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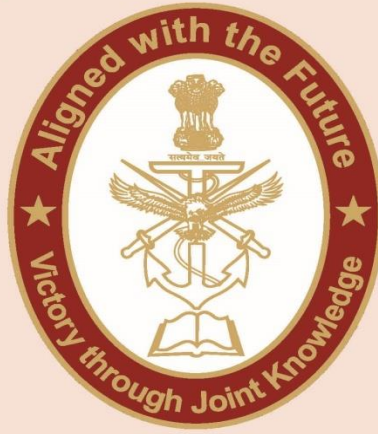
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BANGLADESH'S POTENTIAL ACQUISITION OF NEW- GENERATION MULTIROLE FIGHTER JETS FROM CHINA: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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Bangladesh's Potential Acquisition of New-Generation Multirole Fighter Jets from China: Security Implications for India



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Introduction

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh's trysts with democracy have seen tumultuous times. Bangladesh is still struggling to transform itself into a state built on enduring democratic values, however, democracy remains elusive. The successive ruling governments failed to live up to democratic ideals repeatedly plunging the country into uncertainties and political crises. Despite allegations of degrading democratic norms and institutions, Sheikh Hasina won and was sworn in as Prime Minister of Bangladesh for a fourth consecutive term in January 2024. However, it was a short-lived stint and after weeks of student-led protests, civil unrest, violence perpetrated against minorities and clashes between civilians and police, on 5th August 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina left the country and landed in India seeking political asylum. Within 72 hours, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as Chief Adviser of Bangladesh's interim government on the evening of August 8.¹ The unfolding of events in Bangladesh has direct and long-lasting implications for India. The proposed acquisition of new-generation multirole fighter jets by Bangladesh from

China is one such event which has further exacerbated the relationship between India and Bangladesh.

Changing Contours of India-Bangladesh Relations

The outcome of the ensuing political crisis in Bangladesh has insinuations beyond the South Asia region. Anti-India sentiment is being perpetuated by ISI-backed extremist factions despite Bangladesh government's assurance of maintaining strong ties with India. Some analysts have suggested that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a significant role in orchestrating the protest by inciting and funding fundamentalist groups, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI).² The historical and present linkages between India and Awami League were viewed as impediments to the influence, which both Pakistan and China wanted to exert over Bangladesh. Both these countries want to use Bangladesh as a pawn in geopolitical game against India but. Sheikh Hasina, being a trusted India's ally, circumspectly balanced relations between India and China.

Growing Bonhomie between China and Bangladesh

The growing bonhomie and strengthening of military ties among Dhaka, Islamabad and Beijing have major implications for India's strategic interests and national security. China, on its part, is trying hard to bring Bangladesh into its 'sphere of influence' to strategically checkmate India. The relations between Dhaka and Beijing gained traction after Bangladesh's recognition in 1975 by China and establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries.³ Historically, in months prior to 1971 war, Chinese government remained mute spectator on developments in erstwhile East Pakistan in order not to weaken or alienate its ally Pakistan. However, when Pakistan sought assurance of China's assistance in the event of war with India prior to commencement of hostilities, the PRC premier was noncommittal about Chinese military forces' direct intervention in support of Pakistan, although committed China's political support. In addition, China also holds the ignominious distinction of casting its first veto as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against Bangladesh's admission to the UN. Many considered this move as an expression of unwavering support to its all-weather friend Pakistan.

However, as geopolitical dynamics keep shifting with time and strategic realignments, from 1975 onwards this relationship become more deeply intertwined and embedded. This led Bangladesh to emerge as the second largest customer of Chinese defence equipment globally. The latest report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on arms exported during the period 2019–23 says that Bangladesh accounted for 11% of all total Chinese defence exports and is its second largest defence customer after Pakistan. All the three services of Bangladesh Defence Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) have a substantial inventory of Chinese equipment.⁴ In Dec 2002, Beijing and Dhaka inked a landmark bilateral ‘Defence Cooperation Agreement’ making China the first country to have defence cooperation with Bangladesh over a broad spectrum of areas including training, maintenance and in some areas of production.

The trade between the two countries also increased exponentially and in 2006 China replaced India as Bangladesh’s largest trading partner. However, during COVID pandemic, due to geographic separation and movement restrictions China lost its position to India which enjoys Geographic proximity with Bangladesh. In May 2022, China once again claimed the position of being Bangladesh’s largest trading partner.⁵

Despite sharing a 4,096-kilometre-long international border, (fifth-longest land border in the world) with India, Bangladesh’s sovereignty and territorial integrity has never been under threat emanating from India. Barring minor skirmishes, the stretch of 271 kilometres of international border between Bangladesh and Myanmar has also not seen any major military confrontation. Therefore rationale of having a formidable military with the latest hardware does not stand up under scrutiny. However, in an effort to contain India’s growing economic might and to mitigate India’s growing clout in global politics, China always has nefarious intent to use Bangladesh as pawn against India. Post Aug ‘24, the new regime has taken the Chinese bait and is moving ahead with deeper military ties with China.

Potential Acquisition of New-Generation Multirole Fighter Jets from China

Though Bangladesh’s military cooperation with China is not a recent development, its scale and significance has expanded. This shift highlights Bangladesh’s intent to be identified as a regional power, especially in light of deteriorating relations with India.

Currently, the Bangladesh Air Force operates MiG-29 and F-7 aircraft. The proposed acquisition of new-generation multirole fighter jets from China will accelerate its efforts to modernise its defence forces. Bangladesh is weighing the choice between JF-17 and J-10C.⁶

(a) The development of JF-17 Thunder is culmination of collaborative efforts between Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) and Chengdu Aircraft Corporation (CAC) of China. The first two alphabets JF used in the nomenclature of JF-17 stands for Joint-Fighter while number 17 symbolises succession over number 16 of the F-16 Falcon with PAF. In China, it is known as FC-1 Xiaolong (Fighter China 1 Fierce Dragon). During the development of the aircraft, both PAC and CAC envisaged to offer JF-17/ FC-1 to potential customers as a cost-effective alternative compared to other fighters of similar capabilities.

(b) The J-10C, christened as the 'Vigorous Dragon,' has been designed and developed by the Chengdu Aircraft Design Institute (CADI), a subsidiary of Chengdu Aircraft Corporation. An advance multirole fighter aircraft, J-10C is the latest to roll out from J-10 programme and entered combat service in April 2018. It claims excellent maneuverability and agility in combat as well as enhanced detection, tracking, and targeting capabilities in all weather conditions. In December 2021, Pakistan announced purchase of 25 J-10CEs (export version of J-10C). The first batch of 6 J-10CEs were officially inducted into the PAF's on 11 March 2022. It was reported that Pakistan, along with JF-17 'Thunder' used J-10C to target bases used by the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) 80 kilometres inside Iranian territory.

Security Concerns for India

In the backdrop of growing anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh, this development has the potential to alienate India on one hand while on the other hand offering strategic leverage to China to counter India's regional influence. To seize this opportunity, China stepped up its defence diplomacy by holding a series of meetings with the interim government members and important political parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. The defence cooperation between two countries has been

further bolstered by the changed internal situation and geopolitical dynamics. Beijing's defence cooperation with Dhaka will follow an upward trajectory in the coming days.

In addition, irrespective of whether Bangladesh decides to go for JF-17 or finalises J-10C), in both cases Bangladesh-Pakistan military ties are likely to deepen. In case of acquisition of JF-17, there will be direct military linkages as this aircraft has jointly been developed by PAC of Pakistan and CAC of China. In case acquisition of J-10C, as Pakistan has extensive experience in maintaining and operating these aircraft in South Asian skies, Bangladesh may seek Pakistan's assistance in respect of this aircraft.

Since August 2024, the direction of foreign policy trajectory of Bangladesh seems to be leaning towards Pakistan. Several meetings have taken place between Muhammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser to the interim Bangladesh government, and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.⁷ On 16 January 2025, Lieutenant General SM Kamr-ul-Hassan, the Principal Staff Officer of Bangladesh's Armed Forces Division met Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen Syed Asim Munir in Islamabad.⁸ The visit of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency officials to Dhaka in January 2025⁹ and Bangladesh's participation in Pakistan's naval exercise "Aman 25" in February 2025, has reinforced India's concern over growing military-to-military engagements between two countries.

Linkages between Indian and Bangladesh Air Forces

Prior to Aug 2024, there was perceptible bonhomie between IAF and BAF. In fact, Bangladesh Air Force came into being with one Chetak, one Armed Otter and one Dakota, 09 Officers and 57 Men on 28 Sep 1971, at Dimapur (Nagaland) in India.¹⁰ In February 2024, the Chief of the Air Staff, IAF embarked on a three-day visit to Bangladesh at the invitation of the Chief of Air Staff, Bangladesh Air Force. In December 2022, Chief of Air Staff, Bangladesh Air Force attended Combined Graduation Parade (CGP) at the Air Force Academy in Dundigal as chief guest and reviewing officer of.¹¹ In the year 2024, Bangladesh Air Force confirmed its participation in Ex-Tarang Shakti at Air Force Station Jodhpur from 28 August to 14 September along with five other nations.¹² However a day prior to the commencement of Ex (a possible fallout of regime change) Bangladesh opted out and withdrew its C-130 aircraft.

Bangladesh has historically maintained strong ties with India on one hand while sought China's assistance to bolster its economy and defence. The links between India and Bangladesh are deep rooted, build on shared history, heritage, language and other commonalities. In 1971, India's military intervention helped Bangladesh to secure independence from Pakistan's oppressive regime following the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The contours of relations between Bangladesh and China now have implications beyond South Asian region. Bangladesh needs to thread carefully and find the right balance on geopolitical tightrope. For China, Bangladesh's sharing of border with India, endows it with unique geopolitical significance for countering the India's growing economic and military strength. In addition, Bangladesh and Pakistan's newly found bonhomie comes against the backdrop of anti-India campaign following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina.

Turning a new leaf in relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh, the ban on pro-Pakistani outfit Jamaat-i-Islami has been revoked. Bangladesh and Pakistan recently established shipping contacts and are set to launch direct flight connectivity soon. The caution and circumspection with which Sheikh Hasina dealt with Pakistan has given way to increased bonhomie between the two countries.

Conclusion

The acquisition of new-generation multirole fighter jets from China by Bangladesh poses geopolitical challenges of great magnitude and complexity for India. A not-so-friendly government in Bangladesh which could collude with Pakistan or China or both will compel India to secure its border with Bangladesh with greater alacrity and purpose, thereby reallocating/redistributing military resources. In addition, in case of hostilities with its western or northern neighbours, Bangladesh can be used to tie down precious resources across India-Bangladesh borders. India on its part is making concerted but cautious efforts to normalise relations with Bangladesh. However, the outcome of these diplomatic efforts will depend entirely on the intent of the present political dispensation in Bangladesh.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Endnotes

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