

Pakistan-Bangladesh relations - Prospects and Way Forward

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Abstract

This paper will analyze how in the last 51 years of Bangladesh's Independence, Pakistan has viewed its former part positively transforming in human and social development without any hostility, jealousy, prejudice, mistrust or paranoia. The role of political parties, civil society and youth in altering Pakistan-Bangladesh relations for the better will also be examined in detail. An interesting aspect of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations is the debate in Dhaka which got an impetus on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's Independence that their country has left Pakistan behind in important indicators of human security and development like economic growth rate, foreign exchange reserves, exports, literacy ratio, poverty alleviation, women empowerment and controlling religious fanaticism. Ups and downs in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are linked with the internal dynamics of Dhaka particularly, when Awami League is in power and uses the 'Pakistan card' to mobilize popular sentiments and support for domestic political consumption. Some of the measures which can help augment political will, mutual trust and confidence between Pakistan and Bangladesh relate to easing of visa

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restrictions, better air connectivity, shipping links, joint ventures, cultural and educational cooperation. Furthermore, award of scholarships to Bangladeshi and Pakistani students to study in each other's educational institutions will go a long way in building confidence and goodwill particularly, among the youths of the two countries.

Keywords: Mending Fences, Reconciliation, Political Will, Human Security, Cooperation, Conflict.

Introduction

Fifty-one years after the emergence of Bangladesh, efforts to encourage conflict-free ties and possible ways and means to bridge the differences of the past are still underway. Since Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh in February 1974 till today, there are numerous ups and downs in relations between the two countries. Whenever there is the government of Awami League in Dhaka, contentious issues reemerge like the repatriation of standard Pakistanis, division of assets and tendering apology by Islamabad of what Bangladesh calls 'genocide' during the military operation of 1971.

Pakistan repeatedly argues that all the three issues were settled during the tripartite agreement reached between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in Delhi on April 9, 1974. Pakistan also suggested Bangladesh not to become a hostage of the past and exploiting historical issues for political consumption. This paper will examine in detail how Bangladesh and Pakistan can mend fences regardless of the bitterness of the past, and what are the impediments that obstruct in establishing meaningful friendly relations between the two countries? Furthermore, the paper will explore purposeful areas of cooperation and how the two countries can positively transform their uneven ties by promoting economic, political, educational and cultural relations in the years to come.

The study also reflects on Pakistan's appreciation of its former part positively transforming in human and social development in the last 50 years without any hostility, jealousy, prejudice, mistrust or paranoia. The role of political parties, civil society and youths in altering Pakistan-Bangladesh relations for the better will also be examined in some detail. An interesting aspect of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations is the debate in Dhaka which got an impetus on the occasion of the 50th independence anniversary of Bangladesh that their country has left behind Pakistan in important indicators of human security and development like, economic growth rate, foreign exchange reserves, exports, literacy ratio, poverty

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alleviation, women empowerment and controlling religious fanaticism.¹ The idea behind such a debate is to prove that West Pakistan, which was termed as an oppressor and far developed than East Pakistan in 1971, is now far behind in almost all the fields of development.

If the elites of Bangladesh are the beneficiaries of Independence, and to a large extent possess their hatred and hostility against their former counterparts, there exists indifference in Pakistan to Bangladesh's sustained campaign against Islamabad of 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing.' For the elites of Bangladesh, particularly the ruling Awami League, hostility with Pakistan is the essence of the existence of Bangladesh. It is reflected in 'Pakistan bashing' on the occasion of language day, February 21, Independence Day on March 26, and Victory Day December 16. In all the three national days, pre-1971 regimes of Pakistan are a target of 'Pakistan bashing' for the exploitation and oppression of the Bengali majority of the then East Pakistan. This is rightly pointed out in the mid-1980s by the former Director General Bangladesh Institute of Strategic and International Studies in his paper that:

A historical bitterness still pervades the minds of the people in both the countries. For Bangladesh it is the bitterness of West Pakistan in erstwhile Pakistan, as well as Pakistani atrocities during the independence war. For Pakistan the bitterness exists because of the humiliating defeat in the war of 1971. Although much of the agonizing memory of the cataclysmic event has subsided, the bitterness lingers on. It gets fueled on various occasions like 21st February, Martyrs Day, Independence Day, the Martyr Intellectual Day, all of which are officially celebrated. These are both official and unofficial arrangements for the preservation of the ideals and values of independence war, which all have anti-Pakistan undertone. The contemporary art, literature, sculpture and painting are much coloured with the harrowing tales of atrocities carried out by the Pakistanis. Every year the fateful 25th March of 1971 is recalled

¹ Moonis Ahmar, "How and why Bangladesh is better off than Pakistan?" *The Express Tribune* (Karachi) March 21, 2021.

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*with renewed emotion. The National Museum and archives have exhibits and records that keep these emotions alive. Even the new generation grows up with information and knowledge contained in textbooks or contemporary history that easily generate bitter feelings for Pakistan.*²

The counter-narrative in Pakistan about Bangladesh is to ‘forget’ and ‘forgive’ the bitterness of the past and move forward for a new chapter in relations between the two Muslim countries. That instead of a retrogressive, Pakistan advocates a forward looking approach by promoting meaningful cooperation in areas of trade, commerce, education, culture, science and technology. The receptiveness of Bangladesh to Pakistan’s counter-narrative is not forthcoming as the regime of Sheikh Hasina’s policies are more xenophobic and seek Islamabad’s readiness to tender apology and settle other issues like the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis who are still languishing in the refugee camps scattered in different parts of Bangladesh, and division of assets and liabilities. An attempt is made to answer the following questions:

1. How Pakistan and Bangladesh can *mend* fences and establish conflict-free ties?
2. Why Bangladesh is not *receptive* to gestures from Pakistani side for complete normalization of relations?
3. What are the impediments for resolving issues, and how such obstacles can be removed?
4. What are the *prospects* for conflict-free Pakistan-Bangladesh relations in the years to come?

Theoretical framework

The theory of conflict and conflict transformation will be applied in this research. Conflict is as old as human history and needs to be examined in some details. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary conflict is: “A state of opposition or hostilities. Conflict occurs because of the clash of

² M. Abdul Hafiz, “Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Still Developing?” *BISS Journal* (Dhaka) Volume 6, No, 3, 1985, pp. 366-67.

interest between or among individuals, groups, states or nations.”³ Conflict may be peaceful or violent. Cambridge English Dictionary defines conflict as: “To fight or disagree actively. If the two sides conflict with each other again, it will be disastrous for party unity.”⁴ Similarly, Mark Amstutz in his book *International Conflict and Cooperation* defined conflict as: “A need or perceived incompatibility between two or more areas.”⁵ Furthermore, Peter Wallensteen in his book *Understanding Conflict Resolution, War, Peace and the Global System* states that: “Conflict has many meanings in everyday life. To some it refers to behaviour or action. There is a conflict when a trade union goes on strike or an employer locks out its employees. It is also a conflict when two states are at war with one another, and when battlefield events determine their relations. Conflict consists of action, incompatibility among actors.⁶ Intractable conflict means a situation, which is quite messy and complicated, and the paths for its resolution somewhat passes through a difficult terrain.

If seen in the context of conflict dynamics of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, two propositions could be made. First, the mitigation of conflict in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations got an impetus when a tripartite agreement (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) was reached in April 1974, in Delhi, in which Dhaka agreed to drop charges against Pakistani Prisoners

³https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+of+conflict+by+concise+oxford+dictionary&rlz=1C1SQJL_enPK987PK987&sxsrf=ALiCzsZYi2Pfr6VikXey8V MLb5IZjY2GHA%3A1653899216510&ei=0H-UYvfFHUmR9u8Py PmsuAc&oq=definition+of+conflict+by+concise+oxford+&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAEYADIFCCEQoAEyBQghEKABMgoIIRAE8QFhAdOgcIABBHELADOGcIABCwAxBDogUIABCABDoGCAAQHhAWOggIABAE8QFjoECCEQFToI CCEQHhAWEb06BwghEAoQoAFKBAhBGABKBAhGGABQ6AVYhD1gkk9oAXABeACAAZwCiAGxJZIBBDItMTmYAQCgAQHIAQrAAQE&scient=gws-wiz accessed on My 30, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ Amstutz, Mark, R. *International Conflict and Cooperation* (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1995).

⁶ Wallensteen, Peter, *Understanding Conflict Resolution, War, Peace and the Global System* (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

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of War (PoW) and the Bangladeshi government also granted amnesty to pro-Pakistan elements. Although, the roots of conflict continued, the process of reconciliation in their ties got a boost when Dhaka and Islamabad decided to restore full diplomatic relations in January 1976. Second, whenever there is a change of government in Dhaka, and Awami League comes to power, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina revives old polemics particularly, the apology issue in order to keep conflicts with Pakistan. This keeps the acrimony alive.

Furthermore, along with conflict, positive conflict transformation can be applied as far as theoretical framework of this paper is concerned. Since a complete resolution of Pakistan-Bangladesh conflicts is not possible in view of numerous complications and impediments, what is needed is to apply the theory of conflict transformation by John P. Lederach⁷ because of two main reasons. First, political will and determination will help the process of positive conflict transformation and, second, change in the mindset will go a long way in eradicating mistrust, suspicions and ill-will in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations. Conflict transformation is defined by John P. Lederach as:

*Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-saving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and to respond to real-life problems in human relationships.*⁸

While defining conflict transformation in the context of peace, Lederach argues that, “conflict transformation views peace as centered and rooted in the quality of relationships. In this sense, peace is a process structure, a phenomenon that is simultaneously dynamic, adaptive and changing in essence, rather than seeing peace as a static end state, conflict

⁷ John P. Lederach *The little book of conflict transformation* (Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2003).

⁸ *Ibid.*, P.14.

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transformation views peace as a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationship. It is defined by international efforts to address the natural rise of human conflict through non-violent approaches that address issues and increase understanding, equality and respect in relationship.”⁹

Another definition of conflict transformation is given by Hugh Miall, who says that, “conflict transformation is a comprehensive approach, addressing a range of dimensions (micro to macro issues, local to global levels, grassroots to elite actors, short-term to long-term time scales). It aims to develop capacity and to support structural change rather than to facilitate the outcomes or deliver settlements. It seeks to engage with conflict at the pre-violence and post-violence places, and with the causes and consequences of violent conflict, which usually extend beyond the site of fighting.”¹⁰

The rationale of conflict transformation could be gauged from the fact that conflict resolution and management only promotes an ideal solution of issues, which cause threat to peace and stability. Whereas, conflict transformation talks not about the resolution but promoting the positive development which can help lower the intensity and magnitude of a particular conflict. One can point out the fact that the road to conflict resolution and management also passes through the transformational process. Without a positive change in the attitude, behaviour and actions of parties to a particular conflict, there cannot be any headway as far as the management or resolution part of the conflict is concerned. Therefore, transformation comes first and then management, and resolution.

When reconciliation in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations is talked about, one can expect positive transformation of conflict and the gradual disappearance of conflict. While conflict-free Pakistan-Bangladesh ties may be a wishful thinking in view of five decades of cleavages, a gradual

⁹ John P. Lederach *The little book of conflict transformation* (Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Hugh Miall, “Conflict Transformation: A Multidimensional task,” Bergohf Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/miall_handbook.pdf, accessed on November 25, 2010.

mitigation of conflict leading to positive conflict transformation is possible.

RECONCILIATION PROSPECTS

It is not correct to state that since the emergence of Bangladesh till today, its relations with Pakistan have been unfriendly and hostile. Ups and downs in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are linked with the internal dynamics of Dhaka, particularly when Awami League is in power and uses the ‘Pakistan card’ to mobilize the popular sentiments and support for domestic political consumption. Former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Muhammad Shamsul Haq gave a positive picture of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations when he argued that,

“Bangladesh and Pakistan were bound by many common ties rooted in a shared history and culture, which was overshadowed but not obliterated by the tragic happenings of 1971. The Bengalis role in the creation of Pakistan was also a historical fact. The original Pakistan resolution was moved by Mr. Abdul Kasem Fazlul Haq, a Bengali, Muslim leader, and of the Muslim majority provinces of the British India, Bengal was the only province where the Muslim League was voted to power, thus providing the Muslim League with a political power base.”¹¹

Likewise, G. W. Choudhry, a renowned political scientist and former Communications Minister during the regime of Yahya Khan pointed out that,

“Of all the provinces which made Pakistan, it was Bengal which gave the most solid support to Jinnah in his struggle for the establishment of a separate Muslim State in the Sub-continent. Yet, within a very short period, the Bengalese found them in an unfortunate situation, which made them have second thoughts about the creation of Pakistan in which they had joined with the Muslims of other parts of the Sub-continent in the north separated by a thousand miles of foreign territory. Although, they

¹¹ Muhammad Shamsul Haq, *Bangladesh in International Politics The Dilemmas of the Weak States* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1998), p. 151.

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were the majority group in Pakistan, they suffered from a deep-rooted fear of domination by the minority groups of West Pakistan.”¹²

A former Pakistani civil servant, who was posted to the then East Pakistan from 1956-1962, and again in May 1971 states:

“The West-dominated ruling class of early Pakistan never really tried to understand the Bengali point of view. From the inception of Pakistan, it developed a self-righteous state of mind, which ignored the objective political realities of East Pakistan. The Pakistan establishment, which was the conglomeration of the Punjab political leadership, the old League leadership of NWFP, migrant League leaders of minority provinces in India, and the senior Punjabi and Mohajir civil servants, passionately believed in a strong central government, Islamic ideology, and Urdu language as a symbol of unity and the only state language of the country, and that the opposition groups in East Pakistan were generally subversive, influenced and instigated by the Hindus and Communists and that the defense of East Pakistan depended on the strength of the armed forces in West Pakistan. These narrow premises, and others in a similar vein, coupled with a sense of racial and cultural superiority in the West Pakistan elite, prevented the evolution of a dynamic and equal relationship between the two Wings. The dominant ruling class suffered from a siege mentality. Any demand of East Pakistan, which deviated from the dogma was regarded as a conspiracy and a threat to Islamic ideology and integrity of the country.”¹³

A Pakistani writer who authored a book, *Separation of East Pakistan, ‘A Study of Failed Leadership’* rightly maintained that, “the two wings of Pakistan had very little in common demographically, topographically, geographically or even culturally. In both parts of Pakistan, different

¹² G. W. Chaudhry, *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1998), p. 5.

¹³ Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2001) p. 16. Also see Rounaq Jehan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1994).

scripts were spoken and written. The population of East Pakistan was ethnically almost homogeneous which gave it a single social identity. West Pakistani society was much separated than East Pakistan's.”¹⁴

When one talks about conflict, it is natural even in one family, country and the region. When there is a clash of interest leading to anger and antagonism, conflict is bound to take place. In case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, their conflict dynamics, unlike India and Pakistan are not centered on the conflict of interest but are rooted in the legacy of the past and exploitation of the painful events of 1971. Whenever Bangladesh is under the regime of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Pakistan is extensively maligned. Hence shaping the nature of conflict between Pakistan-Bangladesh relations is problematic. Apparently, ego, paranoia, mistrust, misperception and hostility still shape the mindset of Awami League government against Pakistan. Though this was not the case during the regime of President Hossein Mohammad Ershad and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. In this scenario, does it mean that Pakistan-Bangladesh relations will not fully normalize as long as the Awami League regime remains in power or there is a possibility of mending fences if there is a transformation of mindset in Dhaka about Pakistan?

So far the response from the Bangladesh government, particularly under Hasina's reign, the gestures are non-conciliatory. No Bangladeshi head of the state or government has visited Pakistan since decades. From Pakistani side also, the only bilateral visit which took place was almost two decades ago when President Pervez Musharraf visited Dhaka in July 2002.¹⁵ The prejudice seems pronounced. When former Prime Minister Imran Khan wanted to visit Bangladesh, the circumstances were not welcoming. Imran Khan, on the other hand, in his telephonic conversation with his

¹⁴ Rizwanullah Kokab, *Separatism in East Pakistan A study of Failed leadership* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 1

¹⁵ Moonis Ahmar, *Pakistan and Bangladesh From Conflict to Cooperation* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2003 and Karachi: Pakistan Study Center, University of Karachi, 2005).

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Bangladeshi counterpart and invited Sheikh Hasina, several months ago, but her response is still awaited.

This manifests is an acute dilemma in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations since the ties are neither cordial nor the two are active adversaries. Mending of fences between the two countries requires bilateral reciprocity. While analyzing the concept of mending fences in the context of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, one can come up with four major explanations.

First; when Pakistan extended diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh on the occasion of the Second Islamic Summit held in February 1974, in Lahore, and the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's visit to Dhaka in June 1974, it appeared that the two countries were on the verge of mending fences. During the regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman from January 1972 till his assassination on August 15, 1975, there was no such demand made by Dhaka that Pakistan should formally apologize for alleged atrocities during the military operation from March-December 1971. The focus of Mujib during his rule was on resolving the issues of the division of assets and the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis. The issue of apology was raised when Sheikh Hasina assumed power in 1996, and more forcefully during her second and third-term from 2009 onwards. In fact, Mujib welcomed the visit of Prime Minister Bhutto, but no concrete steps were taken from his side to reciprocate Pakistan's gestures till the end when he was assassinated by his own military on August 15, 1975.

Second; the process of mending fences got an impetus after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Pakistan immediately granted recognition to the new regime which came to power as a result of a military coup in Dhaka, and announced an immediate assistance of around 50,000 tons of rice and 15 million yards of fabric. One should bear in mind the fact that from 1974 onwards, Bangladesh was facing a famine-like situation which created a lot of resentment against Mujib's regime. However, internal political turbulence following the military coup prevented the pace of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations till the time Major

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General Zia-ur-Rehman took the reins of the government after a series of coups and counter coups in November 1975. Formal diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh were established in January 1976, which led to the resumption of Pakistan International Airlines flights for Dhaka, and steady normalization of trade and commercial relations.

Relations got an impetus when President Zia-ur-Rehman visited Pakistan in December 1977, which opened a new chapter of ties between the two countries having a bitter past. From 1977 till 1996, during the eras of Zia-ur-Rehman, Mohammad Ershad and Khaleda Zia, it appeared that the two countries had adopted a forward looking approach in reconciling their relations, and there was no polarization in their growing ties. During 1989, Pakistan was Bangladesh's second largest trading partner after the United States.¹⁶

'India factor' in shaping Pakistan-Bangladesh relations also mattered a lot because of the issue of sovereignty which got threatened because of unresolved water issue, territorial dispute over enclaves and periodic killings of Bangladeshis by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Bangladesh at that time thought that by making friends with Pakistan, it can counter the growing Indian threat following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

The possibility of reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh reached a maturity level from 1977 till 1996, but the issues which were raised by Dhaka namely the division of assets, liabilities and repatriation of stranded Pakistan remained unresolved. As mentioned earlier, the issue of tendering apology by Pakistan for alleged atrocities committed during the military operation of 1971, was not seriously raised by Dhaka from 1974 till 1996. In fact, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman granted amnesty to those who collaborated with the Pakistan Army against the Bangladesh

¹⁶ Moonis Ahmar, "Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations: History as a Hangover and Future Prospects in Jaffar Ahmed (ed.), *Pakistan: Dimensions of History* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society & Pakistan Study Center, University of Karachi, 2013), p. 205-222.

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Liberation Movement. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister was also responsive towards the regrets tendered by the Pakistani delegates on the painful events of 1971, during the tripartite talks held between Dhaka-Delhi and Islamabad in April 1974. At the signing ceremony of the tripartite agreement in Delhi on April 9, 1974, Pakistan Minister of State Mr. Aziz Ahmed paid glowing tributes to the Prime Ministers of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh for their statesmanship approach in making this possible. He said the biggest contribution was made by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman because its (agreement) conclusion depended on how far he was prepared to go. Sheikh Mujib displayed a far-sighted and magnanimous approach, which led to the successful and constructive conclusion of the tripartite talks.”¹⁷ One needs to bear in mind that amnesty was granted by Mujib on December 16, 1973, to those who were convicted or detained under Bangladesh government’s anti-Pakistan collaborator’s order of 1972. Mujib followed a policy of national reconciliation. However, it was reversed by her daughter after coming into power.

Third; relations received a setback when Awami League’s government led by Sheikh Hasina assumed charge after winning the general elections of 1996. The issue of tendering apology by Islamabad got a drive and became a part of Bangladeshi state narrative. Alleged killing of the intellectuals and teachers by the Pakistani armed forces on December 14, 1971,¹⁸ was propagated by the regime of Sheikh Hasina.

Once again the Pakistani prime minister visited Dhaka in February 1998. At a banquet meeting, hosted by Sheikh Hasina in his honour, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif proposed that, “let us learn from the mistakes of the past and build a better tomorrow for our people.”¹⁹ Bangladesh once again demanded an apology on alleged atrocities committed by West

¹⁷ “Tripartite accord signed in Delhi: Aziz praises Mujib” *Dawn* (Karachi), April 10, 1974.

¹⁸ The question of apology from Dhaka was reinforced when a mass grave of people killed during 1971 was discovered during Sheikh Hasina regime in 1999. See Moonis Ahmar, *Pakistan and Bangladesh From Conflict to Cooperation*, *Op.cit*, p. 38.

¹⁹ Altaf Gauher, “Thoughts and after-thoughts What we need is a Truth Commission” *The Nation* (Lahore) February 8, 1998.

Pakistan in 1971. At that time already, there was also a global trend about apology reinforced by the acts of apology made by the American President Bill Clinton to Afro-Americans, Native Americans and the German, and Japanese apology for the war crimes committed during Second World War. It was during the third and the fourth-term from 2014 onwards of Sheikh Hasina that relations with Pakistan started worsening.

Irfanur Rehman Raja, Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan in Dhaka, termed *Mukti Bahini* as a bunch of miscreants in East Pakistan, which led to the crisis and military operation of 1971. This created diplomatic crisis between the two countries. Dhaka severely protested to Pakistan on his remarks and Irfan Raja was recalled to Islamabad after being declared as a *persona non grata* by the government of Bangladesh.²⁰

Similarly, Dhaka took a strong notice of Pakistan's condemnation of the hanging of Jamaat-i-Islami leaders who were convicted by the courts of law for their alleged involvement in war crimes during the military operation launched by Pakistan in 1971. The resolution passed by Pakistan's National Assembly and the statement by the then Federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, condemning such hangings, were also bitterly criticized by Bangladesh.

A statement issued by the Foreign Office, Islamabad, said:

*"We have noted with deep concern and anguish the unfortunate executions of Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader Salahuddin Choudhry and Ali Ahsan Mujahid. Pakistan is deeply disturbed at this development. There is a need for reconciliation in Bangladesh in accordance with the spirit of the Pakistan-India-Bangladesh agreement of 9th April 1974. The agreement calls for a forward looking approach in matters relating to 1971. This would foster goodwill and harmony".*²¹

²⁰ Rashed Chowdhurg, "Diplomat declared persona non grata" *Gulf News*, December 16, 2000.

²¹ "FO wants 1974 accord implemented," *Daily Dawn* (Karachi), November 23, 2015.

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Relations with Pakistan worsened to such an extent that the issuance of visas for those applying to visit Bangladesh was made cumbersome, and was conditional on getting clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Dhaka. Trade, cultural, educational and other areas of cooperation between Pakistan and Bangladesh which had flourished from 1976 onwards reached their lowest ebb during the government of Sheikh Hasina. For 20 months, there was no High Commissioner of Pakistan in Dhaka, till the time Bangladesh approved the appointment of Imran Ahmad Siddiqui as Pakistan's new High Commissioner in November 2019.

Fourth; in the last one year or so, some positive transformation in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations took place when Pakistan's High Commissioner to Dhaka had a meeting with the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister Imran Khan had a telephonic conversation in which the two sides agreed to improve ties by focusing on economic and trade relations. Imran Khan said: "Pakistan is committed to deepening fraternal relations with Bangladesh on the basis of mutual trust, respect and sovereign equality."²² Earlier, according to the news reports, during December 2020, meeting between Pakistan High Commissioner and the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, "the two sides agreed to further strengthen the existing fraternal relations between the two countries. The High Commissioner informed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that the government and the people of Pakistan hold Bangladesh leadership and people in high esteem and affection. The Prime Minister expressed good wishes for the people of Pakistan."²³ Furthermore, in October 2021, Pakistan High Commissioner had another meeting with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister in which the

²² "In a rare call to Hasina, Imran urges closer ties with Bangladesh," *Daily Dawn* (Karachi), July 23, 2020. Pakistan Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan termed executions a violation of international law and human rights and an act below morality. He urged the Bangladesh government to cool down the fire and stops its policy of revenge.

²³ "Hasina calls for strengthening ties with Pakistan," *Daily Dawn* (Karachi), December 4, 2020.

latter suggested deepening of trade ties between the two countries.²⁴ Yet, it doesn't mean that there is a 'leap forward' or a major breakthrough in normalizing ties.

Impediments to Friendly Relations

Pakistan-Bangladesh relations have been a victim of egos and past baggage of recriminations on both sides. The hardening of Indian stance and a xenophobic Hindutva-driven government also casts a negative pall in the relations due to the Indian clout.

The echoes of the Indian role are documented by J. N. Dixit, India's first envoy to Dhaka, in his book, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*.²⁵ He viewed the formative phase of Bangladesh, and India's policy to keep that new state under its influence. Dixit mentions the resurgence of pro-Pakistan elements in Bangladesh during Mujib's government and how anti-Indian feelings had surged. According to him:

*"Mujib had come to the conclusion by the first quarter of 1973 that the only way to neutralize this negative propaganda and affirm Bangladesh's independent status and capacity for freedom of option in foreign and defense related policies was to normalize and expand relations with Pakistan, China, and if possible, with the USA and simultaneously to reassert Bangladesh's Islamic identity by becoming part of the OIC."*²⁶

Dixit also narrated in his book the grand and historic welcome which was accorded to Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he visited

²⁴ "Sheikh Hasina desires stronger trade ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan" Daily Dawn (Karachi) October 26, 2021. In July 2020, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned his Bangladeshi counterpart and expressed deep condolences over Covid-19 deaths and hoped that, "Pakistan is committed to deepening fraternal relations with Bangladesh on the basis of mutual trust, mutual respect and sovereign equality." See, "In a rare telephone call to Hasina, Imran urges closer ties with Bangladesh," Daily Dawn (Karachi) July 23, 2020.

²⁵ J. N. Dixit, *Liberation And Beyond India-Bangladesh Relations* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999).

²⁶ Ibid.

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Dhaka on the invitation of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in June 1974.²⁷

The clout of India on Bangladesh's policy *vis-a-vis* Pakistan is deeply entrenched. Bangladeshis, who apply for the Indian visa having a stamp on their passport of Pakistani visa, their application is rejected. While there is no empirical evidence or data collected from those Bangladeshis whose visa applications were denied because of their visit to Pakistan, such things invariably deter those wishing to visit Pakistan. Pakistani High Commissioner to Dhaka has already stated that his country has lifted all restrictions for Bangladeshi nationals wishing to visit his country, but it is yet to be seen if the conditions imposed by Dhaka for Pakistan nationals applying for visa have been lifted or not. Nevertheless, India's entrenched influence in the government of Bangladesh, particularly during Awami League's rule, cannot be overlooked. It prevents Dhaka from reciprocating friendly gestures of Islamabad.

The rationale of Pakistan's policy of unilateral reciprocity in mending fences with Bangladesh is based on two factors. First; the common people of Bangladesh possess enormous goodwill and positive feelings for Pakistan. Historically speaking, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto received a rousing welcome when he visited Dhaka on the invitation of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in June 1974. Similarly, whenever, Pakistani cricket team plays Test matches in Bangladesh, the local crowd is jubilant.

Pakistan is confident of the feelings of the Bangladeshi people. Unfortunately, there are segments of Bangladeshi elites particularly in media, academia and politics who leave no opportunity to malign Pakistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan is optimistic in its resolve that the new generation of Bangladesh will not carry the baggage of the past, and it will be more pragmatic in its approach.

²⁷ J. N. Dixit, *Liberation And Beyond India-Bangladesh Relations* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999).

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As pointed earlier, Bangladeshi regimes, excluding Awami League, did not press on Islamabad to deal with the contentious issues mentioned above. For Sheikh Hasina, it is Pakistan which refuses to seriously resolve issues with Bangladesh.

From Dhaka's point of view, following are the impediments for reconciliation and complete normalization of relations with Pakistan.

1. Tendering of an unconditional apology for the alleged atrocities committed by the Pakistan armed forces in the then East Pakistan during the military operation from March-December 1971.
2. Division of assets and liabilities.
3. Repatriation of stranded Pakistanis.

Pakistan, however, disagrees with the conditions put by Dhaka for complete normalization with Islamabad. On the issue of apology, Islamabad has taken a consistent position that April 1974, tripartite agreement between Delhi-Dhaka and Islamabad Pakistan had "deeply regretted any crimes that may have been committed." Bangladeshi government dropped the charges of war crimes against 195 officers of Pakistan armed forces who were posted in the then East Pakistan and accepted 'deep regrets' of Islamabad. Though, successive regimes of Bangladesh since August 1975, till 1996, were not persistent over the apology issue except the one led by Sheikh Hasina who rejected Islamabad's argument about Pakistan's statement of April 1974, and called for an official apology. Pakistan has consistently suggested to Bangladesh to move on instead of becoming hostage of the past.

When President Pervez Musharraf visited Dhaka in July 2002, from airport he straight-away went to *Savar* where he paid homage to Bangladeshi war heroes, and wrote in the visitor's book expressing deep regrets of loss of lives during the 1971 painful events in the then East Pakistan. Khaleda Zia, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, accepted what Musharraf expressed in the visitor's book and thanked him in a state

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banquet for his words of regrets.²⁸ Immediately after the visit of President Musharraf to Dhaka, a joint statement by the leaders of fifty-one civil society organizations of Pakistan apologized to the sisters and brothers of Bangladesh for the violation of human rights.”²⁹

On the question of the division of assets, Pakistan’s position is very clear that the issue should not be only confined to assets but must also cover liabilities, i.e. the amount which Bangladesh should pay to Pakistan for its expenditures in the then East Pakistan. Since the issue is very complicated, Dhaka is not pressing on that issue anymore.

Islamabad has taken a firm stand on the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis and states that the position that it has taken back people as agreed in 1974 tripartite agreement. A stance which is rejected by Dhaka and also those in Pakistan who are still demanding that more than 300,000 stranded Pakistanis (called as Biharis) are languishing in 66 camps in Bangladesh and must be repatriated to Pakistan. It seems repatriation issue has lost its momentum because 50 years have passed since the emergence of Bangladesh, and not many of those who are in camps are interested in going to Pakistan as they have opted for Bangladeshi nationality.

Impediments cannot be removed unilaterally or by taking gestures from Islamabad. It requires the pursuance of six measures by the two countries.

²⁸ “Musharraf regrets Pak forces’ excesses in 1971,” *The Independent*, Dhaka, July 30, 2002. After placing wreath at the pedestal of national martyr’s memorial President Pervez Musharraf write in the visitor’s book that, “your brothers and sisters in Pakistan share pain of the events of 1971. The excesses committed during that unfortunate period are regrettable.”

²⁹ “Internal demand in Pakistan for apology,” *Daily Star* (Dhaka) August 6, 2002. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and other Human Rights groups published a newspaper advertisement in Pakistani newspapers calling for full apology to the people of Bangladesh. Throughout the advertisement campaign we are sending a message to our brothers and sisters of Bangladesh that the civil society in Pakistan does not endorse what was done by the military. See news item, “Pak Human rights groups press government for full apology,” *Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 8, 2002.

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These measures are as follows:-

1. Political will.
2. Determination.
3. Mutual trust and confidence.
4. Overcoming the bitterness of the past while adhering to mutual forgiveness.
5. Pursuing a forward looking instead of retrogressive approach.
6. Focusing on promoting economic, trade and commercial ties and cooperation in other areas.

These are the measures which must be seriously pondered by Dhaka and Islamabad, if the two sides do not want to carry the baggage of the past and move ahead in the realm of meaningful relations in the years to come. During the visit of President Musharraf to Dhaka in July 2002, the two sides agreed to establish Pakistan-Bangladesh Joint Commission and give a boost to trade relations. Cooperation in educational, cultural, scientific and other fields was also agreed upon but the two sides failed to keep pace with the bilateral agreements.

The two countries also formed Pakistan-Bangladesh Business Council under Bangladesh Federation of Chamber of Commerce & Industry and Pakistan Chamber of Commerce & Industry. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has sponsored several study tours to Pakistan composed of Bangladeshi students and faculty representing different universities and educational institutions from Pakistan sponsored by Bangladeshi University Grants Commission (UGC). However, any study tour is yet to be experienced.

It is unfortunate that several mutually agreed decisions to augment Pakistan-Bangladesh economic ties are yet to be implemented. For instance, “both sides agreed to sign a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to open more trade alongside South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA). This needs to be implemented in letter and spirit. There were many reservations besides those hindrances which were raised

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by Bangladesh. Key reservations included special and differential treatment of Bangladeshi goods on grounds of being least-developed nation, as well as differences over opening of markets post-FTA.”³⁰

Some of the measures which can help augment political will, mutual trust and confidence between the two states relate to easing of visa restrictions, better air connectivity, shipping links, joint ventures, cultural and educational cooperation. Furthermore, award of scholarships to Bangladeshi and Pakistani students to study in each other’s educational institutions will go a long way in building confidence and goodwill.

Unlike a segment of elites of Bangladesh, where anti-Pakistan sentiments are promoted for political consumption, one can observe positive feelings and goodwill in Pakistan about Bangladesh. When one talks about conflict-free ties, the role of youth must be considered. From a pragmatic point of view, a major impediment in reconciliation is not the issue of apology but overcoming psychological barriers of the past and moving forward.

Prospects and the Way Forward

From the above discussion, four conclusions could be drawn: First; there is no hostility, antagonism and anger in Pakistan and Bangladesh against each other at the popular level. The issue centers at the elite level, particularly in Bangladesh. As examined earlier, there are reasons why Sheikh Hasina pursues a hardline approach vis-a-vis Pakistan. In most cases, her position reflects domestic political dynamics where Pakistan-bashing is a dominant state narrative and rampant Indian influence, particularly its Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), has permeated in the power corridors of Dhaka.

Second; Prospects and the way forward in mending fences also depends on the role of India and how New Delhi is subverting efforts made in this

³⁰ Syed Shujaat Ahmed, “Trade: a low hanging fruit in ties with Bangladesh,” *The Express Tribune* (Karachi), August 23, 2017. During Musharraf’s visit to Dhaka in July 2002, Pakistan granted duty free access to Bangladeshi tea and jute goods to Pakistani markets.

regard. Even the government of Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh National Party (BNP), which has traditionally been soft on Pakistan, felt pressures from New Delhi when President Musharraf visited Dhaka in July 2002. Not only the opposition, Awami League, boycotted that visit but Dhaka had to host the visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, who visited Bangladesh soon after Musharraf's visit, and reminded Bangladesh of the "sacrifices of the Indian armed forces" for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, while addressing at Dhaka University blamed Pakistan for spreading terrorism and fear in India's neighbourhood.³¹ Indian officials visiting Bangladesh keep on reminding Dhaka that without their support and intervention, independence from Pakistan was an impossible task. It is this baggage which the Bangladeshis will have to carry for an endless period of time. Pro-Indian lobby in Bangladesh not only got an impetus from Delhi's decisive role during the liberation war of 1971, but it feels more comfortable with their counterparts in India rather than Pakistan because of cultural and geographical proximity.

Whenever, there is some hope for mending fences between Pakistan and Bangladesh, the events of 1971 are quoted by those who are against the reconciliation as far as Dhaka and Islamabad are concerned. A plausible way out from the current standoff is the pursuance of a prudent approach based on getting over the hangover of the past. To mend fences and complete normalization of the relations, it depends on the domestic dynamics of Pakistan as well. The culture of Bangladesh is simple and friendly which unfortunately is now wrongly perceived due to the economic success of Bangladesh as compared to Pakistan.

Finally, fifty years after the emergence of Bangladesh, the new generation of both the countries must ensure a paradigm shift, and do away with the baggage of the past. The task is difficult but not impossible.

³¹ "Modi blames Pakistan for spreading terrorism in India," *Daily Dawn* (Karachi) June 8, 2015.

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While celebrating the 46th Independence Day of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh in Karachi stated that,

*“Pakistan and Bangladesh share historical, cultural and religious ties. Both countries today are unfortunately suffering as a result of terrorism and extremism and both must come together to fight against these elements and secure the future of coming generations. We must also be aware of the nefarious designs of the regional powers who are trying to sow the seeds of discord between our two countries.”*³²

In an editorial published in an English daily newspaper way back in 2017, the vision for conflict-free Pakistan-Bangladesh relations was aptly examined in the following words:

*The way forward is only through truth and reconciliation, not through continuing to poison future generations with the venom of the past. Bangladesh should reconsider its attitude towards Pakistan and respond to Islamabad's overtures. ...Pakistan must respond to provocations in a calm and measured tone and resist attempts to isolate it regionally and internationally.*³³

By resolving contentious issues, there can be a boost in Pakistan-Bangladesh trade relations. Trade between the two countries which is roughly \$1 billion has a potential to expand ensuring a win-win situation. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister has already accepted an invitation extended by the former Prime Minister Imran Khan to undertake visit to Pakistan. Only if the leadership of both the countries remain visionary with a forward looking approach, one can expect mending of fences and qualitative breakthrough in their relations particularly dealing with the contentious issues and augmenting relations in the fields of trade, commercial, educational, cultural, science and technology. The two

³² “Envoy highlights Bangladesh’s economic successes,” *Daily Dawn*, (Karachi) March 29, 2017.

³³ “Pakistan-Bangladesh Ties,” *Daily Dawn* (Karachi), April 3, 2017.

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countries can learn from their expertise and experience in order to deepen their relations through cooperation. ■