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Japan-Bangladesh Bilateral Relationship: How It Will Look Like in the Upcoming Five Years

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Abstract – A limited amount of research has been carried out on the future direction of Japan-Bangladesh relations. This article attempts to contribute to Japanese Studies and International Relations literature by exploring the potential direction of Japan-Bangladesh relations for the upcoming five years. This qualitative research indicates that the bilateral relationship between the two countries will be stronger and reach a new level in the coming years. Significantly, the Japanese “megaprojects” in Bangladesh will play a vital role in this regard. However, the Bangladeshi government must address and mitigate the factors likely to hinder the country’s relations with Japan. The research also focuses on the possibility of the Japan-Bangladesh FTA. There are some milestone years ahead regarding the two countries’ bilateral relationship. The research reveals that the potential scenario of the bilateral relationship will be very dynamic and will also be optimum for both countries in the upcoming five years.

Keywords Bilateral relation · Japanese influence · Megaprojects · BIG-B · FTA ·

1. Introduction

Japan is known for its great economic boom, sparkling success in science and technology, and unique cultural heritage. The relationship between Japan and Bangladesh is historical, which mainly gained momentum after the latter’s independence. The people of Japan extended their sincere support and help to the liberation efforts of Bangladesh. Both countries have been maintaining warm and friendly relations over the years. The friendship between these two countries is reflected in their respective flags, where the red circular disc is a common theme. Japan is currently the most prominent development partner of Bangladesh, which has a considerable contribution to improving the latter’s economy and infrastructure. In the previous decades, Japan’s economic and development

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cooperation mainly shaped its relations with Bangladesh. The relationship between these two countries is currently at its peak. However, the next five years are crucial to even further this relationship. This research tries to figure out the nature and possible pattern of the bilateral relationship between Japan and Bangladesh in the next five years.

2. Literature review

Despite having asymmetry in status and economic power, the bilateral relationship of Japan and Bangladesh illustrates a prosperous and harmonious companionship between a developed and a developing country. The two countries have maintained warm relations since 1972 through economic and technical cooperation, cultural exchanges and mutual visits. Japan officially recognized Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state on February 10, 1972, and the Japanese embassy was opened in Dhaka in March 1972 (Rashid, 2012).

From the geostrategic perspective, Bangladesh is critical to Japan, mainly because of its location beside the Bay of Bengal (Akon, 2020). Japan tries to achieve its economic goals in Bangladesh by providing aid, developing trade, and investing in infrastructural projects (Rahman, 2005). As a developing nation, Bangladesh welcomes the flow of foreign investment into the country for creating new ways and means to help improve the job market and economic growth. The contribution of Japan is very significant in this regard. Besides, Bangladesh is a significant source of essential raw materials for Japan and an important market for Japanese manufactured goods (Moni, 2006).

Both Bangladesh and Japan observed the 30th and 40th anniversary of establishing the bilateral relation in 2002 and 2012. Bangladesh adopted the “Look East” policy in 2002 to strengthen its relations with East Asian countries, including Japan (Rahman, 2003). The bilateral relations between the two countries elevated to a “comprehensive partnership” in 2014 during a visit to Japan by the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Akon, 2020). The infamous terrorist attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, which killed 7 Japanese nationals, could not deteriorate the relations between the two countries (Kitaoka, 2016). Both Bangladesh and Japan carefully handled the situation and peacefully moved on.

The relations between the two countries became more dynamic when Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina abandoned her bid for a nonpermanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the term of 2016-2017 to support the candidacy of Japan (The Japan Times, 2014). In return, Japan increased its support for the development of Bangladesh. The government of Japan in 2019 pledged to provide ¥132.7 billion (about US\$1.2 billion) in loans to Bangladesh

to help the South Asian nation improve its infrastructure (The Japan Times, 2019). The Japanese government again pledged to give Bangladesh ¥338.2 billion (about US\$3.2 billion) in 2020 for the same purpose (The Business Standard, 2020). Japan is also one of the biggest trade partners of Bangladesh. The trade deficit between Bangladesh and Japan is comparatively much lower than the trade deficit of China-Bangladesh or India-Bangladesh (Akon et al., 2019). In 2019, the Bangladeshi government approved to set up a ‘Special Economic Zone’ (SEZ) for the Japanese investors at Araihasar in Narayanganj. This economic zone is expected to go on full-swing operation by 2023, which will attract a considerable number of investments from Japan (The Financial Express, 2021a). More than 300 Japanese companies are operating in Bangladesh, and the number of such companies will likely increase in the coming years (The Financial Express, 2021b).

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) finds the relationship between Japan and Bangladesh for the upcoming five years “significant” since it is helping Bangladesh reach the next level of development with the completion of several mega projects (The Daily Star, 2019). Japan hopes to support the integrated development of the Maheshkhali-Matarbari area to make it an energy and trade hub in the region. The Maheshkhali-Matarbari area is the core area of the “Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt” (BIG-B) initiative, which consists of logistics, energy, trade and waterfront industry hubs (JICA, 2014). According to a senior official of JICA, the bilateral relationship between the two countries are very significant for the coming years because the ‘Vision 2021’ targets Bangladesh, the 50th anniversary of the Japan-Bangladesh diplomatic relationship in 2022, 50th anniversary of JICA volunteers in 2023, the opening of the Matarbari deep seaport and Matarbari coal-fired power project and other projects, including the opening of the much-hyped metro rail service (The Daily Star, 2019). These significant events will undoubtedly shape the bilateral relation in the upcoming five years.

Japan also helped Bangladesh control the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The Japanese government gave Bangladesh nearly US\$ 13 million along with a vast amount of ‘Personal Protective Equipment’ (PPE) as emergency support to tackle the pandemic situation, and under ‘The Covid-19 Crisis Response Emergency Support Loan’, Japan agreed to give Bangladesh US\$ 330 million (The Financial Express, 2020). Japan will grant this loan with favourable terms for Bangladesh and a low-interest rate, and it will be much helpful for Bangladesh, which is currently struggling to control this pandemic situation.

Another factor is likely to contribute to the bilateral relationship in the coming years. Bangladesh is a ‘least developed country’ (LDC), and almost all Bangladeshi products currently enter the Japanese market with a duty-free and

quota-free facility. This facility vastly helped this country improve its trade performance with Japan in the previous years, which ultimately positively impacted the bilateral relationship. Bangladesh will graduate from the LDC status by 2026 and lose this benefit. This country needs to pursue Japan to conduct a 'Free Trade Agreement' (FTA) to secure her benefits after graduation (Uddin, 2020). This factor will mainly shape the trade scenario between Japan and Bangladesh in the post-Covid period.

The amity between Japan and Bangladesh is truly remarkable in the international arena. The positive outlooks of the people of both countries have been very helpful to sustain the amity. Although the relations between Japan and Bangladesh are not based on military or security alliance either from the global or regional perspective, Japan has been the most significant development partner of Bangladesh sharing her burden consistently over the years. The people of Bangladesh expect Japan to continue this role in the coming years.

The literature review successfully portrays how the relationship with Japan is essential for Bangladesh, how deep the relationship between the two countries is, and how significant the upcoming five years will be for the bilateral relationship because of the mega projects. It also shows the significance of the BIG-B initiative and how it will transform Bangladesh's Maheshkhali-Matarbari area. However, there exist some gaps in the reviewed literature. The literature review seems to be unable to identify any obstacle or factor that may hamper the bilateral relationship, the overall impact of those megaprojects, and what Japan will achieve from those projects – especially the BIG-B initiative. It also fails to explain how the FTA with Bangladesh will benefit Japan. So, this research intends to fill these gaps by providing a potential scenario of the Japan-Bangladesh relations for the upcoming five years. To underpin this objective, this study answers the following research questions:

- a) What factors may hinder the bilateral relationship between Japan and Bangladesh in the coming years?
- b) What will be the impact of Japanese megaprojects in Bangladesh, and what will Japan achieve from these projects?
- c) If the two countries conduct FTA, how will it benefit Japan?

3. Methodology

This research adopts the interpretivism research philosophy since the research intends to interpret elements of the study, which are the opportunities and challenges, by involving the attitude and knowledge of others with a common interest. The approach to theory development is

abductive because it enables the researchers to decide the most likely inferences that can be made from a set of observations. Then, the research adopts the multi-method qualitative strategy combining archival research and case study because the research will attempt to light on the factors and the relations among the factors that tend to influence the study by reviewing several pieces of literature. The time horizon is often both cross-sectional and longitudinal. However, the study mainly uses the cross-sectional time horizon. Finally, the study collects data through interviews, web-surfing and documentation. Both primary and secondary data are the sources of this study. Five hypothetical interviews of the Hons. 1st batch students of the Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka, were taken on May 23, 2021. All the interviewees have opted for anonymity as they do not want to share their identities. A semi-structured questionnaire written in English has been used for the interview, which is provided in the Appendix section. Several documents have been examined to get secondary data for this research, which have probably not been appraised by previous studies.

This research pays close attention to research ethics. The respondents were informed about the research aim, and however, anonymity is given to the respondents anticipating harm or negative consequences. Braun and Clarke's six steps of knowledge analysis have been followed to research the info (Braun & Clarke, 2006) viz. familiarization with the information, generating initial codes, checking out the themes, reviewing for themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. All the interviews and documents have been read and re-read to familiarize themselves with the five initial ideas. To enhance clarity and a far better understanding for the readers, several interviews have been directly quoted within the analytical sections of this study.

4. Limitations of the study

This study has tried to provide a potential scenario of the bilateral relations between Japan and Bangladesh for the upcoming five years from the perspective of the Bangladeshi people. This research is primarily based on the recent developments in Japan-Bangladesh relations. Only books, articles, newspaper reports, and documents mainly collected from online sources and some interviews formed the base of this study. Most of the other offline data were unfortunately excluded from this research. Examining the official documents of the

governments of both countries would allow the outcome of this research to be more precise and accurate. The primary data of this research was collected only from a few academicians who have a significant level of knowledge in the field of Japan-Bangladesh relations. Therefore, the views of other important people such as government officials, politicians, business people and diplomats of both countries have not been reflected here.

5. Discussion

5.1 Factors which may hinder the bilateral relations

Japan faces many challenges in Bangladesh, and the significant challenges include the dominant influence of China, security issues, poor business environment and cultural differences. These challenges will create factors that may hinder the relations between Japan and Bangladesh in the upcoming years.

There is a strong Chinese influence in Bangladesh, increasing even more, and Japan has a historical rivalry with China. The dominant influence of China in Bangladesh is a direct threat to Japanese interests. If China manages to secure an overall dominance in Bangladesh, it will acutely undermine the interests of Japan in this country. So, this is a significant concern and challenge for Japan to improve its relations with Bangladesh (Interviewee C, 2021). Besides, the activity of the religion-based terrorist groups in Bangladesh is a significant challenge for Japan in terms of security. We know about the ‘Holey Artisan Attack’, which the Japanese nationals became victims of. Though the activities of these terrorist groups have decreased drastically because of the strong counter-terrorism measures of the Bangladeshi government in recent years, it remains a significant challenge for Japan (Interviewee C, 2021).

The business environment in Bangladesh is not up to the mark for the foreign investors due to the intense corruption, acute bureaucratic red tape phenomenon, procrastination in ports and custom areas, lack of congenial infrastructure, lack of security and lack of political stability. Bangladesh needs to improve its business environment to attract more investments from Japan (Interviewee B, 2021). Moreover, there is a vast cultural difference between Japan and Bangladesh, which is a barrier to bilateral relations. So, this is also a significant challenge for Japan in Bangladesh (Interviewee B, 2021).

The government of Bangladesh must address these issues and start taking the necessary steps. Bangladesh needs both China and Japan to secure its benefits. Though the dominant Chinese influence in Bangladesh handicaps Japanese interests, Bangladesh cannot give up China. What the Bangladeshi government can do in this regard is strengthen relations with Japan without jeopardizing

Bangladesh's relations with China (Interviewee C, 2021). Regarding security concerns, the Bangladeshi government needs to increase its counter-terrorism activities and provide a firm and substantial assurance of security for the people of Japan coming to this country (Interviewee C, 2021).

The business environment in Bangladesh has been consistently poor. Bangladesh must reduce the existing corruption and upgrade its bureaucratic system. The country has achieved some political stability in recent years, and it must be continued for improving the business environment. Besides, the Bangladeshi government must promote 'One Stop Service' for Japanese investors. This system will allow the investors from Japan to get all the investment-related services at a single location. The government of Bangladesh must take these measures to improve this country's business environment (Interviewee B, 2021). To reduce the cultural difference, both Japan and Bangladesh need to increase people-to-people connectivity and promote respective cultures to other countries. The Bangladeshi government has to pursue the Japanese government (Interviewee B, 2021).

5.2 Impact of Japanese projects in Bangladesh

Many development projects in Bangladesh were funded by Japan or completed using Japanese assistance. Meghna Bridge, officially known as the "Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge", was constructed in 1992 using Japanese economic and technical cooperation (Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh, 2020). The Jamuna Bridge, officially known as "Bangabandhu Bridge" and the largest river bridge in Bangladesh, was also built with Japanese assistance (Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh, 2020). The Meghna Bridge made it easier to commute between Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, and Chattogram, where the principal sea-port of Bangladesh is located. The Jamuna Bridge did the same between Dhaka and North Bengal. These two bridges' social and economic impact was immensely positive for Bangladesh (Interviewee D, 2021). In this regard, Interviewee A (2021) opined:

"The two bridges contributed a lot to transport people and goods across the country, which helped increase the economic growth."

Other infrastructural projects assisted by Japan fulfilled the same objective. Japan also extended its support for the development of education, agriculture and rural area of Bangladesh under various projects. The socio-economic impact of such support for this country is beyond imagination (Interviewee A, 2021).

Currently, the works of several major Japanese projects are going on. These major projects are popularly known as 'mega projects'. The Japanese mega projects include 'Dhaka Metro Rail Project', 'Jamuna Railway Bridge Project', 'Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Expansion Project', 'Matarbari Deep Sea-Port

Project’ and ‘Matarbari Coal-Fired Power Plant Project’ (The Business Standard, 2020; Tanaka, 2014). The last two megaprojects are part of the famed BIG-B initiative. Besides, other Japanese projects related to agriculture, education, governance, urban and rural areas are also going on. All the Japanese mega projects in Bangladesh are expected to be completed thoroughly within five years. The impact of these projects will be far more positive than all the previous Japanese projects combined (Interviewee E, 2021). The economic growth of Bangladesh will be highly accelerated along with the considerable improvement of the social standard. These projects will change the look of this country and immensely help achieve its goal of becoming a developed nation (Interviewee E, 2021).

Not only Bangladesh but also Japan will be highly benefited from these projects. Many Japanese companies and organizations are involved in almost every phase of the projects, and those companies and organizations are working in terms of the construction and consultation of the projects. So, the projects derive a handsome amount of economic benefit for them (Interviewee D, 2021). Besides, the accomplishment of these megaprojects will drastically increase the Japanese influence in Bangladesh, ultimately decreasing the existing Chinese influence. So, these mega projects will immensely help Japan secure its economic and political goals in this country (Interviewee D, 2021).

5.3 Japan-Bangladesh FTA

Bangladesh is a ‘least developed country’ (LDC) according to the United Nations. Because of this, Bangladesh gets an advantage and preference in trade with other countries, allowing it to secure benefits while trading with Japan. Among the products Bangladesh exports to Japan, almost all the products enter the Japanese market with duty-free and quota-free facilities. The graduation of Bangladesh from the LDC group will take place in 2026 (The Daily Star, 2021). The graduation of a country from the LDC group indicates obtaining official global recognition for its development achievements. It will be valid for Bangladesh as well after graduation. However, leaving the LDC group will relinquish many privileges regarding trade that Bangladesh currently enjoys. Significantly, the duty-free and quota-free facility for exports will not be available for Bangladesh anymore. After graduation, Bangladesh will face high export duty in other countries, including Japan.

The bilateral trade between Japan and Bangladesh is currently on the rise. In order to secure trade benefits in Japanese markets, Bangladesh needs to conduct a ‘Free Trade Agreement’ (FTA) with Japan before the LDC graduation. A ‘Free Trade Agreement’ (FTA) refers to an agreement that creates a free trade area between the cooperating countries. The FTA usually reduces the tariffs and duties on

imports and exports. If Bangladesh conducts the FTA with Japan, it will enable the Bangladeshi products to enter the Japanese markets at low tariffs and duties. A recent study conducted by the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission (BTTC) suggested that Bangladesh sign the FTA with Japan (Uddin, 2020).

The government of Bangladesh must take the initiative to conduct a joint feasibility study with Japan in terms of the FTA (Interviewee C, 2021). Before conducting the study, it cannot be said clearly whether the Japan-Bangladesh FTA would be feasible or not (Interviewee C, 2021). However, Interviewee B (2021) was optimistic. In this regard, Interviewee B stated:

“The FTA between Bangladesh and Japan is most likely to be feasible, and Japan has signed the FTA in Asia or is involved in similar initiatives with India and ASEAN countries. The economy of Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia, and Bangladesh is capable of fulfilling the prerequisites like those Asian countries to conduct the FTA with Japan.”

Japan will also be benefited from the FTA with Bangladesh. Japan has an economic goal of capturing the big market of Bangladesh for its products. The FTA will help Japan achieve this economic goal (Interviewee B, 2021; Interviewee D, 2021). Japanese products are generally popular in Bangladesh because of their high quality. However, consumers in Bangladesh do not buy Japanese products in a large amount due to the high price. The FTA will reduce the tariffs and duties on products from Japan, ultimately decreasing the price of those products to some extent (Interviewee B, 2021). More Bangladeshi consumers can afford Japanese products after that. It will gradually enable Japan to get a firm foothold in the Bangladeshi market (Interviewee D, 2021).

So, FTA or similar initiatives will play a vital role in shaping the bilateral relation between Japan and Bangladesh in the coming years.

6. Potential scenario of Japan-Bangladesh relations

The upcoming five years will be extraordinary regarding the bilateral relation between Japan and Bangladesh. The year-2022 will mark the 50th anniversary of establishing bilateral relations between these two countries. Both countries are willing to observe the anniversary with great enthusiasm. Once the relationship between Japan and Bangladesh was a somewhat “patron-client” relationship. It has recently transformed into a “comprehensive partnership” because of the strong collaboration between the two countries. The amount of Japan’s ODA and FDI for Bangladesh is currently rising. The bilateral trade is also increasing. These aspects will continue to increase in the upcoming five years as well. The government of Bangladesh must work diligently to mitigate the factors which are likely to hinder this country’s relations with Japan. Significantly, the government

needs to emphasize improving this country's poor business environment. A vibrant business environment in Bangladesh will immensely help strengthen her relations with Japan in the coming years. It is a positive sign that the Bangladeshi government has addressed these issues and taken the necessary steps.

The Japanese megaprojects in Bangladesh will considerably consolidate these two countries' relations. Significantly, the great initiative called the BIG-B will be a 'game-changer' for Bangladesh in terms of its internal and more extraordinary regional affairs. The BIG-B initiative will produce immense benefits for Japan as well. All of these projects will be completed within the next five years. The significance of the Japanese economic zone and the Japanese business organizations in Bangladesh also cannot be overlooked. They will also contribute a lot to further the bilateral relations in the years to come. If the two countries conduct the FTA, it will also become a critical factor in the bilateral relationship. The Japanese influence in Bangladesh will undoubtedly increase in the upcoming five years, and the overall relations between these two countries will be more robust and dynamic.

7. Conclusion

It is difficult to say what wait in the future for sure. The future always remains uncertain. However, the future direction of a particular matter or issue can be predicted based on the prevailing aspects or features. The potentiality of that matter also contributes to the prediction. The more features or potentiality exist, the more accurate the prediction becomes. The existing aspects of the current Japan-Bangladesh bilateral relation firmly indicate a robust and dynamic future in this regard. The historic friendship of the two countries is most likely to go even further in the upcoming five years.

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Annexure

Interview Questionnaire

01. What are the significant challenges that Japan faces in Bangladesh?
02. What can the Bangladeshi government do to mitigate those challenges?
03. How positive was the impact of the previous Japanese projects in Bangladesh?
04. Will the impact of the ongoing Japanese projects be as positive as the previous ones?
05. Is the Japan-Bangladesh FTA feasible?
06. What may Japan gain from the FTA with Bangladesh?

N.B.: All interviews were administered with the Hons. 1st batch students of the Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka and anonymity is given to all of them because of their requests (as mentioned in the Methodology section).