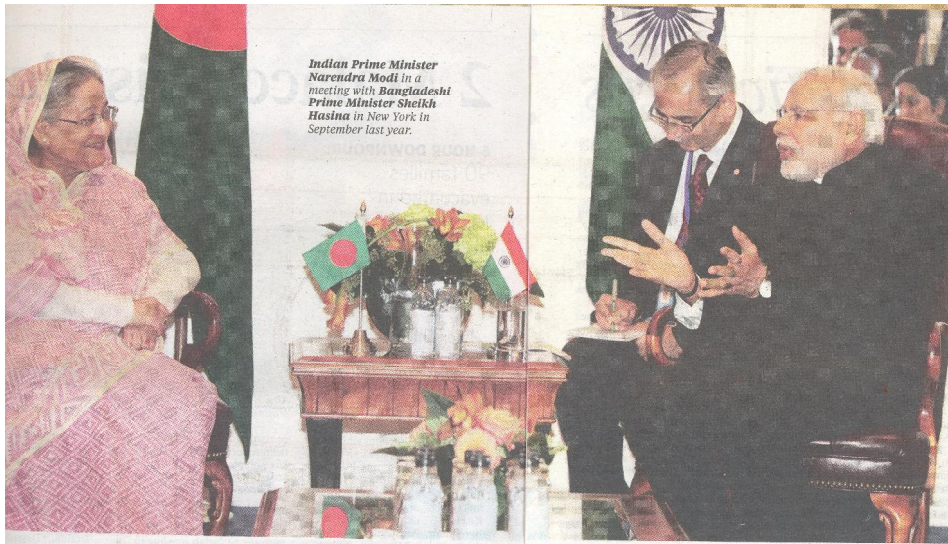


Heading towards stable borders?



Farish Noor

'LOCAL EFFORT': Asia's integration driven by Asians, not the 'international community'



THE announcement that the border zone between India and Bangladesh might be secured at last, thanks to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh over the weekend, was greeted with some degree of relief by analysts, as it signals a move towards the firming of borderlines and a deescalation of tension in yet another part of Asia.

India has always been keen to secure its border zones once and for all, and has, over the past few decades, kept a close eye on the settlement of people and movement of troops along its borders with Bangladesh, Pakistan and China. That the long-standing issues related to claims along the border may be settled at last means that India will have one less border to worry about, at a time when its relationship with China seems to be moving to a positive note, too.

Should these issues be resolved for good, it would mark a significant development, as far as inter-state relations in Asia is concerned.

China's recent commitment to Pakistan, and its promise to help develop the mainland trade route that passes through the north of the country all the way through Baluchistan, is also another important development to consider. Since the 1970s, the Baluch region has been host to a low-level insurgency that has flared up time and again, and has complicated relations with its neighbour to the west, Iran, where the other half of Baluchistan is to be found.

Here, too, the problems were complex on the ground-level: alongside the Baluch revolt were the problems of terrorism and smuggling; rendering border controls effectively meaningless, and contributing to anxiety and suspicion for both Iranians and Pakistanis.

With Chinese investment into that region, there is every likelihood that it will be policed and securitised as well, and thus, introducing an element of socio-economic stability that has been absent for decades. (Baluchistan ranks as one of the least developed parts of Pakistan, with economic life at a standstill and public literacy rates at the lowest in the country.) And it is certainly unlikely that China would pump in billions of dollars of capital into the region, only to see its investment jeopardised by insurgents or local criminal gangs.

These developments, though singular and distinct from one another, also point to an important development in Asia as a whole: for, it now appears that parts of the huge Asian continent that were once associated with revolts, insurgency, economic stagnation and criminality are finally being brought under some kind of law and governance, and these efforts – settlement of border disputes, overlapping territorial claims and low-level criminality – are all being resolved by Asian states themselves, without the intervention of the international community.

In this respect, it lends weight to the claim that Asia is putting its house in order and that all states in Asia are united in the common desire to avoid war at all costs. Notwithstanding the hype we hear and read about the so-called inherent instability of states in Asia, countries like India and China, and many others, too, are able to settle inter-state border disputes between themselves, on terms acceptable to both/all sides.

When we take a step back and look at this state of affairs from the broader, long-term macro perspective, a more impressive picture emerges: China has managed to secure its land borders with Russia, Mongolia, and may well do so with India and Pakistan as well.

India has secured its borders with Bangladesh and is undertaking efforts to improve ties with China. Both China and India have expressed their earnest desire to invest in Southeast Asia and to play a meaningful role as a partner in development in the region.

In real-life terms, this means the opening up of economic zones that have been neglected and left undeveloped for decades, and releasing all the economic potential that was not allowed to emerge due to instability in the past.

In broad aggregate terms, it means reducing the potential for conflict, but also opening up economic opportunities for once-marginalised local communities who were far from the political-economic centres of their respective states. It is here that we are likely to find the catalysts for Asia's much touted economic take-off, for stability opens the way for education, development and much more besides.

Thus, while the world's attention at present may be focused on other potential conflict zones, such as the South China Sea and the Pacific, it would be wise for us to also consider the strides that Asian

states had made in terms of reconnecting parts of Asia that were until recently disconnected and isolated.

It bears repeating again that these instances of successful peace-building and negotiation have been the result of Asian determination and agency, and not thanks to some "international community" that has come to rescue Asians from themselves.

Without taking too triumphalist an attitude, it is worth reminding ourselves that Asia's development today has largely been the result of Asian agency and determination as well, and part of that determination stems from a long-standing abhorrence to war and all forms of conflict.

The borders of the present-day states of Asia may have been the result of the experience of Western colonialism in the 18-19th century, but Asian integration today has been a local effort, driven by Asian agendas defined by Asians themselves.

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