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Inaugural address by Foreign Secretary at the 5th India-Bangladesh Security Dialogue at Observer Research Foundation

April 02, 2014

Mr. Joshi, Ambassador Farooq Sobhan,

Distinguished delegates,

Gentlemen, Ladies,

1. I am delighted to be here with you at ORF. Given the fact that Bangladesh is one of India's most important partners in every sense of the term, I am glad to see that ORF has been organising this series of dialogues regularly with the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) on various aspects of the India-Bangladesh relationship.

2. Today I am going to try and give you a broad brush picture of how we in GOI see the India-Bangladesh relationship and how it will evolve in the future.

3. Let me start by stating that the past few years have seen a remarkable transformation in the relationship. I believe that we have come a very long way in taking forward a partnership that is based not just on a shared civilizational heritage with roots running very deep indeed, but on a whole host of factors that span virtually the entire spectrum of interaction that it is possible for neighbours to have.

4. Looking back at our individual history since independence and then from 1971 onwards to the present date, it is indeed fascinating to see how we engaged with each other over the years before arriving at where we are today. A mature relationship borne out of shared experiences over the past decades, some good, some not so good but all useful in reaching a better and a greater understanding of each other's needs as well as concerns and above all, a willingness to recognize, to acknowledge and to build on the critical role that each country plays in the other's all-round development.

5. The past few years have seen a new momentum in our bilateral relations. Not only is this reflected in convergent perceptions and approaches at the government level, but also in the desire of opinion-makers, businessmen and people on the ground to forge closer ties of goodwill and friendship and build bonds of cooperation to mutual benefit.

6. The landmark visits of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 and Dr Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011 have laid the foundation for new avenues for cooperation and set a roadmap for our partnership. The Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development signed by the two Prime Ministers in September 2011 is a path-breaking agreement which sets out bold parameters for taking our cooperation forward in several new areas, including in security, in environment and in sub-regional cooperation. It also established the mechanism of the Joint Consultative Commission to oversee progress that we sought to achieve on various fronts.

7. I will illustrate just some of the progress that has been achieved over the last 5 to 6 years. Some of the most remarkable progress is in the area of trade and on the economic front. Bangladesh has overtaken Sri Lanka as India's largest trading partner in South Asia. Our total trade has increased from \$3.7 billion in 2007-08 to \$5.3 billion in 2012-13. Clearly, the duty free access extended by India on all export items as requested by Bangladesh, barring only 25 items, is yielding some results. Yet, we still have a long way to go and much work remains to be done as the trade volumes are low. If we are to significantly increase the volumes, we need to look at trade and investment in conjunction. This, I believe, is one of the pillars on which our future relationship will be built. There are several Indian corporates who are keen on investing in Bangladesh and there is potential for Bangladesh investment in India. I put it to ORF that perhaps your next dialogue can focus on the specific areas, perhaps even projects, looking at new models of cooperation that would promote greater trade and investment between our two countries.

8. Let me also point to some progress that we have registered in the power sector. Cooperation has been progressing well and the grid interconnectivity between Bheramera and Barampur that was inaugurated in October 2013 and led to 500 MW of power flowing from India to Bangladesh, where the total production is 7500. We are talking of 500 MW out of a total production of 7500 MW. This is significant. Separately NTPC has signed a joint venture agreement with the Bangladesh Power Development Corporation for setting up a 1320 MW coal based power plant in Khulna. These are encouraging developments. But it is not the sum total of what we have set ourselves. I would like to envisage, in the future, grid connectivity to our North Eastern region as well, and a power grid traversing Bangladesh from the North East to West Bengal, which will benefit Bangladesh as well as India. I think that both sides need to work on this.

9. Another area where we have laid the ground for future cooperation is in sub-regional cooperation. First meetings of the Joint Working Groups on water and power and trade and connectivity between India, Bangladesh and Bhutan were held last year. We are working towards holding the second meetings soon. This is an area that has potential and that needs to be further explored.

10. In the great progress that has been registered in the development of our relations and in what I would say is a transformation in the manner that we look at each other, a fundamental area where we have managed to work together and to set up institutional mechanisms for cooperation have been precisely the three areas that your dialogue will focus on today and tomorrow – border security, border management and counter-terrorism cooperation. It is said, not without good reason, that good fences make good neighbours. I believe that the mechanisms that we have set up have helped towards making good fences and towards helping us become better neighbours. The DG BSF-DGB level border coordination conferences, held twice every year, are important in understanding each other's concerns and in taking progress forward. The last conference was held in Dhaka in September last year and the agenda covered all significant issues related to the border, including deaths along the international boundary, smuggling of drugs, trans-border crimes including circulation of fake currency notes, action against Indian insurgent groups, joint survey for construction of fence within 150 yards of the border and development works within 150 yards of the IB.

11. We share information on all the bad elements, drug traffickers, touts involved in human trafficking, FICN racketeers, cattle smugglers, persons kidnapped but not yet released, list of priority patches for fencing and I believe that this is critical to the manner in which we have interacted with each other on this particular issue. In addition we have the DG level talks between the Narcotics Control Bureau and the DNC. A slew of talks covering issues such as smuggling of narcotic substances, coordination between ground level officers and cooperation through training programmes are another important component of the security cooperation between India and Bangladesh.

12. The first meeting of the task force on fake currency notes was held this year in January 2014 and an MoU to be signed between India and Bangladesh is under discussion. The 13th Joint Working Group Meeting and the 14th Home Secretary level talks were held last year in July in New Delhi. The Task Force on Human Trafficking is working on Standard Operating Procedures for preventing human trafficking and trafficking of women and children.

13. India continues to emphasise its security concerns to Bangladesh, especially on the use of Bangladesh territory by Indian insurgent groups and by terrorists of other nationalities. There are still some IIGs operating from Bangladesh. Given the wide range of issues, it is important to note that the three Agreements signed in January 2010 for Mutual Legal Assistance in criminal matters, Transfer of sentenced persons and Combating international terrorism, organized crime and illicit drug trafficking have come into force following exchange of instruments of ratification in January 2011. The Extradition Treaty with Bangladesh signed during the visit of Home Minister to Bangladesh in January 2013 has also come into force.

14. Owing to reasons of topography, riverine patches, dense forested hills and other factors, the nearly 4000 km long India-Bangladesh border is one of the most difficult to patrol. We are all aware of the fact that the porous nature of the border has led to numerous trans-border problems including infiltration, smuggling of arms and drugs, illegal movement of persons and crime such as kidnapping for ransom, cattle lifting and extortion. A fence is being built along the border to ensure better border management and to check illegal cross-border movement. The coordinated Border Management Plan signed between the two countries aims to synergize the efforts of both the border guarding forces for more effective control over cross border illegal activities and crimes and maintenance of peace and harmony along the India-Bangladesh border.

15. Let me come to the larger picture. There are other issues that impact on the larger picture of relations between India and Bangladesh. I think this has to do a great deal with the fact that both countries realize that security is mutual. It is not just a question of India's security or Bangladesh helping India to secure her security. India's security also helps Bangladesh in her security. This is an issue that goes to the core of what our common understanding has to be about. Connectivity works both ways. It can be positive and it can also be negative; it can be nobody's case that sheltering or encouraging forces of extremism, terrorism, and fanaticism can only encourage those forces to operate in one direction. We have seen from the experiences of another neighbour, our neighbour to the West that the forces of terrorism that are sheltered or encouraged will come back and turn on the very support structures that gave them sustenance in the first instance.

16. So, ultimately I think what has changed is the manner in which India and Bangladesh have decided to deal with each other, to interact with each other. Do we wish to harm each other or do we wish to contribute to each other's growth, prosperity and well-being? I believe that both countries have come to a very clear determination that we do not wish to harm each other, we wish to contribute to each other's all round economic progress, socio-economic progress and development and stability.

17. There are several other factors in this matrix and I will briefly touch on them, which is part of the larger picture. The region of South Asia which we both inhabit, is changing. India is changing and so are each of her neighbours. Most of our neighbours are changing in a positive direction and here we see how South Asia is emerging as one of the fastest growing regions in the world, notwithstanding the global economic downturn. Granted this is from a low base, but the economic growth figures are encouraging and more importantly, these changes bring with them growing aspirations as well as growing demands on the political classes to respond. Today we see the beginning of multiparty democracy taking roots in every country in our region. Every country in South Asia is either going into or emerging from an electoral process. Democracies are still nascent in many respects but they bring with them larger constituencies for peace, for economic progress and for development. People want to get on with their lives and not remain hostage to narrow political agendas or ideologies.

18. In the process of democratic transformation that is taking place in India and in Bangladesh, the forces of stability, moderation and progress are gaining strength, also helped by the fact that there are an increasing number of stakeholders and constituencies for growth and normalcy. It is no longer the case that governments are the only players determining relationships with neighbours. Besides government, the media is playing a critical role, as is trade and industry, civil society and diaspora who through the strength of their remittances and overseas linkages are often in a position to influence developments in their countries.

19. I think another very important change that will have profound implications both for India and for Bangladesh, is what is happening in Myanmar in terms of the democratic process that is starting over there. This has implications for India's North East and for Bangladesh and for our common engagement with ASEAN. There is digital connectivity which also has implications for counter-terrorism and for security and border connectivity as well. The revolution in telecommunications allows India and Bangladesh to connect with each other in a manner that outpaced physical connectivity. Physical connectivity of roads, railways, water ways, power grids is also being put in place; and what is very important is that there is willingness to put them into place in a manner that benefits both countries. I can think of a time some years back when there was not even a willingness to look at these issues.

20. We are also cooperating with each other in capacity building in regional institutions such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, which play a very important role not just in terms of what they are doing on the ground but in terms of giving us platforms to interact with each other, to develop a better understanding of the persons that we deal with. For instance, I have met my counterpart in Bangladesh 4 times over the past 8 months at various forums, whether it was at the UNGA in New York or at the BIMSTEC Summit at Nay Pyi Taw. This in itself led to a better understanding when we met each other just a couple of weeks back, to make sure that the momentum of progress was maintained over the period till the new government is in place and to start the process of preparing for the next Joint Consultative Committee meeting. I think this kind of familiarity at the official and the technical level is very important and is playing a role.

21. Let me finally say that there have been certain other developments in Bangladesh which we have followed. They bring home the fact that when you have cases such as the Chittagong arms haul case, or IIGs that have been operating with impunity in the past, and you see the kind of involvement there seems to have been, one realizes the dangers of allowing such forces to flourish within the national framework. I think that these hold lessons for all of us in terms of what we have to watch out for in the future and where we need to proceed in terms of avoiding certain areas that have led to dissonance and to a great deal of misery for people in India as well as in Bangladesh.

22 I believe that the developments that have taken place over the past few years have been to the benefit of both India and Bangladesh. I believe that the three areas that ORF and BEI will be looking at during this Dialogue in terms of reimagining the narrative or building a better narrative, are critical to the job that we have set ourselves in benefiting from growing inter-linkages and inter-dependencies and in interlinking our economies to the extent that it results in great value and benefit for the people of both our countries.

23. I believe that the trajectory that our two countries have set for ourselves in taking our relationship forward will enable our partnership to grow even further in the years to come.

Thank you.



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