Interview with Ambassador Iftikhar-ul-Karim

Interviewer: Swaran Singh

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Place: Dhaka

Ambassador Iftikharul Karim is a retired diplomat from Bangladesh. Formerly of the Pakistan Foreign Service he joined the Bangladesh Civil Service (Foreign Affairs) and served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dhaka in senior levels and in Bangladesh embassies and missions in Stockholm, Ankara, Geneva, Washington, where he was Deputy Chief of Mission, South Korea and China. He was Ambassador of Bangladesh in the Republic of Korea, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Mongolia and the P.R of Dem. Korea.

Amb. Karim has been a Member of Bangladesh Delegations to many bilateral and multilateral conferences and meetings including the UN Commission on Human Rights, the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, the Non-Aligned Summit Cartegena,, CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur, the ICFM, World Health Assembly, IAEA Gen. Conf., International Labour Coinference, Micro Credit Summit, UNHCR, UNFCCC Kyoto, BIMSTEC, and D-8 Summit. He was elected Vice-Chairman of the IOM Executive Council.

He was conferred the Order of Diplomatic Service Merit, Gwanghwa Medal, by the Republic of Korea in 2002. He was a Fulbright scholar in the US.

Ambassador Iftikhar Ul Karim former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China, chats exclusively with Professor Swaran Singh of Association of Asia Scholars narrating reminiscences about China’s influence on his country’s culture, politics, the liberation war of Bangladesh. Ambassador also recalls, at his residence in Dhaka, his impressions and experiences in China. The initials PSS represent Professor Swaran Singh and IUK for Iftikhar-ul-Karim in the following transcription of Oral History Interview.

PSS. At any stage of your life, in your childhood or adolescence or youth, when did you first encounter with the word China?
IUK. My maternal grandfather’s family was from Calcutta and my earliest memories about the Chinese were from their discussions about the Chinese in Kolkata. Apparently there was a large ethnic Chinese population in that city engaged in various trades and services. However, at a much later stage, my interest in China and the PRC in particular started growing while I was on a Fulbright Program in the [United] States in 1978. My professor Dr. Richard Walker was considered a China expert and I attribute my interest in China to him. By 1978 Deng Xiaoping had managed a come back and had established himself as major political leader under whose guidance China was undergoing political and economic transformation. I remember Dr. Walker telling us his graduate seminar to carefully watch this Chinese leader as he thought that Deng Xiaoping had the potential to influence China’s future for the foreseeable next 30-40 years rivaling the legacy of even Mao Ze Dung. At that point I never imagined that I would have the privilege and honour to represent Bangladesh as Ambassador in that country and be witness to the momentous transformation of Mao’s PRC to Deng’s China.

PSS. The Chinese community is still vibrant in Calcutta and they also run a weekly newspaper in Chinese even now. There were many imaginations about this community amongst the local population of Calcutta. Do you recall any such memory?

IUK. I never lived in Calcutta. My father was from Bangladesh, my mother was from India but after they got married they settled in Dhaka Bangladesh. My mother would go occasionally to meet her parents in Calcutta where my grandfather had been, before retirement and eventual migration to Bangladesh, Principal of Calcutta Medical College Hospital and their conversations would often be about the Chinese tradesmen peddling silk and other wares. The Chinese in Calcutta were also in the hand made shoe industry whose products were much in demand. The Chinese owned laundry establishments were reputed for their service. Moreover, Dhaka also had a Chinese presence (incidentally, these Chinese communities outside of mainland China were generally known as overseas Chinese) but it was not as large as Calcutta’s Chinese population. In then East Pakistan, the first Chinese restaurant probably opened in the early 1950s and was a novelty that was patronized by the Dhaka dwellers with enthusiasm. Thus, my early adulthood
association with China began with Chinese cuisine – shark’s fin soup and chow mein, if you please. I believe long term Chinese presence in the subcontinent probably dates back to the period of British colonial rule when many Chinese (mainly “overseas Chinese” from the Canton region) settled in various parts of the Indian sub-continent.

PSS. In many cases China’s relationship with United Pakistan now known as Islamic Republic of Pakistan is full of mysteries. For instance, after China got liberated, its ideological relationship was with East Pakistan while its [official] relationship with West Pakistan was a big facade. What are your views on the relationship between New China and East Pakistan?

IUK. It was 1954 or 1956 when Zhou En-lai first visited Bangladesh (East Pakistan). I remember being taken from school to line the roads of Dhaka to greet Mr. Zhou En-lai. I distinctly remember him waving to the school children like me and others who wanted a glimpse of the visiting dignitary. I think Mr. Zhou En-lai was the first Communist Chinese dignitary to come to East Pakistan. It probably laid the foundation of a relationship between China and East Pakistan that lasted for a very long time in spite of the growing relationship between Pakistan as a whole, especially with West Pakistan. I am also convinced that Mr Zhou En-lai’s memories of that visit to E. Pakistan had in some measure influenced his thinking about the Bangladesh War of Liberation and the sobering advice of restraint he is said to have proffered to the Yahya regime in 1971.

PSS. The liberation movement inspired the youth in Bangladesh. The movement was led by Sheikh Mujib who was given the honorary title of Bangabundhu. The relationship between East Pakistan and China was a very organic one while the latter’s relationship with West Pakistan was a very superficial one. Do you remember the influence of China on the society in Bangladesh?

IUK. I was in Bangladesh during part of the Liberation War. The people of Bangladesh as a whole, of every political persuasion, whole heartedly joined the War of Liberation. It is also a fact that in our Mukti Bahini there was a strong thread of left forces which enjoyed the support of China. Our venerable Maulana Bhasani was perhaps the most high
profile leftist political leader whose links with the Chinese Communist Party was never questioned during the nine months of war or even when China was vetoing Bangladesh’s entry into the UN. Throughout this same period Khwaja Kaisar was Pakistan’s ambassador in China and he was in a distinct dilemma. His loyalties were with East Pakistan and he could not openly leave his post as an Ambassador without embarrassing his host govt. It is said that it was Zhou En-lai who personally assured him that he would return to East Pakistan (Bangladesh). That assurance made him continue in his post after which he returned to Bangladesh and then became Bangladesh’s Ambassador to Myanmar.

PSS. Going back to mysteries, the integral organic relationship of China and Bangladesh inspired the liberation war to some extent. Then why did China cut all its relations with the country [once it was liberated]?

IUK. One needs to put the relationship in the context of the geo-politics of that time. The Indian government and Mrs. Gandhi in particular wanted to help Bangladesh during the liberation war but India also had to face the opposition of the United States. The US was at that juncture in a delicate situation because it was opening up to China and they were using Pakistan’s intervention to establish the links with China. Henry Kissinger writes about this in his *White House Years*. Recently, around February 13th an obituary appeared in the *Washington Post*. The obituary mentioned that this person was in charge of South-eastern and Middle-eastern affairs in the State Department [of US] at the time of the liberation war. He dealt with the liberation war in the context of US’s relations with China and how it would affect its relations with Bangladesh. Both US and China were tip toeing towards each other using Pakistan’s Yahya Khan as conduit and therefore neither wanted to push Yahya too hard on the Bangladesh liberation front. In the case of China there was an additional factor and that was the Indo-Soviet axis that emerged from the Indo-Soviet treaty prior to the war between India and Pakistan. This sent different signals to China.
PSS. You are making an important point, China was not completely reticent. It was implicitly advising Yahya Khan’s government.

IUK. The Chinese could not officially do anything. They used back channels to help the government. If you read the White House papers there is lot of information on how China attempted to persuade Yahya Khan’s government to end the mass destruction in East Pakistan. However, at that time the Pakistanis were in a different mood and they underestimated the resilience and determination of the people of Bangladesh.

PSS. You are saying that ambassador Kaisar was posted in Myanmar after he returned back to Bangladesh and he was a constant link between China and government of Bangladesh without any official links [during early years after liberation of Bangladesh]?

IUK. There was no official contact but links through unofficial channels always existed. China even though had a different perception about the events that unfolded during the liberation movement was not shy to establish formal relations with Bangladesh after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib. Moreover, Sheikh [Mujib] Saheb also was keen to establish relations with China as quickly as possible.

PSS. From mysteries to series of conspiracies, the assassination of Sheikh Mujib was subjected to many interpretations and analysis. What were the motivations, actors and forces behind the act? The most interesting part is that the leader of the liberation movement who also established an independent socialist country was done away with so brutally. This event was followed by the recognition of China.

IUK. China would have recognized Bangladesh even if Sheikh Mujib had not been assassinated. China’s recognition was in the offing. The recognition decision was perhaps hastened by the events that took place after his death.

PSS. What were the Chinese interpretations?
IUK. The Chinese were trying to fathom; how would the newly elected government of Bangladesh align itself to the Indo-Soviet axis.

PSS. But the government was the same even after the war [same people manned the government as ministers]?

IUK. Yes the government was the same but the international environment had changed considerably. The international political environment of 1975 was very different from the environment of 1971-72 [after the liberation war]. India [largest neighbor] was going through a change in her internal politics. Moreover, China had recently secured its position in the United Nations (UN) and China was blocking Bangladesh’s entry in the UN to establish links with the US. The US govt. was not inclined to the [liberation] movement in Bangladesh because of the delicate and tentative links that were being established between the US and China using the channels of the Yahya regime.

PSS. When did you first visit China?

IUK. I first went to China with Foreign Minister Humayun Rashid Choudhury, as a member of the Foreign Minister’s office in 1988. At the time of my first visit to China, the country had already undergone an economic transformation under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Yang Shangkun and Qian Qichen were the President and Foreign Minister of China respectively in 1988.

PSS. Now you are in China interacting with the Chinese leaders. Did this experience burst any myths that you had of China and its leaders?

IUK. I was surprised to say the least. We did not encounter any of the perceptions that we had of the communist leaders of China. I was in China at the time when change of leadership was taking place. An older and more conservative Chinese Communist Party under Jiang Zemin was making way for a CCP under Pres. Hu Jintao. The Party itself
was moving slowly but surely towards controlled economic and political transformation. The Chinese leaders, in my view, were determined to guide economic liberalization at pace faster than political change keeping in mind the disastrous collapse of the former Soviet Union. They would not repeat the mistakes of communist Russia. My first visit was in 1988. Within months after that visit there was the Tiananmen Square events that shook the Chinese leadership to their very core. By the time I was next in China in 2002, it was incredible to see how rapidly had China changed from the 80s. The new generation of Chinese leaders was very relaxed and confident as against my earlier perception of Chinese leaders being ideologically rigid. Tiananmen was a distant memory and the energy of frenetic economic activity was palpable everywhere. I remember in 1988 standing outside the Dayotai State Guesthouse for 40 minutes observing the cars on the road. I could hardly see 10 cars while the whole city it seemed was on bicycles and almost everyone wearing Mao suits. In 2002 the sight from the same complex of the Guesthouse was completely different. Both sides of the road were full of cars and there was traffic jam of 45 minutes, hardly any bicycle and no one in Mao suit.

PSS. Co-incidentally, your first visit to China was in 1988 and in the same year India’s prime minister visited China. The visit by India’s prime minister was a new beginning of the Indo-China relations. Did this relationship interest you in any way?

IUK. Although I attended the meetings during my first visit I was not a very senior official, being the Bangladesh FM’s staff, Director (FMO). Furthermore, the FM’s visit to China was purely about bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh.

PSS. The visit by the Indian Prime Minister was regarded as a breakthrough in India-China relations. Did the visit have any influence on your relations with China?

IUK. Our discussions with China were completely bilateral. We were very pleased at that time as the Chinese were very open to us. They were willing to discuss our situations and mutual problems to the fullest.
PSS. You were in those meetings. What did you learn from them?

IUK. It was very surprising how hospitable and gracious our Chinese hosts were but at the same it was for me at least an eye opener. Eaves-dropping is very common in all countries. One evening during the visit I remember sitting in the Daiyoutai SGH talking with my colleague from the Embassy in China, who later became Foreign Secretary, I casually told him that this is the first time I have come to China and I will not get time to see the Great Wall as I would be busy running from one meeting to another accompanying the FM. I forgot about the conversation. Next morning after the official meeting a person from the Chinese Foreign Minister’s office took me aside. He told me this being your first visit to China it would be incomplete if you did not see the Great Wall. If you want and if your FM can spare you for a few hours we can provide you with transportation to see the Wall. It was a lesson I never forgot when I spent a longer time in Beijing as Ambassador. (I hope you don’t quote this).

PSS. Chinese leaders are still known for their late night meetings that go on till the wee hours of the morning.

IUK. It is a very select and closed circle. Whatever the perceptions may be, I believe the Chinese leaders are uninhibited and free in their discussions among themselves.

PSS. Another question that I am curious about is: You were setting up a new government including the ministry of foreign affairs. You had a lot of trained people with you so you were not starting from scratch, still you got an opportunity to rewrite.

IUK. Bengalis in Pakistan’s Foreign Service were not many but were sufficient in number by the time of our War of Liberation to form a nucleus for the future Ministry of Foreign affairs. The entry of Bengalis in the Pakistan Foreign Service was from as early as 1949. For Bangladesh, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a completely new entity
and there quite a few, not enough for our needs of that time but sufficient, trained officers of Bengali origin. During the formative years I was a junior officer but we had the benefit of guidance and experience of our senior colleagues. My father in law, (much later) for example was one of the senior most Bengali-Pakistani diplomat at that time. By 1969-70, he along with others like Khawaja Kaisar, were already Pakistan’s Ambassador in several countries. If not for these trained professionals, it would have been difficult for a new country like Bangladesh to secure recognition of the international community within the short time frame that it actually did. Within the next twenty years Bangladesh was elected to the non permanent seat of UN Security Council defeating Japan, a Bangladeshi diplomat was elected President of UN General Assembly and Bangladeshi diplomats were appointed to senior positions of the UN agencies and international organizations. That I think speaks to the caliber of our diplomatic colleagues.

PSS : Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your views on Bangladesh-China relations.