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Towards a peaceful border

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BANGLADESH and India share a 4,000 km border. It is the longest border that India shares with any of its six neighbours. Happily for us, as the British left, most of the border between India and then East Bengal (East Pakistani) was demarcated based on the district maps. However, in three places along this border, a total of about 6.5 km border has remained un-demarcated since 1947. Despite long-standing friendly relations, a number of border issues that often vitiate Indo-Bangladesh relations need to be addressed urgently.

One of the most vexing problems that arose after partition is that of the enclaves. There are 106 Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh and 92 Bangladeshi enclaves inside India. There are also enclaves inside another enclave. In September 2011, the governments of India and Bangladesh announced their intention to resolve the issue by swapping 162 enclaves, giving residents a choice of nationality. India will receive 51 enclaves of 7,110 acres, while Bangladesh will get 111 enclaves (out of the 119 Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh proper) of 17,149 acres. Apparently Bangladesh is going to gain about ten thousand acres. Besides, it would retain the 4,617 acres of its Dahagram-Angarpota enclave. People living in these enclaves want to be recognised as the citizens of the country inside which these enclaves are located, and they have been agitating for this. Yet, due to the intransigence of the current West Bengal government, a permanent solution to a rather humanitarian problem has been held in abeyance.

Adversely Possessed Land (APL) is another legacy of partition. About 3,500 acres of Bangladesh land is under India's possession and about 3,000 acres of Indian land is under Bangladesh possession in different points of the border. Both sides agree that APL is a problem, but disagree on the modus operandi of settlement. Decisions on these issues are quite unlikely until a new government takes office in New Delhi.

India is currently constructing a 3,400 km long barbed wire fence 150 yards into the Indian side of the border. The project is likely to be completed this year. India sees the fencing as a means to stop smuggling, whereas Bangladesh sees it as an affront to its national pride. Bangladesh views the fencing along the border, while not illegal, as an unfriendly act creating distances between the two peoples rather than bringing them closer.

Unprovoked firing and killing of unarmed civilians by the BSF is a matter of grave concern for all Bangladeshis. Although sometimes the victims happen to be crossing the border illegally, more often they are there working on their land or just going about their normal business. Despite repeated assurance from high-ups in India, border killing goes on, although the numbers of people killed have come down significantly in recent years. Due to differences in prices and various impediments to formal trade between Bangladesh and India, there has been a thriving informal sector since the partition. With

the opening up of trade and globalisation of economy, the ratio of smuggling to formal trade has been coming down. Yet, items such as narcotics, small arms and explosives find their way into Bangladesh from India. Smuggling encourages criminal nexus to develop on either side of the border. This includes law enforcement agencies, customs and excise officials. The item that causes most border killings is cattle smuggling. Because India cannot export live cattle to Bangladesh and there is a big market for beef here, a criminal chain has developed across the border.

Human trafficking is directly dependent on the economic situation. Bangladesh GDP has been growing at above 6% annually for nearly two decades. It is now in a better position than some of the bordering states of India. If this trend continues, human trafficking will come to a stop. However, crossing of the border by criminals to avoid justice is a matter of worry for both the countries.

Another issue is the impact of climate change on poor people living close to the Sundarbans. With the rising level of salinity in the soil, created due to the withdrawal of water from the Ganges at Farakka, these people, called “climate refugees,” have to leave their agricultural land and head to the nearest metropolis; which is often Kolkata, rather than Dhaka.

Bangladesh and India have no option but to live as good neighbours. In fact, our history and geography are so intertwined that a cooperative arrangement is necessary for peace and prosperity of the whole region. There must be an understanding at the highest political level that, irrespective of any regime change in either country, the cooperative security arrangement will function to provide physical and human security to the people of the two states.

For greater physical security, we need a peaceful border. Outstanding border issues such as exchange of enclaves and settlement of APL must be resolved in the spirit of the 1974 boundary agreement and the joint declaration of the two PMs in 2010 and 2011.

The demarcation of 6.5 km border should be completed. Strong political pressure will probably get the bureaucrats moving. Issuing of special pass for the border people on either side may be considered so as to discourage unauthorised crossing of the border. Both sides need to invest in border areas to generate economic activities. Setting up of “Border Haats” has been a step in right direction. The decision to set up joint patrol of border by the BSF and BGB is also a positive step that will reduce unnecessary border clash. Both countries need to think how to legalise the cattle trade, which is a source of many criminal activities around the border.

For countering Islamic militants and internal insurgents, both countries need to set up a joint intelligence cell and also need to coordinate counter-terrorist operations. We had a number of exercises in recent years between the two military forces. This needs to continue with greater participation of air and naval forces. We need to work jointly so that the terrorists and anti-state activists do not use the space of one country to launch operations into another. Our border control mechanism should be such that while we deter miscreants from crossing the border, the ordinary people can travel easily from one country to another. A peaceful Indo-Bangladesh border will be a harbinger of prosperity for both the countries.

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