

**BANGLADESH-PAKISTAN RELATIONS: FROM CONFLICT TO  
COOPERATION\*  
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Abstract

**INTRODUCTION**

One thousand miles separate Pakistan and Bangladesh. Despite the distance they numerous common interests and objectives owing to a shared history (for around quarter of a century) as well as similarities in religious, economic, commercial, political and social features. After the secession of East Pakistan on December 16, 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state, relations between Dhaka and Islamabad have passed through various phases of conflict and cooperation. From August 14, 1947 till December 16, 1971, political, economic and cultural dynamics of East and West Pakistan relations indicated the uniqueness of the state of Pakistan. Despite geographical, cultural and other areas of contradictions, the two wings of Pakistan remained united. The emergence of Bangladesh as a result of the unpleasant events of 1971 and a long history of unjust and bitter relations between the two wings set the stage for the future interaction between Pakistan and the new state of Bangladesh. Despite the bitterness of the past, both Dhaka and Islamabad agreed to unleash the process of normalization of their relations in the aftermath of their mutual recognition granted on February 22, 1974.

In the world of real politics there are no permanent adversaries or friends, only permanent interests. From December 16, 1971 till February 22, 1974, an element of acute hostility had overshadowed Dhaka-Islamabad relations. Yet, even after the granting of mutual recognition, relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh remained cool and under the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. While both realities seemed adequate to prevent any future reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh, pragmatism from both sides demanded ushering a new era of relations while learning lessons from past happenings. It was the feeling of moving from the bitterness of the past and to establish a new era of friendship, which unleashed the process of normalization in Pakistan-Bangladesh (hereafter referred to as Pak-BD) relations. Pakistan President Pervez

Musharraf in his visit to Bangladesh on July 29-31, 2002 also emphasized ushering a new era of friendship between the two countries and pointed out that the time of BD-Pak reconciliation has arrived.

Ironically, even after 31 years of the emergence of Bangladesh, relations between Dhaka and Islamabad are not conflict free. There still exist “historical” and “psychological” hangovers discouraging close friendly relations between the two countries. Neither meaningful trade ties (amidst the signing of MOU on forming the BD-Pak Business Council on the occasion of President Musharraf’s visit to Bangladesh) nor meaningful people to people interaction seems to take an upward trend in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. In this scenario, pessimistic-optimistic nature of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations provides an opportunity for rethinking the entire gamut of these relations and seek an alternative but a viable approach to institutionalize the process of cooperation.

This paper is presented on the occasion of the annual conference of Asia fellows held under Asia Scholarship Foundation, Bangkok and its purpose is to disseminate the substance of my research that I did in Bangladesh from January 7 to October 19, 2002. The paper aims to examine the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations and bring into picture possibilities of better relations between the two countries in economic, political and cultural areas.

The following questions will be examined and addressed in this paper.

1. What are the pending issues in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations and how can these be resolved?
2. Why could people-to-people interaction not be strengthened and how the civil societies of the two countries could come forward in this regard?
3. How can the areas of convergence neutralize the areas of divergence in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations?
4. What lessons could be learned from the negative factors in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations and how could conflict-free relations between the two countries be established?

## **OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS**

The transition of Pak-BD relations from animosity to gradual normalization is still an on-going process. Since January 1976, when diplomatic missions of the two countries assumed their responsibilities, there have been several ups and downs in Pak-BD relations. Some of these were the outcome of past bitterness and unpleasantness, particularly as a sequel to the events of 1971, while others were primarily the result of bureaucratic obstacles in implementing decisions for greater cooperation made from time to time by different governments of the two countries. Still, the desire among the people of Pakistan and Bangladesh to begin a fresh journey of friendship and cooperation remained alive. As noted by a former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh:

Bangladesh and Pakistan were bound by many economic ties rooted in a shared history and culture, which was overshadowed but not obliterated by the tragic happenings of 1971. The Bangladesh's role in the creation of Pakistan was also a historical fact. The original "Lahore Pakistan Resolution" was moved by Mr. Abdul Kasem Fazlul Haq, a Bengali. Muslim leaders, 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.<sup>1</sup>

However, there remain many barriers that need to be overcome by the two countries. One is that the West Pakistani elite who control most of the instruments of power never tried to understand the undercurrents of dissatisfaction among the Bengali population of the then East Pakistan and undermined the importance of democracy which could have given a genuine sense of participation to them. Another is that the process of national integration which should have been a top priority of governments in power since August 14, 1947. Unfortunately, it could not be properly unleashed because of geographical and cultural contradictions between the two wings of Pakistan. Likewise,

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Shamsul Haq, *Bangladesh In International Politics The Dilemmas of the Weak States* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993), p. 151.

had the leadership of Pakistan after independence followed democratic path and formulated policies on the basis of social justice and political wisdom, the grievances of the people of East Pakistan would not have resulted into the violent events of 1971. On this account, if a relationship is based on exploitation and undermining the legitimate rights of people, the outcome cannot be conducive and pleasant. There are very few examples in modern history where people of a particular region who participated in movement for a separate homeland with other groups from diverse regions gave second thoughts to their relationship with that state and struggled to seek independence. Only the disintegration of Pakistan could be cited as such an example.

Even after more than three decades of the emergence of Bangladesh, one can see bitterness and animosity between the two countries. It is because of past hangovers that Pakistan and Bangladesh have not been able to forge meaningful economic, political and cultural ties. Time is a great healer and one can hope that the future generations of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis will not carry the historical baggage and will formulate a healthy and respectable relationship. Sadly, at the present, the legacy of the past is still a factor in BD-Pak relations. A security and defense analyst of Bangladesh has described the shadows of past as an impediment to better Pak-BD relations in the following words:

A historical bitterness still pervades the minds of the people in both countries. For Bangladesh the bitterness is that of politico-economic exploitation and domination 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. It gets fueled on various occasions like 21<sup>st</sup> February Martyrs Day, Independence Day, the Martyr Intellectual Day and the Victory 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 colored with the harrowing tales of atrocities carried out by the Pakistanis. Every year the fateful

25<sup>th</sup> March of 1971 is recalled 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.<sup>2</sup>

Given that the symbols of liberation movement of Bangladesh have been institutionalized, reminding people again and again of the bitter past, particularly the events of 1971, what can be done to create goodwill and harmony between the people of Bangladesh and Pakistan? There can be no short cut in dealing with historical hangovers but there are four important steps that can certainly help in improving the relations between the two countries are concerned.

First, there is a need to go beyond emotions and rhetoric. The two governments need to make sure that vested interest groups from both sides are not allowed to exploit bitter events of 1971 to advance their selfish agenda. However, the “humanitarian aspect” of 1971 tragedy should not be sidelined or forgotten. Since millions of innocent people had suffered because of military operation and subsequent violent events, the government of Pakistan needs to publicly express remorse for the atrocities committed by its military forces against civilians in the course of the tragic events. Probably such a gesture by Islamabad will help unleash the healing process and create a better understanding. Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has taken a big step by courageously regretting the bitterness of the past and has appealed to the people of Bangladesh to forget such unpleasant events and move on to a better future. The initiative taken by the civil society groups of Pakistan to apologize to the people of Bangladesh for military action conducted during March-December 1971 is an important development because such a step will pave the way for a categorical official condemnation of military atrocities committed in the then East Pakistan. The future leaders of Bangladesh and Pakistan, particularly those representing the civil societies of the two countries, can sustain the process of reconciliation by allowing more people-to- people interaction and promoting viable relations at various levels.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Abdul Hafiz, “Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Still Developing?” *BISS Journal*, Vol. 6. No. 3, 1985, pp. 366-67.

Second, the government of Pakistan needs to encourage non-governmental organizations to interact with their Bangladeshi counterparts in different areas, particularly in culture, human development, education and media so a better image of Pakistan is created. The bitter memories of 1971, which still impede meaningful ties between Dhaka and Islamabad, should gradually be replaced with goodwill and harmony. There are so many areas where tremendous potential exist for improving ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan. These include substantial involvement of NGOs to build bridges between the two brotherly Muslim countries. Secondly, the government of Bangladesh, with the support of non-governmental organizations should discourage activities that create ill will and hostility against Pakistan. As long as vested interest groups carry out their malicious campaign against Pakistan on account of historical facts, it will be very difficult to create an environment of goodwill and cooperation between the people of the two countries. Finally, there is a need on the part of Bangladeshi intelligentsia to go beyond emotions and discourage attempts to malign Pakistan on account of 1971 events.

## **AREAS OF ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL COOPERATION**

Amidst the feelings overshadowed by the events of 1971, it has been an uphill task for Bangladesh and Pakistan to overcome the unpleasantness of the past and move towards a better future. But the question is how one should proceed to achieve that objective? As rightly said by Mr. M. Abdul Hafiz, “the growth of relations between former adversaries is nothing new and often forms a part of *real politik*. There are instances of past enemies entering into excellent bilateral understanding and times forging multilateral cooperation found in today’s Europe.”<sup>3</sup> Until the fall of Mujib’s regime in 1975, a very limited cooperative relationship existed between Bangladesh and Pakistan because of numerous socio-economic and political problems. After Mr. Bhutto’s visit to Dhaka in June 1974, Bangladesh kept on reminding Pakistan about the need to settle the issues of division of assets and repatriation of remaining stranded Pakistanis. But no progress was made as Islamabad insisted that given the complicated nature of these issues, it cannot concede to the demands of Bangladesh right away.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,

Wide prospects of cooperation between Dhaka and Islamabad have existed since the beginning, particularly in areas of trade and commerce, education, culture and science and technology. While political factor cannot be underestimated in examining prospects of meaningful cooperation between Bangladesh and Pakistan, there exists willingness or desire among the people of the two countries to establish mutually beneficial relations. As a gesture, Pakistan presented a Boeing 707 to Bangladesh and 28 railway coaches, which were imported earlier for East Pakistan railways, and were handed over to Bangladesh. Moreover, Bangladesh gifted tea to Pakistan and the latter donated clothes to the flood victims of Bangladesh. Bangladesh's former High Commissioner to Pakistan Mr. C. M. Shafi Sami, in his address to the audience at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, Karachi vividly explained the dynamics of Pak-BD relations as follows:

Bangladesh and Pakistan share manifold affinities characterized by the age-old and traditional bonds of religion and history. These ties, which reflect the earnest desire of the peoples of two fraternal countries, have grown in intensity and depth over the years. The two countries have an identity of perception and have extended valuable support to each other in various international forums. Both countries have a complete convergence of views on many regional and international issues.<sup>4</sup>

On the question of trade prospects between the two countries, he says that "there exists a vast opportunity for increasing our exports to Pakistan, especially raw jute, jute goods and tea. Pakistan may buy all her raw jute requirements from Bangladesh to feed its 17 existing jute mills. There is potential for increasing import of jute goods into Pakistan. Pakistan has developed the capability of manufacturing sugar plants and machinery and is willing to offer suitable terms of financing. There is a state credit of U.S \$ 50 million on soft terms as well as a U.S \$ 50 million suppliers credit for purchase of container vessels, clinker factories and a sugar plant."<sup>5</sup> Huge prospects of cooperation between Bangladesh and Pakistan as envisaged by Mr. Shafi Sami exist but the question is why no upward trend has been seen not only in trade ties, but also in other areas of cooperation? Is it

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<sup>4</sup> C. M. Shafi Sami, "Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations in the changing international environment" *Pakistan Horizon* (Karachi) Vol. 44, No. 4, October 1991, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

because of geographical distance or the legacy of 1971, which tend to impede progress in relations between the two countries? Or the domestic and external dynamics of the two countries play an important role in preventing sound progress in BD-Pak relations?

Currently, Pakistan-Bangladesh trade is around 130 U.S million dollars a year. In 2000-2001 fiscal year, Bangladesh imported goods from Pakistan amounting to 90.53 million dollars against exports of 30.2 million dollars. Therefore, the trade gap between the two countries stands at 63.27 million dollars. In 1996, trade imbalance between Pakistan and Bangladesh was 28.49 million dollars.<sup>6</sup> A high profile trade delegation from Pakistan visited Bangladesh in January 2002. Led by Federal Commerce, Industries and Production Minister Abdul Razzaq Daud, the delegation held talks in Dhaka and Chittagong to broaden the areas of trade and commerce between the two countries. Bangladesh President Badruddoza Chowdhry in his meeting with the visiting Commerce Minister of Pakistan said that the trade gap between Bangladesh and Pakistan should be minimized for the benefit of the two countries. He said that Bangladesh should export pharmaceutical products, leather and leather goods, ceramics and melamine products to Pakistan in addition to tea and jute. He stressed the need for the exchange of visits of doctors, teachers, businessmen and cultural delegations between the two countries apart from government delegations so that such exchange of visits can help the people of the two countries to know each other better.<sup>7</sup> During her meeting with the visiting Commerce Minister from Pakistan, Prime Minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia invited Pak businessmen to invest and open joint ventures in Bangladesh taking the advantage of attractive incentives being offered by her government. She said that there exists ample scope for investment in the polyester, bamboo and cane industries as well as light engineering sector of Bangladesh where the Pakistani investors can take the advantage.<sup>8</sup> The Pakistan Commerce Minister while exchanging views with business people during his visit to Dhaka gave a positive response to Dhaka's request for duty free access for 21 category items, particularly jute and tea. However, he said he was not sure how far the

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<sup>6</sup> See "Pindi agrees to duty-free access of Dhaka's jute goods," *The Bangladesh Observer*, January 28, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> "Trade gap should be minimized," *The Bangladesh Observer*, January 29, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> "PM invites businessmen to invest in Bangladesh," *The Bangladesh Observer*, *ibid.*,

Finance Ministry would agree to give ‘zero tariff’ but gave the assurance of studying the request for duty free access of other items proposed by Bangladesh. He accepted the proposals for regular shipping services and joint venture banks to smoothen joint trade.<sup>9</sup> The demand from Bangladesh that Pakistan should give duty free access to tea, jute and jute products was accepted when Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf paid a three-day visit to Dhaka.

Addressing the business community in Chamber Bhaban at Agrabad, Chittagong, Pakistani Commerce Minister said that “his country wants to establish a win-win economic relations with Bangladesh based on highest forms of professionalism.” He urged the Bangladesh entrepreneurs to favor strategic alliance with garment sector business in Pakistan to combat future challenges to effect RMG sector in South Asia in January 2005. He said that, “we assure the Bangladeshi business community that if they step one feet asking cooperation we would be marching two feet. We have a strong sense of desire to built Bangladesh-Pakistan ties.”<sup>10</sup> There is a need to follow-up the understanding reached between Dhaka and Islamabad during the visit of Pak Commerce Minister. Bureaucratic and various technical matters should not be allowed to delay the implementation of ideas agreed upon during that visit. The following table will help give a better understanding about the dynamics of trade relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan over the last five years and major gaps in this regard. Most importantly, the need to pursue the objectives outlined in the MOU on establishing a BD-Pak Business Council cannot be ignored because trade relations between the two countries can take an upward position if there is a follow-up to what was agreed in the MOU.

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<sup>9</sup> “Pak Minister favors duty-free access of tea, jute initially,” *The Bangladesh Observer*, January 30, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> “Pindi wants better economic ties with Dhaka, says Dawood” *The Bangladesh Observer*, January 31, 2002.

**Table-1**

**PAKISTAN'S TRADE RELATIONS WITH BANGLADESH**

Million \$US

<b>YEARS</b>	<b>IMPORTS</b>	<b>EXPORTS</b>	<b>BALANCE</b>
1996-97	38.40	87.50	+49.10
1997-98	38.30	98.60	+ 60.30
1998-99	32.24	119.56	+ 87.32
1999-2000	29.49	120.45	+90.96
2000-01	33.27	133.84	+ 100.57

Source: *Foreign Trade Pattern of Pakistan* (Karachi: Economic and Research Development Cell, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2001), p. 56

**CULTURAL AND OTHER AREAS OF COOPERATION**

Theoretically, there exists tremendous potential for strengthening Pak-BD relations in the fields of culture, education, science and technology etc. From time to time, the two countries have also taken steps to broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation but the progress in this regard has been very slow. There are several reasons why a productive and vibrant Pak-BD ties in non-trade and commercial areas could not take off. First, there are administrative and bureaucratic impediments in pursuing and seeking the implementation of cultural agreement in its complete form. Second, there are political misunderstandings and unsettled issues which adversely affect progress in promoting bilateral ties between the two countries. From time to time, some unpleasant issues related to the events of 1971 hamper efforts for a close cultural interaction. Third, there is lack of participation of people from the two countries in the process of reconciliation and cooperation. Dhaka and Islamabad had signed several agreements but in most cases, the non-involvement of civil society and intelligentsia of Bangladesh and Pakistan made it difficult to bridge the gap and usher a new era of friendship and cooperation.

Notwithstanding obvious impediments in Pak-BD relations, the two countries tried to improve people to people contacts. On October 16, 1979, Bangladesh and Pakistan signed a cultural agreement providing for exchange of teachers and scholars of the Universities and other educational institutions of Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as scientific and industrial training for their students on reciprocal basis. Under the agreement the two governments agreed to promote cultural and intellectual exchange by organizing youth programs, art exhibition, music concerts and visits by folklore troupes. They also decided to exchange radio and TV programmes and films and promote free flow of books and regulations.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, not much was done to implement the contents of the cultural agreements. Relations between the two countries, particularly at the cultural and educational levels would have certainly improved had Dhaka and Islamabad seriously tried to conform to the agreement which was signed in 1979 between the two countries.

Another important attempt to promote cultural relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan was made on the occasion of Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's visit to Dhaka. In that visit, the two countries, signed a new cultural exchange program for 1988-1991 under the cultural and scientific agreement of 1979.<sup>12</sup> Nawaz Shariff visited Dhaka in January 1998 to participate in India-Bangladesh-Pakistan Business Summit. A cultural agreement on promotion of cultural ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan was signed by the Bangladesh Cultural Affairs Secretary and Pakistan's Foreign Secretary on behalf of their respective countries.<sup>13</sup>

On the occasion of Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Pakistan in August 1992, two agreements were signed on scientific and technological cooperation and exchange of plots for setting up High Commissions in each other's countries.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the agreement on the exchange of plots for setting up High Commissioners has not been implemented. A valuable opportunity to lay the foundation

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<sup>11</sup> See Syed Serajul Islam, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> "Call for international cooperation" *Dawn*, October 4, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> "Dhaka, Islamabad to expand trade ties," *Daily Star*, January 17, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, August 11, 1992.

stone of a new building of Pakistan High Commission on the occasion of President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Dhaka was lost because of bureaucratic delay.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also visited Bangladesh in her second term in October 1993 on the occasion of Biennial Conference of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. In her meeting with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Benazir Bhutto expressed her willingness to take technical expertise from Bangladesh to make family planning program successful in Pakistan where the rate of population growth is very high. She praised Bangladesh's progress in family planning and welfare programs.<sup>15</sup> Such developments in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations could have been of far reaching implications had the policy-makers of the two sides tried to seriously implement these agreements.

The following summarizes major agreements signed between Pakistan and Bangladesh since January 1976.

1. Air link agreement signed in June 1976, which provided reciprocal landing and ticket-selling rights
2. Trade agreement signed in April 1976.
3. In 1976 the two countries signed an agreement to establish and to improve direct telecommunication links via satellites.
4. In August 1976, the shipping authorities of Pakistan and Bangladesh fixed the freight rates of 98 commodities and finalized the sailing schedule of ships.
5. In 1978, a shipping agreement was signed which provided that the two countries would accord most favored nation treatment to each other's vessels and their crew.
6. Another trade agreement was signed between Dhaka and Islamabad in July 1978 according to which Pakistan agreed to buy tea, jute and jute products and Bangladesh agreed to buy cotton, cotton clothes etc.
7. Joint economic commission was formed in July 1979.
8. Cultural cooperation agreement was signed in October 1979.
9. Convention relating to avoidance of double taxation was signed in October 1979.

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<sup>15</sup> "Pindi eager to take FP expertise from Dhaka," *The Bangladesh Observer*, October 23, 1993.

10. Visa agreement was signed in August 1983.
11. A new cultural exchange program for 1988-1991 under the cultural and scientific agreement of October 1979 was signed during Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's visit to Dhaka in October 1989.
12. Agreements on scientific and technological cooperation and exchange of plots for setting up High Commission in each other countries were signed on the occasion of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Islamabad in August 1992.
13. In May 1998, Bangladesh and Pakistan signed an agreement to take measures to arrest the declining trend of two-way trade and work for its balanced growth.
14. Signing of MOU on setting up BD-Pak Business Council on the occasion of President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Dhaka in July 2002.
15. Protocol on enhancing cultural cooperation was signed in July 2002.
16. Protocol on regular consultation between the foreign ministries of Bangladesh and Pakistan on important regional and bilateral issues was signed in July 2002.

The list seems impressive but unfortunately in most cases the level of bilateral interaction remained low. It looks like no proper follow-up was pursued by Dhaka and Islamabad to make sure that official agreements signed would be properly implemented. The Joint Economic Commission which was signed earlier remained inactive and had to be activated as a result of talks held between Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and the Bangladesh Government officials. Similarly, the cultural agreement, which was signed in 1979 and renewed in 1989, also failed to bring meaningful cultural interaction between the two countries. Travel and tourism, which should have been promoted for improving Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, also remained a low priority for the two governments. Therefore, the lesson which one learns after looking at the list of BD-Pak agreements, protocols and MOU's is that there is a big gap existing particularly at the non-governmental level. Along with official interaction it is essential that meaningful people to people interaction is encouraged --- joint ventures, joint investment, educational and cultural exchanges at the non-official level.

## **AREAS OF CONFLICT**

Some of the areas of political conflict in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations are as follows:-

1. The question of apology concerning the tragic events of 1971.
2. Repatriation of stranded Pakistanis.
3. Division of assets and liabilities.

To a large extent because of these political problems, relations between the two countries have not been able to reach the level of complete normalization. While one cannot disagree with the merit of these issues, there exists in Pakistan a perception that the relevance of these issues has become marginal and that to a large extent Dhaka's approach to these issues has been emotional and rhetorical rather than pragmatic. The question of official apology from Pakistan, as demanded by some segments of Bangladeshi society has somewhat been diluted because of the expression of regrets made by the Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf when he visited that country on July 29-31, 2002. But just the same, the issue on apology is far from over. It has been argued by certain circles in Bangladesh that if Japan could offer an official apology to the people of Korea for atrocities it has committed and if Germany can apologize for the Nazi acts during the second world war, why cannot Pakistan follow the examples of Japan and Korea?

On the other hand, issue of repatriation of stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh has assumed a low profile. As a legacy of 1971 crisis, the issue of stranded Pakistanis remained unresolved even after 31 years and it has lost its momentum because of three main reasons. First, according to the tripartite agreement signed by India, Bangladesh and Pakistan in April 1974, Pakistan agreed to take those stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh with divided families, West Pakistan domicile, federal government employees and hardship cases. Pakistan took around 200,000 stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh but then refused to take more. A Pakistan Government spokesman told newsmen in Islamabad on August 18, 1979 that, "the repatriation of non-Bengalese of agreed categories from Bangladesh to Pakistan will be completed by the end of this year (1979) or in early next year (1980). He further said that "non-Bengalese not belonging to the agreed categories and the agreed number would not be repatriated to Pakistan. They will have to live in

Bangladesh.”<sup>16</sup> Second, because of ethnic and political factors in Pakistan’s southern province of Sindh where most of the stranded Pakistanis were re-settled in mid-1970s, Islamabad has been unwilling to take more. Third, because of the lack of political will expressed by various Pakistani regimes, the issue of stranded Pakistanis, which is humanitarian in nature was not seriously taken. As a result, majority of such people who have been living in camps in a miserable condition have reconciled with the reality that they cannot go to Pakistan and hence will have to consider Bangladesh as their home. Those who were born in these camps after 1971 are reluctant to go to Pakistan because in the last 31 years they have assimilated in Bangladeshi society and have only remote idea about Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

From time to time, the government of Bangladesh has raised the issue of stranded Pakistanis with Islamabad but without any positive outcome. The last indication in terms of repatriation of stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh was seen in 1992. A joint press statement issued simultaneously from Islamabad and Dhaka at the end of a three-day state visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to Pakistan said that the, “repatriation of the first batch of 3,000 families of stranded Pakistanis would commence by year end.” Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told his Bangladeshi counterpart that the stranded Pakistanis living in various camps in Bangladesh would be rehabilitated in specially constructed housing settlements in various areas of the Punjab province.<sup>18</sup> Apart from the settlement of couple of hundred stranded Pakistanis in the Punjab during late 1992, the process was stopped because of the dismissal of Sharif’s government in April 1993.

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<sup>16</sup> The Pakistan Government spokesman further said that about 22,000 non-Bengalese were to be repatriated to Pakistan in the second phase. Of them, 4,785 have arrived in Pakistan in three shiploads. He said responsible people from Bangladesh had assured that non-Bengalese of non-agreed categories would be assimilated in Bangladesh. Of the 534,000 non-Bengalese who applied for repatriation to the International Committee of Red Cross, 118,866 were cleared for repatriation under the auspices of UNHCR in the first phase, 107,836 non-Bengalese were officially repatriated from September 1973 to June 1974. They included 25,098 hardship cases. See news item, “Repatriation to end early year,” *Dawn* (Karachi), August 19, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Perception based on author’s visit to the Geneva camp of stranded Pakistanis in Mohammadpur Dhaka on August 14, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> “Repatriation to start by December,” *The Bangladesh Observer*, August 12, 1992.

On July 30, 2002 a delegation of stranded Pakistanis met Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in Dhaka and appealed to him to end their plight by starting the process of repatriation at the earliest. While expressing sympathy to the plight of stranded Pakistanis, the President ruled out an early settlement of that issue arguing that in view of the presence of millions of Afghan refugees it will be difficult for his country to accommodate stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh at this stage.

Realistically speaking, the only viable solution to the unfortunate issue of stranded Pakistanis is to provide a financial package by the Government of Pakistan for the relief and rehabilitation of such people in Bangladesh. Apart from raising funds from various sources, both the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh can solve this issue in such a manner that those who are living in camps and who do not want to go to Pakistan through that package are settled while taking into account their housing and other needs. The funds lying with the *Rabita-i-Alami-Islami* for the purpose of repatriation of stranded Pakistanis should also be used. Others who want to go to Pakistan, their cases should be considered on humanitarian grounds and with the help of the Muslim countries they should be repatriated to Pakistan soon. In any case, majority of the stranded people understand the fact that they cannot go to Pakistan and will be pragmatic enough to accept the nationality of Bangladesh. Funds mobilized for these people need to be disbursed by a credible NGO in Bangladesh so that the amount is not misused. Through that arrangement, a sad chapter of 1971 and a political issue in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations could be justly and amicably resolved.

Concerning the issue of division of assets and liabilities, it remained a major political irritant between Dhaka and Islamabad since the emergence of Bangladesh. For Dhaka, it was imperative that Islamabad settles that issue keeping in view the contribution of erstwhile East Pakistan to the national exchequer of United Pakistan. But, Islamabad, while not rejecting the Bangladeshi claim, suggested negotiations so as to remove various technical and complex matters.

### **Chart One: Conflicts in Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Solution</b>
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Trade imbalance	Negotiations	Possible
Question of apology	Cautious by Pakistan	Possible
Repatriation of stranded Pakistanis	Unfavorable by Pakistan	Remote
Division of assets and liabilities	Unfavorable by Pakistan	Remote
Hostile propaganda/Enemy images	Political issue in Bangladesh and Pakistan	Possible

**Chart Two: Cooperation in Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Trade and Commerce	Problem of implementation of agreements signed	Partially satisfactory
Culture, education	Problem of implementation of agreements signed	Partially satisfactory
Travel, tourism	Not promoted	Not satisfactory
Science and information technology	Yet to be properly explored	Wide prospects
Joint ventures/investments	Political and historical obstacles	Wide prospects

**STRATEGIES FOR MEANINGFUL TIES**

There is no short cut to transform BD-Pak relations from relative indifference to mutual warmth. The process of reconciliation, as envisaged by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in their speeches of July 30 requires extra effort not only by the two governments but also by various segments of civil societies of the two countries. Since different sets of factors influence the policies of the two sides, it will take some time to ensure the following of a more cooperative path in Dhaka-Islamabad relations. The two countries had made a good start by establishing full diplomatic missions in each other's capital in January 1976 and had moved fast in strengthening bilateral ties by signing a number of agreements in trade, commerce and cultural cooperation. But such a progress remained at a modest pace until end of 1980s

and lost its momentum in 1990s. As a result, the prevailing BD-Pak ties despite having tremendous potential for meaningful cooperation is hampered by lack proper initiative and political will.

As shown earlier, Bangladesh and Pakistan despite differences are proximate to each other in several ways. Both countries share a common past, common religion and common understanding of various regional and international issues. Tremendous potentials in the areas of trade and commerce exist and they require practical policies to be implemented. The two countries have supported each other in various international forums. Close defense cooperation also exists as evident from the visit of military officials from time to time. Therefore, it will be not wrong to argue that despite their unresolved conflicts, Bangladesh and Pakistan are natural allies. Both countries need each other.

As far as the progress on bilateral areas of cooperation during President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Dhaka is concerned, it proved to be substantial because of two reasons. First, institutional measures to enhance BD-Pak cooperation were taken and second, Pakistan granted duty free access to Bangladeshi jute and tea to its markets. Both Pakistan President and Bangladeshi Prime Minister considered the official talks as very successful. While giving her reaction to newsmen about talks, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia said that she was fully convinced that the future of Pakistan and Bangladesh relations is extremely bright.<sup>19</sup> After BD-Pak official talks held on July 30, two protocols were signed. The first protocol called as "Cultural Exchange Program" between Bangladesh and Pakistan will have a duration from 2003-2007. The protocol "Bilateral Consultations" called for periodic consultation between the Foreign Affairs Ministries of the two countries. Pakistan also unilaterally granted duty free access to Bangladeshi products, particularly on items like jute and tea to her markets.<sup>20</sup>

In the area of non-governmental cooperation, the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) and Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish a Bangladesh-Pakistan Joint Business Council (JBC) to promote bilateral trade

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<sup>19</sup> "Khaleda terms talks with Musharraf very successful" *The Bangladesh Observer*, July 31, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> "Pakistan offers duty-free access of jute, tea," *The Bangladesh Observer*, *Ibid*.

and investment through increased interaction between business people of the two countries. It will provide a regular and recognized platform for discussion on promotion of trade, investment, technology transfer, services and other industrial sectors between businessmen and industrialists of the two countries. The Joint Business Council agreement also marks the renewal of the agreement on Economic and Commercial Cooperation, which was signed on July 22, 1992 in Dhaka between FPCCI and FBCCI. According to the details of the MOU, the BD-Pak JBC meetings will be organized in Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively for liaison and consultation between the two business circles. The two-nation business body will also exchange recommendations, receive businessmen and technical experts and conduct other activities useful in order to achieve the JBC purpose.<sup>21</sup> It was also decided in BD-Pak official talks to reactivate the moribund joint economic commission and ensure its regular meetings to broaden areas of cooperation.

Some of the strategies which could be formulated and adopted in giving depth and a positive direction to Bangladesh-Pakistan relations are as follows:-

### **SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES**

1. Building of trust and confidence by discouraging negative propaganda against each other, particularly in the media. From time to time, one can hear provocative statements, speeches and programs covered in some sections of print and electronic media maligning each other. Such type of a situation is detrimental to the objective of promoting cooperation between the two countries and can only accentuate biases and hostility against each other, particularly among the generation born after 1971. The assertion made by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in his banquet speech delivered on July 30 in Dhaka in his honor that in his view the time of Bangladesh-Pakistan reconciliation has arrived and the truth expressed by the Bangladeshi Prime Minister on the same occasion that a level of maturity has arrived in BD-Pak relations cannot be undermined. What is needed is to extend the understanding for cooperation from official to the non-

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<sup>21</sup> "Dhaka-Pindi Joint Business Council formed," The Bangladesh Observer, *Ibid*.

- governmental level so that suspicion and mistrust which since 1971 tend to negatively influence BD-Pakistan relations are removed.
2. The trade volume of the two countries is very low and should be enhanced by promoting trade both at the official and non-official level. Both sides need to provide maximum facilities in order to seek win-win situation in trade and commerce both at public and private sector. The formation of BD-Pak Business Council and the exemption of duty given by Pakistan to Bangladeshi tea, jute and jute products can positively shape trade relations between the two countries. Moreover, there is also a need to encourage bilateral investments and the launching of joint ventures in various commercial fields.
  3. There is an urgent need to encourage people to people contacts by launching exchange programs in education, culture, media, business, science and technology and other areas. For this purpose, air and sea links between the two countries need to be made more effective so that more people from the two countries can visit resulting in the promotion of tourism and in developing better understanding of each other.
  4. Visa policy of the two countries should be people friendly. There is a need on the part of Pakistan Government to establish consulates in Chittagong and Sylhet and for the Bangladesh Government to open consulates in Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta. The issuance of Visas should be without any hassle to the applicants. The tourist corporation of the two countries can launch joint ventures by special package tours at an affordable prices for students, artists, musicians, media people and businessmen.
  5. The two governments should encourage NGOs to carry out joint projects in important areas like environment, rural development, gender emancipation etc.

### **LONG-TERM STRATEGIES**

1. In order to create goodwill among the people of Pakistan, it is imperative on the part of Government of Pakistan to categorically condemn and regret the atrocities, which were committed by its forces during 1971. This can be done by the future parliament of Pakistan. Such a step will help remove misgivings and negative

feelings among the vast majority of the people of Bangladesh who demand a formal apology from Pakistan Government for the unfortunate acts of 1971. Similarly, the killing of both Bengalese and non-Bengalese as a result of tragic events of 1971 should be simultaneously condemned by Dhaka and Islamabad without any political compulsion. Only then mutual forgiveness can clear past hangovers and create prospects for better ties. A truth and reconciliation commission composed of renowned persons, including human right's activists of the two countries should be formed so as to launch the healing process. Similarly joint studies by Bangladeshi and Pakistani researchers to rewrite the history textbooks should be initiated so that an objective view about the events of 1971 and other related matters could be presented to the people of Bangladesh and Pakistan. According to Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Chairman, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, "there is a need for a better understanding between the people of Bangladesh and Pakistan, particularly those related to 1971. A joint criminal court, composed of judges from Pakistan and Bangladesh with a reputed international jurist as Convener, if required, could be set up to probe the killings of 1971."<sup>22</sup> The Government of Pakistan also needs to close the sad chapter of stranded Pakistanis (Biharis) by establishing a special fund for their relief and welfare. It is quite obvious to the stranded Pakistanis living in different camps in Bangladesh that because of political reasons it is not possible for the Pakistan Government to seek their repatriation. Therefore, the fund composed of the amount lying with the a trust established by the *Rabita-i-Alam-i-Islami* with the contribution made by the Government of Pakistan and other agencies can help settle the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh. Once the stranded Pakistanis owe their allegiance to Bangladesh, there will be no problem for their settlement and absorption in the society of Bangladesh. However, those stranded Pakistanis who want to go to Pakistan should be repatriated on humanitarian basis. Here it must be taken into account that a survey was undertaken in the stranded Pakistanis in 1992 by the International Committee of

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<sup>22</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, welcome address given at a seminar on, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Future Prospects," organized by the Bangladesh-Pakistan Forum, Dhaka on June 8, 2002

Red Cross (ICRC) and the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka to determine the cases of repatriation. On the basis of that survey, the issue of stranded Pakistanis could be resolved. Similarly, the issue of division of assets and liabilities which has been pending since the last 31 years should also be resolved through sincere joint efforts of Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is better for a better future of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations that existing conflicts between the two countries are minimized so that no further bottlenecks are created for unleashing the process of reconciliation.

2. In order to institutionalize Bangladesh-Pakistan relations on long-term basis, it is essential that all agreements signed in the past and in the future between the two countries should be implemented in letter and in spirit. Unfortunately, Dhaka and Islamabad had signed so many agreements since 1976 but the implementation process has not been up to the mark. This is particularly relevant in case of MOU and protocols signed between Dhaka and Islamabad on the occasion of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Bangladesh.

It is hoped that with the passage of time, the unpleasant part of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations will be replaced with positive developments. No matter how strong are the forces against Dhaka-Islamabad rapprochement, if there exists determination and good intention on the part of the policy-makers of the two countries, much can be done to open a new chapter in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations.

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