bangladesh's dependence on foreign assistance.

Other projects such as the financing for mega projects such as Padma Barrage, multi-modal tunnel under river Jamuna, dedicated Railway Bridge over river Jamuna, multi-modal Dhaka Eastern Bypass, and ecological restoration of four rivers around Dhaka - are concrete issues of cooperation in economic arena of Bangladesh-Japan relations, both the leaders have developed solid understanding of diplomatic and political issues.

Two issues are particularly critical. First, during Abe's visit Bangladesh declared the withdrawal of candidacy from the race to vie for a seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council from the Asia Pacific Group for 2016-2017. The decision of Bangladesh has

[11] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 15 September 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/bangladesh/abes-successful-visit-to-dhaka-two-political-challenges-4658.html

been extremely significant given its history. Bangladesh has never withdrawn its candidature from such a global body; it rather defeated Japan in its bid to become the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the first time in 1979-1980. Understandably, it has sparked a debate in Bangladesh about the pros and cons of this diplomatic decision.

The issue of 'give and take' has been raised in the sense that Bangladesh took the crucial decision without any concrete gains from Japan. It has generally been argued that the decision reflects more of momentous and strong urge for deeper relations. Without pointing out directly to domestic politics in Bangladesh some analysts argued that this decision demonstrated 'governance and credibility crisis' of the government of Bangladesh. What surprised people in Bangladesh is that the opposition parties particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami have shown a lukewarm disagreement, if not indifference, to the decision by the government. One may argue that Bangladesh's decision for withdrawal of its candidature has met a favorable time for the current government. Besides, Japan enjoys largely a bipartisan acceptability in otherwise strongly polarized political culture in Bangladesh.

Second critical issue is the idea of the "Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt" (BIG-B) launched by Japan. The Government of Japan has been promoting the concept of BIG-B as a program for Bangladesh to help achieve economic development of both countries arguing that it would help bring prosperity of the two nations. To the Abe Government BIG-B can be the "centrepiece" of Japanese cooperation in Bangladesh. Improvement of infrastructure for industrial development, the creation of better environment for investments and the promotion of regional connectivity were the three dimensions of BIG-B. In elaborating the idea further, the Japanese Ambassador in Bangladesh, Shiro Sadoshima argues that Japan has a grand design of combining the two oceanic regions – Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean – for more geo-political space to boost its economy. The largest Bay in the world, Bay of Bengal forms the north-eastern part of the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh is located in the north of this Bay.

The idea of BIG-B brings to the center stage other ideas such as China supported 'Silk Road' and Bangladesh supported 'blue economy' in the recent years. The idea of 'Maritime Silk-Road' recently coined by the Chinese Premier and foreign policy makers is based on the historic "Silk-Road" of trade and cultural routes in Central, South and East Asia. Starting from Han Dynasty about 200 BC, China had played a key role to maintain these important and strategic trade and cultural routes, which connected countries from Asia, Middle East and Europe.

Specifically, China is pursuing Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) cooperation in its bid to revive the ancient silk-road. On the other hand, Bangladesh organized an international workshop on blue economy on 1-2 September 2014 in Dhaka. Bangladesh hosted this workshop for the first time bringing together more than 30 experts and representatives of 20 countries. About the vision of blue economy Bangladesh Foreign Minister states that it must be inclusive and people-centric. Amid new ideas of cooperation frameworks Abe's visit to Dhaka leaves a strong imprint of partnership between the two unequal, but long trusted friendly nations.

Bangladesh: A New Thrust Towards East Asia[12]

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina's back-to-back visits to Japan and China provide a diplomatic bonanza to the government bedeviled by legitimacy crisis at home and abroad following the 5 January general elections this year. Hasina took the opportunity to silence her critics by making substantive gains in bilateral relations with the two East Asian countries. Japan is generally known as a committed development partner of South Asian countries – as reflected in volumes of official development assistance (ODA) pumped into the region every year. Japanese investment and bilateral trade volume between Tokyo and Dhaka have been seen a rise, especially over the past decade. Japan has remained the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh for the past fifteen years. Both countries have developed a strong development partnership with growing activity by Japanese investors in Bangladesh.

The 21 point Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership signed by the respective prime ministers during Hasina's May 2014 visit is a demonstration of strong commitment to engage Japan more substantively in Bangladesh's development process. In the past seven years, the number of Japanese companies operating in Bangladesh has nearly tripled – from 61 in 2007 to 176 in 2013; and the total grants and aid from Japan stood at $11 billion in 2013. Japan's strategic intention was to combine two oceanic regions – the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean – for what the Japanese ambassador in Dhaka called a larger space for Japan's economic activities.

He added that it looks like a "butterfly" in which Bangladesh and Myanmar occupies the "lynchpin position" to connect these oceanic regions. Apart from appreciating the strategic importance of Bangladesh, Tokyo would also be happy to receive Dhaka's support in its bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC – and also to the issue of the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea. Recently, the Bangladeshi government recognised a number of foreign friends, including a few Japanese, for their contribution during the Bangldesh Liberation War.

As a result, the prime minister's Japan visit has contributed to an agreement on a range of specific projects vis-à-vis, inter alia, the construction of Ganges Barrage, a multi-modal tunnel under Jamuna River, a dedicated Railway Bridge over Jamuna River, a multi-modal Dhaka Eastern Bypass, and the ecological restoration of four rivers around Dhaka. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Japan External Trade Organization and the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority that reserves important facilities in 5 EPZs in Bangladesh for Japanese investors. Japan has also committed its support for capacity building in nuclear safety and security. In an unprecedented gesture, Japan committed an ODA of $6 billion over the next five years that is crucial for infrastructure development in Bangladesh.

In a rare show of diplomatic moves, Hasina made a six-day official visit to China in early June with a 70-member business delegation immediately after she visited Japan. With these back to back visits, Hasina scored high points in diplomatic maneuvering both for her new government and the state. The much discussed China visit resulted in five deals, including Chinese assistance in the construction of a power plant in Patuakhali and building a multi-lane road tunnel under the Karnaphuli River. Chinese President Xi Jinping described Bangladesh as an important

[12] Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 16 June 2014. See http://www.ipcs.org/article/south-asia/bangladesh-a-new-thrust-towards-east-asia-4512.html

country along the maritime Silk Road project that he has been championing, and which envisages enhancing connectivities, building ports and free trade zones, and boosting trade with littoral countries in the Indian Ocean region and in Southeast Asia. China made it clear that it attaches great importance to the Beijing-Dhaka relationship and regards Bangladesh as an important development partner and cooperative partner in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Bangladesh is an important country along the Maritime Silk Road for China, and Beijing welcomes Dhaka's participation in the development of the cooperation initiatives of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The issue of constructing the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor also garnered the interest of both leaders as part of efforts towards enhancing connectivity between China and eastern South Asia. However, the absence of any deal on construction of the Sonadia deep sea port was conspicuous. The diplomatic circles in both countries had widely expected a deal on this mega project. As revealed by Bangladesh's State Minister of Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, "Bangladesh has decided to take time to pick the best offer over the construction of a deep seaport at Sonadia in Cox's Bazar as a number of countries have shown interest in the lucrative mega project."

High level visits often turn out ceremonial and declaratory in substance. But these two visits of Bangladesh's prime minister have been a diplomatic breakthrough for Dhaka in cementing its foreign policy thrust towards the east. The diplomatic overtures by Japan and China have emboldened the Hasina government in Bangladesh to strengthen her position domestically and internationally. Although Japan and China are traditional friends of Bangladesh, there has always been a gap in their economic engagement, particularly in the context of Bangladesh's growing economic and social performance. The outcomes of the recent visits might lead to reduction in the gap, especially amid the new matrix of external roles in Dhaka's domestic politics.