

India's NRC, CAA may take Bangladesh closer to China

Recently the Government of India has started to implement the NRC, CAA across the country to trace the so-called illegal Indians and to deport them. The CAA bill has been criticized severely as it goes against the interest of Muslims in India. It grants citizenship to religious minorities such as Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Sikhs and Christians- who fled to India before 31 December 2014, from the neighboring Muslim majority nations of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan due to persecutions. Bangladesh is seriously worried about the massive influx of Indian refugees as it is already overburdened with Rohingyas from Myanmar. Though the bilateral relationship of Bangladesh with India is very strong since the liberation war in 1971, the socio-economic and political relations of Bangladesh with China has recently been even much better which India considers as a threat. Bangladesh is strategically balancing the relations with these two giant neighboring countries and thus reaping the best from their hostile relationship. This paper aims to contextualize the impact of India's NRC, CAA on the triangle relationship among Bangladesh, India and China.

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The full form of NRC is National Register of Citizens and CAA is Citizenship Amendment Act. NRC is the Supreme Court's order to identify the illegal immigrants from Assam. Though it was a state-specific order, now Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led Indian government is implementing the NRC across India. The current Indian central government led by Narendra Modi has recently passed the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, initially introduced in 2016 by the Lok Sabha by amending the Citizenship Act of 1955. To further aggravate the matters, there have been murmurs of Assam's NRC introduced in 2003 (National Register of Citizens), being implemented across the entire nation, even stated by Home Minister Amit Shah on several occasions. The BJP led government has time and again assured the skeptics, and critics of these bills, that the proposed National Register of Citizens will not be drawn on religious lines, compared to the Citizenship Amendment Act, at other times even denying that no such NRC is going to be officially introduced (Kuchay 2019). Finally, it is happening!

People have labelled the CAA bill as unfair, and prejudiced against the Muslim populace of India, and more importantly declared it unconstitutional to the core, as it is discriminatory on religious lines. The CAA bill grants citizenship to religious minorities (illegal migrants) such as Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Sikhs and Christians- who fled to India before 31 December 2014, from the neighboring Muslim majority nations of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This move is said to imply that India believes Muslim majority nations, are persecuting their religious minorities, which some find outrageously offensive, given India's current state of affairs. There has been a rise in communal violence in Delhi over the last few days, and brutal attacks on the Muslim populated areas have taken place, all perpetuated by government backed groups such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh popularly known as RSS and Baj Rang Dal, which have led some to question the real motives of the Modi government. Current events have taken the world by storm, and many argue that the CAA/NRC move, could have a global impact.

These events have taken the Bangladeshi people by blizzard, sparking widespread resentment, and criticism of the Indian government on social and national media. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's media advisor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury has even expressed his distaste in being compared to Pakistan and Afghanistan-nations rife with terrorist activity. The drastic move by the Indian government has set flames to its secular fabric, and at the same time, severely tarnished



Protest against National Register of Citizens (NRC).
Source: AP Photo.

its friendly relation with the Bangladeshi people, and it will not stop there. Socio-economic issues will soon hit both nations. If the CAA/NRC bills are applied, it will create a massive influx of refugees into Bangladesh, which will go against balanced bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. This will further strain already complicated ties, as Bangladesh is already tackling the Rohingya crisis single-handedly, whereas much more capable countries have refused the Rohingyas shelter. This has caused much concern for our Bangladeshi government, as our already overpopulated country is full to the brim. Bangladesh simply cannot afford any more guests. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina feels NRC/CAA are internal matters of India at the same time she thinks the act is unnecessary (Times 2020)

India-Bangladesh Relationship

India and Bangladesh share a friendship dating back to the Bangladeshi Liberation war of 1971, where the former aided the latter in securing a sovereign nation free of Pakistani tyranny, and oppressions. Over the years, political and business alliances have been strengthened between the countries. Bangladesh treats India as a strong and supportive neighbor as both rely on each other for different issues, given their massive contribution to the Liberation struggle. Energy deals between the two nations have been ongoing. Hasanujjaman (2020) stated that in 2019 Bangladesh imported 1160 Mega Watts of electricity from India, in exchange for internet bandwidth; numerous energy deals have been signed, some of which include a 130 km oil pipeline running from Bangladesh to India, and the 1320 Mega Watt Maitree coal-fired thermal power plant, which will be a 'half and half' joint venture between India's National Thermal Power Corporation and Bangladesh Power Development Board. A whopping 2000 Mega Watts of power from solar parks in Gujarat, and Rajasthan may soon be purchased by Bangladesh. Plans for energy sharing are also being planned between India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.

Another critical dispute between the two nations is regarding the sharing of water resources, as they share a few common waterways, the river Teesta to be more specific. The Teesta River is a 414 km long river flowing through the Indian states in West Bengal and Sikkim, then crossing through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. It is the fourth largest shared river, after Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers. In 1972, a Joint River Commission established in Dhaka, on demand

of the Prime Ministers of both nations, via the Indo-Bangla Treaty of Friendship. More deals were made in the following years, but the most recent is the interim deal, made in 2011 which is part of a 15-year deal, and currently ongoing (it gives India 42.5% and Bangladesh 37.5% of Teesta's water) the rest 20% remaining unallocated. This has also caused much discontent among some Bangladeshis, as they feel India has not shown a 'friendly' stance on the River issue, given its negligence of Bangladeshi demands, on the water of the Teesta. The water from this river is crucial to the farmers, and hydro energy corporations of both nations, thus the creation of 'bad blood' as some might call it.

Water and Energy are two major sectors for both governments, and both have worked towards fostering friendly relations since the Liberation of Bangladesh on various other issues. Another unique example of Indian 'friendship' is the country signing defense deals with the Bangladesh Government in 2007—the first of its kind. Under this deal, India provided a \$500 million loan to Bangladesh for defense expenditure, expert training, logistical aid, along with joint training exercises between the two militaries, in hopes of making the Bangladesh military more self-sufficient. A move which is quite reminiscent of the war of 71, and puts emphasis on good Indo-Bangladeshi relations.

There is also much contention between Bangladesh and India on multiple issues—the most glaring of them all is the border killings by the Indian BSF (Border Security Force). This issue has time and again caused public disdain and scorn among Bangladeshis. The recent CAA bill is just fanning the already burning flames of contempt between the two nations. Although the ruling party in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Awami League has maintained a good relation with the current Indian government, recent state of affairs is creating a chasm of hostility between the people of the two nations. The Bangladesh government has taken a neutral stance on the issue, with several prominent officials stating that it is an internal matter of India, taking the bureaucratic approach, by not using objectionable words in discussing the recent events which have taken place in India over the last couple of days.



Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in a meeting at New Delhi on 6 October, 2019.
Source: AP Photo.

According to Abul Barakat, an eminent professor of Dhaka University, economist and researcher in Bangladesh, around 11.3 million Hindus left Bangladesh between 1964 to 2013 due to severe persecutions. Most of them left during the military regime after independence in 1971. Their properties were taken over by the then Pakistani government marking these as enemy properties and subsequently were accepted as vested properties by Bangladesh government. These two incidents left 60 percent of Bangladeshi Hindus landless (Hasan 2016). Although present Awami League government of Bangladesh is secular and pro-minorities, discriminations at different levels in the society force Hindus to migrate to India to ensure a secured life for their future generations. Indian Home Ministry reported, India provided citizenship to near about 4000 people from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Out of them 600 were Muslims (Kumar 2020). However, this illegal migration and subsequent recognition of their citizenship is not a solution. At present, the trust level between Bangladesh and India is at the peak. Both the countries have registered their citizens through biometric system and brought them under smart national identity cards. If both the countries share their respective database, the illegal migration between the countries and unexpected border killings can easily be controlled.

Bangladesh–India–China Relationship

Bangladesh is in a geopolitical location of great significance to India and its archrival, China. This had led to a subtle tug of war regarding Dhaka, between Beijing and New Delhi, as both nations aim to deepen their foothold in Bangladesh. Bhaskar (2019) mentioned in his article that “in 2003, China overtook India as Bangladesh’s primary trading partner– and has remained so ever since.” Furthermore, he stressed

the following, “As of 2017, India’s two–way trade with Bangladesh is less than US\$7 billion– half the figure between Bangladesh and China.” Also pointing out how Narendra Modi should focus on building better relations with Bangladesh in order to compete with China, for a stronger sphere of influence over Bangladesh, both politically and economically. Bangladesh is a developing nation, which seeks to attract foreign investment; its geological location has put it in a place of great importance to both China and India. This is an advantage for Bangladesh, as it can reap the benefits of maintaining a good relation with both the super powers. Both India and China will try to usher Bangladesh to their side. Maintaining the right amount of friendliness with Beijing and New Delhi, is a top priority to the current government. The huge financial and logistical supports of both the countries, play a vital role in developing the overall economic development of Bangladesh.

China has been a long–time friend of Bangladesh too, with ties dating back to ancient times. Scholars, monks, explorers, tourists and merchants frequented Ancient Bengal during the Qin Dynasty period (221–206 BC), the first dynasty of Imperial China. Among them, many notable travelers such as Faxian, the Chinese Buddhist monk, traveled to Ancient India at the time.

China is currently Bangladesh’s largest trading partner. Hossain (2018) mentioned Chinese investment in Bangladesh has been calculated at a whopping total of \$38 billion USD– the largest amount pledged by a foreign nation, to Bangladesh. This included various investments in infrastructure projects, aimed at strengthening China–Bangladesh economic ties. The \$1.65 billion Payra coal power plant currently undergoing construction, and China’s 25% stake in the Dhaka Stock exchange are examples of a few Chinese investments, with many still in the drawing books awaiting formal approval. China has also been a huge help to Bangladesh in the national defense sector. Bangladesh was the second–largest importer of Chinese armaments from 2011–2015. Bhaskar (2019) wrote, “In total, one–fifth of China’s military exports are now bought by Dhaka.” Chinese investments in Bangladesh’s Naval defense has been worrying India, especially after the purchase of Type 035 Submarines by Bangladesh at very low prices from China. This has made India aware of the influence of China in its ‘backyard,’ as some might call it. Beijing has much more money

to spend on its neighbors, as compared to its much financially weaker rival, Delhi. China's hefty investments have made many countries lean towards them, as no one is likely to turn down foreign investment, even if it is a debt trap.



Bangladesh and China delegates, headed by Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina and Chinese President Xi Jinping at her office in Dhaka on 14 October, 2016.
Source: AP Photo.

Growing ties between China and Bangladesh have irritated India time and again. There is not much left to do for them but cautiously frolic around the geopolitical playing field of South East Asia, as strong demand on Bangladesh, might push Bangladesh into China's lap. This will no doubt be a massive loss for Indian interests in Bangladesh. On the positive side, Bangladesh can be the starting point for 'new beginnings' in the relationship between Beijing and New Delhi. It is yet to be seen!

The Government of India's uncompromising stand on the NRC, CAA will extremely distress their "neighborhood-first" policy. It may lighten their long-term deep bonding with Bangladesh. Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Mr. A K Abdul Momen said, "Apart from Bangladeshi citizens (if any), we will not accept any other illegal citizens from India." Bangladesh is seriously agitated with the India's branding of Bangladesh as a terrorist country like Pakistan and Afghanistan. The cancellation of pre-scheduled visits of Bangladesh's Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen and Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan in protest of NRC, CAA further complicated the Bangladesh-India tie. However, the smart move for Bangladesh would be to carefully balance the power paradigm between the nations to its favor. Both India and China will try to appease the Bangladeshi people to best forward their geopolitical agenda of keeping one another under constant check and threat. Bangladesh can utilize the Indo-China tug-of-war relationship to boost up its economic condition gradually.

Author Introduction

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