**Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Exchange of Mutual Advantages**

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Despite being South Asian countries and sharing the same religion, culture, and history, the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh aren’t warm. The reason for the existing distance between Bangladesh and Pakistan even after so many years of liberation war is the myriad of human, economic and political problems. If all these problems are not resolved, it will not be possible to establish diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Both counties should go ahead to resolve the bilateral problems. Policymakers from both sides should be soft to each other. Relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan must be improved.

Especially for the last two years, PM Imran Khan’s government has been trying to strengthen relations with Bangladesh. In the interest of the people, Pakistan is now keen to build economic relations with the countries of the region. Bangladesh is being given special attention as it shares the same history and culture.

The younger generation is very interested in meaningful relationships. There is a huge potential for bilateral economic and trade cooperation. The high commissions in both counties should try their level best to improve trade and business relations between the two countries more. Pakistan should try its level best be to make bilateral relations as good as possible. The trade imbalance between the two countries must be addressed. According to the State Bank of Pakistan, Pakistan’s exports to Bangladesh in 2019 stood at 736 million, while Bangladesh’s exports to Pakistan were only 44 million. Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh are getting closer in the context of tensions between India and a few other countries in the region. But the good news for us is that the bilateral trade between Pakistan-Bangladesh is growing gradually. According to the media report and statements of the State Bank of Pakistan, Pakistan’s trade with Bangladesh witnessed a surplus of 46.65 per cent during the first six months of the financial year (2021-22) as compared to the corresponding period of last year. The overall exports to Bangladesh were recorded at $399.408 million during July-December against exports of $274.246 million, showing growth of 45.63 per cent, Meanwhile, on a year-on-year basis, exports during December 2021 increased 52.01 per cent, from $54.433 million to $82.746 million. Similarly, on a month-on-month basis, imports rose by 14.38 per cent during December 2021 in comparison with exports of $72.339 million in November 2021. It is true that Bangladesh and Pakistan can benefit from growing trade ties. Pakistan and Bangladesh should ink a free trade agreement to boost up the trade volume.

Pakistan should have a lasting dialogue with the Bangladesh government on how to move the bilateral relations in a positive direction.

In today’s world of free trade, every country is preoccupied with the idea of moving forward, as a result of which the interests of their own country are at the forefront, leaving the enmity behind and giving priority to the alliance. So, if we, too, respond to Pakistan’s request and extend a hand of friendship to them, you will soon see that they will be sorry for the wrong that Pakistan did to Bangladesh in 1971. Then, the limits of relations between the two Muslim countries will go so far that India will not be able to oppress Bangladesh if it wants to. On the other hand, when a bond of brotherhood is formed between the people of Bangladesh and Pakistan, trade and commerce will be exchanged. For this reason, both countries will benefit immensely. Therefore, in my opinion, it is better for Bangladesh to accept the extended hand of friendship of Pakistan.

India’s relations with Bangladesh have passed the test of time and are historic. Despite the enduring relationship between India and Bangladesh, Islamabad must continue its efforts to strengthen ties with Bangladesh. Pakistan now had the responsibility to establish relations. Imran Khan should maintain the “follow-up” of his telephone conversation with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

It is praiseworthy that Pakistan and Bangladesh have already taken some initiatives to develop diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations. In fact, some recent diplomatic developments could ease the long-complicated Pakistan-Bangladesh equation.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan invited the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina to visit Islamabad in a rare telephone call earlier in December 2020. Just a few days before the phone conversation, a silent meeting was held between Pakistan’s High Commissioner to Dhaka Imran Ahmed Siddiqui and Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen. Relations between the two countries have never been normal since the 1971 war.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated further in 2016. At that time, Bangladesh executed several leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami for the 1971 war crimes. Pakistan calls it politically motivated. Bangladesh saw it as Pakistan’s interference in the internal matters of Bangladesh. Relations between them became deteriorated. At one stage, in a fresh diplomatic row between Pakistan and Bangladesh, diplomats were expelled from respective sides.

Amidst these, Dhaka accepted a new Pak envoy in Dhaka in 2020. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has invited Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to visit Pakistan. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had also invited Imran Khan to visit Bangladesh. There was a phone conversation between the two heads of government in 2020.

We saw Pakistan-Bangladesh’s mango diplomacy in August 2021. Then Pakistani envoy to Bangladesh met with Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina in October 2021. She desired to strengthen bilateral trade ties with Pakistan during this meeting. There were indications of melting the ice between the two strained ties. But these must be continued for bolstering relations.

It is time to restructure relations. Pakistan should have a lasting dialogue with the Bangladesh government on how to move the bilateral relations in a positive direction. Both should work together and advance their relationship on any issue related to trade, culture, and mutual interests.

Bangladesh and Pakistan together make up five per cent of the world’s population. The people-to-people contact, religious tourism, scholarship exchange cab be the potential sectors. Reconnecting ports (air, sea) between the two states is very necessary to bolster the ties. Bangladesh can benefit from using Pakistan’s seaports (Karachi port, Gwadar port, Keti Bandar, port Qassim, CPEC). On the other hand, Pakistan can take access into the markets of Nepal, Bhutan, Southeast Asia, etc. because Bangladesh is a gateway between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Religious and cultural exchanges would be boosted up. Pakistan and Bangladesh can work closely because both share some common regional and global platforms.

*The writer is a free calmist.*