



INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: KEY FACTORIAL INFLUENCES

Juhi Sharma, Research Assistant
Centre for Global India Insights, New Delhi
sjuhi5366@gmail.com

Pinku Jha, Senior Research Fellow,
Dept of Political Science,
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara
pinku.j-polsciphd@msubaroda.ac.in

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the determinant factors that have played and continue to play a crucial role in shaping the Indo-Bangladesh relations. India and Bangladesh are close neighbors located in the South Asian region, sharing a 4096 km long border. Bangladesh was initially a part of British India. In 1947, upon independence from the British and the partition of British India based on the Hindu-Muslim communal division, it emerged as East Pakistan, predominantly inhabited by Bengali-speaking Muslims. Bangladesh fought its liberation war thrusted by Bengali nationalism and emerged as an independent nation in 1971 on the basis of Bengali identity. Bangladesh's liberation owes greatly to the Indo-Pak war of 1971 where India assisted Bangladesh's 'Mukti Bahini'- freedom fighters. Although Bangladesh started off with close ties with the Indian government upon its birth, the country has had an evolutionary trajectory of volatilities with India owing to its domestic politics and other allied factors including the growing Chinese might in South Asia. The paper examines the evolving nature of relations between India and Bangladesh and how far it has shaped the contemporary politics of both nations. The paper provides a succinct analysis of geopolitical ramifications in the Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Keywords: Bangladesh, India, South Asia, nationalism, geopolitics, China

Introduction

India and Bangladesh are two neighboring countries located in the Indian subcontinent. The two countries share a border that spans a distance of 2,530 miles. India was the first nation to acknowledge Bangladesh as a separate and sovereign nation state. Bangladesh's independence in December 1971 was greeted with diplomatic relations by India. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 laid the groundwork for India and Bangladesh's relationship. On December 3, 1971, India entered the Bangladesh Liberation War as a result of Pakistan's preemptive airstrikes against northern India. India gave Bangladesh vital material and military support in its struggle for independence from Pakistan. The subsequent Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace signed on March 19, 1972, solidified the close relations between India and the newly formed state of Bangladesh. The two nations are closely connected by language and culture, a shared history and cultural heritage, and shared appreciation of the arts, music, and literature. This shared experience is evident in the multifaceted and developing relationship between the two neighboring countries. The geographic positions of Bangladesh and India are advantageous to one another and offer both



countries an opportunity to expand their economies and connectivity. Over the course of the last five decades, the two nations have established a comprehensive institutional framework to facilitate bilateral cooperation while also continuing to solidify their political, economic, trade, and cultural ties. Bangladesh is one of India's main trading partners.

Over the course of time, the Indo-Bangladesh relations have experienced ups and downs owing to the varying domestic political currents within Bangladesh. Since gaining its independence from Pakistan, Bangladesh has experienced multiple political transitions. Bangladesh has experienced up to 29 military coups between the first known uprising in August 1975 and the most recent attempt in December 2011. Bangladesh is also a site of rivalry between India and China. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League has been in power in Bangladesh since 2009. This period marks a relative calm in Bangladesh's democratic history in the absence of successful military coups. While the Sheikh Hasina administration has maintained cordial ties with India, China's increasing economic and defence cooperation with Bangladesh is a matter of concern for New Delhi. Bangladesh continues to draw India's special attention as part of India's Neighbourhood First Policy.

Domestic Politics in Bangladesh: A Determinant factor in India-Bangladesh Relations

The domestic political framework of Bangladesh has been a strong determinant of the India-Bangladesh relationship. The many ups and downs in India-Bangladesh relationship over the past fifty years and more owes its volatility to the changing strains of power in Bangladesh's domestic political landscape. Whether it has a positive or negative connotation, the "India factor" has continued to influence Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions. The general pattern in Bangladesh is that when the Awami League (AL) and other progressive left-wing political parties form the government, relations between India and Bangladesh are typically cordial. However, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other religious right-wing political parties take power, the nation generally maintains a mistrustful attitude toward India and consistently adopts an anti-Indian foreign policy stance as a counterbalance measure. As a result, Bangladesh's domestic political structures, which are influenced by the nature of political power in existence, define its relations with India (Bhardwaj, 2020).

Right after its independence from Pakistan Bangladesh under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League was a secular country holding close ties with India. India's efforts to fight the Pakistani army contributed to the creation of Bangladesh. The Muslim majority country Bangladesh emerged on the basis of a freedom movement centered around Bengali identity. The nation's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shaped the politics of the country on secular lines which was defined by Bengali nationalism, and Islam had no role to play in the spectrum of Bangladesh's identity politics. "Friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh," Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared to the recently independent country (Bhasin, 2003). The same sentiment was prevalent even in India at the time, as evidenced by Indira Gandhi's 1972 speech in the Lok Sabha, in which she said, "In future, the governments and people of India and Bangladesh, who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit." (Gandhi, 1971).



It was the emergence of Islamic nationalism in the domestic politics of Bangladesh after the 1975 assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that affected its ties with India. The assassination of Mujib-ur Rahman in August 1975, the fall of the Awami League, and Maj. Gen. Zia's military takeover in November of the same year marked the beginning of a new era of Bangladeshi nationalism in which racial and religious minorities were marginalized or eliminated. Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed, the immediate successor of Mujib and a prominent Awami League member noted for his pro-Pakistan and Islamic views, started ending his speeches with the phrase Bangladesh Zindabad, which means "long live Bangladesh" in Persian instead of Joi Bangla, the liberation struggle's battle cry (both words are Bengali). Radio broadcasts and government announcements soon adopted this as standard procedure. There was also a discernible change in foreign policy. The first government of Bangladesh placed a strong emphasis on its ties to the Soviet Union and India. Bangladesh was moved closer to Saudi Arabia, China, and Pakistan by Zia's administration (Kabir, 1994).

The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a Pakistani intelligence organization, resumed operations in Bangladesh and collaborated closely with the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), a local organization. Pakistan never got over the loss of East Pakistan which was possible because of India's military intervention. After the incredibly violent liberation war, in which millions of people perished, the prospect of Bangladesh ever again joining Pakistan was unthinkable. However, Pakistan was adamant about regaining control over its former eastern region and, moreover, about minimizing Indian influence there. These goals were furthered by Zia's policies, which included permitting the Jamaat to return. It was only natural for Pakistanis to highlight Islam as the primary factor bringing the two nations together (Kabir, 1994). Historian M.G. Kabir further contends that Zia's dissemination of a new strain of nationalism in Bangladesh was a calculated move to allay nationalistic sentiments, offer a set of emblems for national unity, bolster the fervor behind nation-building endeavors, and, in the end, preserve Bangladesh's identity and integrity as a nation-state independent of India (Kabir, 1994).

Following the democratic resurgence in 1991, the BNP emerged as a political force opposed to India. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's foreign policy ideas appeared to be modeled after those of the previous military regimes. But during Sheikh Hasina's premiership (1996–2001), the two nations' relations appeared to be improving as a result of India adopting a non-reciprocal (the Gujral doctrine) approach (Gujral, 2003).

A historic agreement was signed regarding the sharing of the Ganges water in 1996. The introduction of the bus service between Dhaka and Kolkata marked a major advancement in promoting people to people communication and the beginning of a new chapter in the bilateral relationship. During the second term of Begum Khaleda Zia (2001–06), the political and religious elites began to support militant activities, not with the intention of inciting terror but rather out of a deeply considered desire for domestic political gain. India has been portrayed by these pro-Chinese, center-rightist forces in Bangladesh as an imperialist, hegemonic Hindu state that is expanding (Chakraborty, 2016). As a result, during Khalida Zia's tenure, the two nations were unable to make significant progress on bilateral issues. Following BNP's Khaleda Zia's electoral triumph in 2001, her supporters launched a



systematic 150-day campaign of violence against Hindus. The attacks were planned and executed with the intention of destroying the Hindu community's economic resources, frightening them into emigrating to India, and seizing their properties. (*The Daily Star*, 2 December 2011; Hindu American Foundation report). The 2001 episode of violence along with trade disputes, border disputes, Ganges River water sharing, migration, insurgency, and disputes surrounding gas exports were several areas of contention that dominated Indo-Bangladesh relations during this period. The growth of extremism interlinked with the issue of Talibanization of Bangladesh led to India highlighting the growing threat arising from the presence of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh.

However, Sheikh Hasina's second term as prime minister, which began in 2009, established a precedent opposing escalating militancy and terrorist activity. In terms of both foreign and domestic policy, she has brought back the gesture that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wished to preserve. Additionally, she understood that positive interactions with India's expanding economy will usher in a wave of development, at least for the eastern part of South Asia (Bhardwaj, 2020). Domestic variables have played a vital role in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The downplay in Indo-Bangladesh relations during the start of this century under BNP was altered under Sheikh Hasina's rule from 2009. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League is the only secular party in Bangladesh. Post-2009, the Indo-Bangladesh relationship has seen a consolidation to a fine status under Sheikh Hasina's rule. At present, in a neighborhood rife with anti-Indian sentiment and shifting allegiances, the Sheikh Hasina administration is arguably India's closest and only trustworthy ally.

A new chapter in the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India was opened by Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in September 2022. Her acceptance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the diplomatic ties between the two nations is what made her visit even more noteworthy. It was Hasina's first visit since the COVID-19 outbreak. The history of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India demonstrates how the two nations have benefited from one another's close ties during the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina's reign in Bangladesh. Because of this, Sheikh Hasina's opponents have been closely examining the Indo-Bangladesh ties, which have gained considerable importance in Bangladeshi domestic politics. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Khaleda, has regularly attacked the Awami League, claiming that it is "very weak" in its interactions with India. Under Sheikh Hasina's rule, Indo-Bangladesh relations have always been characterized by the important principles of candor, respect, cooperation, and mutual trust. Leaders from both nations now refer to this stage of bilateral relations as a "Sonali Adhyay" (golden chapter), as they embark on newer initiatives to strengthen their ties in the vital areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and water sharing (Chaudhari, 2022)

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had promised that India and Bangladesh will continue to work together amicably in the run-up to the twelfth parliamentary elections in Bangladesh held in January 2024. This found reflection in her India-friendly election manifesto which stated: "The long-standing problem of demarcation of land boundaries and exchange of enclaves with India has been resolved. This achievement has encouraged continued multilateral cooperation and friendly relations with India". Hasina's manifesto promised to maintain



bilateral trade and security cooperation with India while establishing new areas of cooperation, such as energy cooperation and cooperative river water management (Ani, 2023).

Bangladesh is India's closest neighbour and the sustenance of the strength in this crucial relationship is clear upon Sheikh Hasina's victory in the recent parliamentary election in Bangladesh. Hasina thanked her "trusted friend" India shortly after the results were revealed, and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was one of the first world leaders to congratulate the 76-year-old leader. This demonstrated the close bilateral relationship between the South Asian neighbors and highlighted New Delhi's commitment to strengthening the "people-centric partnership" (Sumeda, 2024).

Subnational Diplomacy between New Delhi and Dhaka

Engaging state and local actors in foreign policy—a process known as subnational diplomacy—is crucial to addressing the increasingly complex national security challenges of the twenty-first century. Subnational actors have become more involved in significant global issues over the past ten years, ranging from climate resilience and refugee integration to pandemic response (Saifee, 2022).

As per the Indian constitution, the central government has complete authority over India's foreign affairs and diplomacy. Laws and policies defining the nation's relations with the outside world are enacted from New Delhi. In India, the Union and the states have clearly defined roles in terms of legislative authority. According to Article 246 of the Indian Constitution, there shall be a tripartite division of legislative powers between the two. Only the Union government has the authority to enact laws pertaining to foreign affairs, diplomatic, consular, and trade representation, participation in international conferences, signing and implementing treaties, agreements, and conventions with other nations, foreign jurisdiction, trade and commerce with other nations, import and export, and treaty implementation. Subnational governments have, nevertheless, become more involved in determining India's foreign policy in recent years. State governments have become significant actors over the past three decades, especially on the country's periphery, despite the constitution's lack of mention of their role. India's foreign policy outlook, especially in light of the country's Neighborhood First policy, requires a closer examination of sub-national ventures as the country's regional governments—West Bengal and Assam among others—extend their reach directly to foreign investors and governments. Owing to their advantageous geopolitical location, the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam are in a better position to take advantage of the numerous connectivity initiatives in which India is involved and to conduct business with neighboring countries particularly Bangladesh (Sarki, 2023).

Given its geographic and historical ties to Bangladesh, the Indian state of West Bengal may be in a better position to strengthen diplomatic relations with the Bangladesh government. Bengal and Bangladesh have the potential to strengthen their ties regarding water sharing, inland water trade, and illegal infiltration issues, in addition to fostering better bilateral relations between their common Bengali diaspora. In this context, Harsh V Pant opines



“While paradiplomacy throws up fresh challenges for the Indian government, the involvement of state governments in the domain of foreign policy certainly addresses the issue in greater depth. The Centre needs to come up with effective institutional mechanisms to introduce paradiplomacy in the country.” (Pant & Tewari, 2017).

In the case of West Bengal, the West Bengal government's participation has been instrumental in the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), and enclave transfer with Bangladesh. West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu was instrumental in resolving the Ganges water dispute between Bangladesh and India during the United Front government's tenure in office. The negotiations he conducted during his official six-day visit to Bangladesh ultimately led to the signing of the water sharing agreement between the two nations in December 1996 (Jha, 2014). But, Banerjee's intransigent position regarding the Teesta water dispute has called into question the idea of paradiplomacy. Water is a state subject according to the Indian constitution, and for a deal to proceed, all parties involved must approve it. In 2011, a 15-year temporary agreement was reached whereby 42.5% of Teesta's water would go to India and 37.5% to Bangladesh. Bengal was against the agreement, which is why it stalled and never got signed. It is indisputable that West Bengal's Chief Minister Banerjee has good intentions and truly cares about West Bengal's interests. However, positive resolution of the Teesta dispute will contribute to strengthening bilateral ties between Bangladesh and India. When states' narrow political interests become a roadblock to the efficient formulation of national foreign policy, paradiplomacy takes a hit. West Bengal's interest is relevant in the Teesta dispute, but it is not as important as India's. It is about time CM Banerjee conceded this and created room for a more comprehensive understanding of foreign policy, rejecting a regional perspective. States should be aware that, even with their expanded role in fostering better ties with neighbors, the formulation of foreign policy is still a very delicate matter for the federal government and its Ministry of External Affairs (ORF, 2017)

In the case of Assam, the procedures leading up to the ratification of India's historic Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh were actively participated in by the state government. Relative peace was restored to the state when a significant portion of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), led by Arabinda Rajkhowa, surrendered after Sheikh Hasina was appointed Prime Minister and Assam started to recover from the horrific violence during the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) regime, which had overseen insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and then Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi visited Bangladesh in 2011 after India signed the LBA protocol. Both the governments of Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi actively involved the Assam government in the agreement's finalization, despite the state's strong opposition to it. Sheikh Hasina wrote a letter following the swearing-in of Himanta Biswa Sarma as the new chief minister of Assam. In it, she reaffirmed her government's commitment to enhancing connectivity in Northeastern India and extended an invitation to Assam to capitalize on Bangladesh's socioeconomic development and growth trajectory.

Assam and Bangladesh have stepped up their economic cooperation in response to the Indian government's request in recent years. Bangladesh has opened the ports of Chattogram and Mangla to the shipment of goods from Northeast India and established an Assistant High Commission in Guwahati. The state can advocate for increased rail, road, and air connectivity



with Bangladesh, as well as focus on organic food, silk, crude oil, fisheries, tourism, and work permits for young talent, with the support of the MEA and the Assam government (Sinha, 2022).

Assam could become a land-linked region through reciprocal relations with Bangladesh. Currently, it is a land-locked region. And as a result of the reciprocity, ties between Bangladesh and India will improve beyond measure. A 55-person Assamese parliamentary delegation arrived in Bangladesh on November 19, 2022, for a four-day visit. The group was led by Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Biswajit Daimary. The purpose of the visit was to increase connectivity and trade between Bangladesh and the Indian states in the northeast. Bangladesh extended a cordial welcome to the delegation team. The India-Bangladesh relationship's "Assam Factor" was strengthened by this visit (Ashrat, 2022).

Northeast India and the chief minister of West Bengal have expressed disapproval of New Delhi's handling of the National Registry of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the Rohingya refugee crisis. India is facing awkward situations as a result of criticism from West Bengal and Northeast states (Parashar, 2021). These criticisms undoubtedly reach India's neighboring countries as well, so India may not be immune to them. However, the Modi administration is well aware that bordering Indian states' advice and cooperation are crucial when formulating foreign policy with neighboring nations. For this reason alone, the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and West Bengal are certain to be impacted by the relations between India and Bangladesh. New strands of diplomacy at the sub national level have emerged between the two countries with the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam engaging in informal paradiplomacy with Bangladesh. The prospects of enhanced paradiplomacy in the Indo-Bangladesh relations are under discussion.

The Bangladesh component in India's Neighbourhood First Policy

The concept of the 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' came into being in 2008. It was intended to strengthen ties with a number of priority nations, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Maldives (Chaudhary, 2023). India's "Neighbourhood first" policy accrues special attention and particular consideration to Bangladesh. India has time and again expressed the anticipation for deeper and more robust cooperation between Bangladesh and India in all areas. At present, both nations have a strong political desire to advance their relations to new heights. The two countries had combined celebrations of 50 years of diplomatic ties, the centennial of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth, and the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's War of Liberation. In South Asia, Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner. The world's largest network of visa operations is provided by Indian visa services in Bangladesh. (News Service Division, 2022). Bangladesh holds a sentiment of gratitude to the Indian government and people for their material and moral support during the 1971 War of Liberation led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation. The evolving relationship between India and Bangladesh sets a positive example for neighborly relations.



The international border between Bangladesh and India is longer than 4000 km. Bangladesh is bordered by five Indian states: Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and West Bengal. Since the historical protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement was ratified in 2015, the two sides have reached an amicable resolution regarding the land boundary. A few noteworthy recent events include the completion of the four trial runs of the 2018 Agreement on the Use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports, the unveiling of Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant Unit-I, and the opening of the Rupsha railway bridge, one of Bangladesh's longest rail bridges. India is Bangladesh's largest development partner. When it comes to the distribution of funds during the most recent fiscal year, India emerged as Bangladesh's leading development cooperation partner. Roads, railways, shipping, ports, and power are just a few of the sectors in which India has given Bangladesh concessional credits totaling nearly USD 10 billion (MoE, 2023). These credits have been provided through three of India's largest bilateral lines of credit. Compared to trade of USD 10.8 billion in FY 2020–21, bilateral trade reached a record high of USD 18.14 billion in FY 2021–22, registering a record increase of 68%. India's top trading partner in South Asia is Bangladesh, and Bangladesh's top Asian export destination is now India. Apart from Line of Credit (LOC), India has also been giving grants to Bangladesh for a number of infrastructure projects, such as building the Akhaura-Agartala rail link, dredging Bangladesh's inland waterways, and building the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline to bring high-speed diesel into Bangladesh. One of the active pillars of India's development assistance are High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs). 74 HICDPs, including the building of academic buildings, student housing, skill-development and training centers, cultural centers, orphanages, and various heritage restoration projects, have been funded by India (Pti, 2023).

In order to achieve greater connectivity, the two nations have signed the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, which permits inland vessels from one country to pass through designated routes in the other. The current protocol routes are as follows: Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi, Pandu-Karimganj-Pandu, Kolkata-Pandu-Kolkata, and Kolkata-Karimganj-Kolkata (Sarma& Hazarika, 2021). For transit and cross-border trade, the protocol permits vessels from India and Bangladesh to share 50:50 cargo. In each nation, specific ports have also been designated for inter-country trade. The goal of establishing connectivity between India and Bangladesh through railroads, roads, and waterways has been ongoing. This covers trans-shipments, trial runs, cargo movement on barges, and bus services between Agartala and Kolkata via Dhaka. The construction of a multimodal transit hub at Sabroom, which includes road and rail connectivity to reduce the distance of the Chittagong port, is another. Other projects include the Maitri Setu, a bridge built over the Feni River that reduces the distance between Sabroom in Tripura and the port to just 111 km. Additionally, improvements in road connectivity in Meghalaya's Dawki, southern Assam's Sutarkandi, and Tripura's Akhaura link eastern and south-eastern Bangladesh (Karmakar, 2022).

In terms of road and rail connectivity projects, GoI is working on six rail connectivity projects in Bangladesh that will cost USD 1514.3 million through Line of Credit (LOC). Five of the six rail links that existed before 1965 between India and Bangladesh have been restored with the operationalization of the Haldibari (India) – Chilahati (Bangladesh) rail link. On June 1, 2022, the two rail ministers officially launched the third passenger train



service, known as the “Mitali Express,” which runs from New Jalpaiguri in India to Dhaka in Bangladesh. With both sides signing the 2nd Addendum to the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade in May 2020, the connectivity of inland waters between the two sides has also been strengthened. Trade via protocol routes is a more economical and ecologically friendly form of transportation. In order to make certain routes in Bangladesh more navigable, both sides are dredging them.

While India continues to provide development assistance to its close neighbour Bangladesh, there remains areas of discord in the India-Bangladesh relations. The discord between Bangladesh and India stems from four primary concerns: illegal migration, boundary disputes, passage issues, and water sharing. Initially, the two nations had reached an agreement on critical matters like the delineation of the land boundary and the sharing of Teesta river waters. The Indian government was held accountable for “dragging its feet” on these matters, ensuring that the promises made by the two nations are kept is the clear task facing the administration in New Delhi. In addition to fulfilling previous commitments and agreements, the Indian administration needs to find new ways to work with others. Bangladesh must take into account India’s worries about border control and illegal immigration. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) signed between the two countries in 2015 resolved the land boundary issue (Chaudhary, 2023).

In the riparian relationship between India and Bangladesh on international rivers, there is a great need for increased cooperation. India is home to numerous trans-boundary rivers, each of which has a unique riparian status. Being the upper riparian to the 54 rivers that enter Bangladesh, India has an advantage over other certain areas in Bangladesh in terms of river flow management. Of the 54 rivers that both countries share, a treaty already exists for the Ganges water sharing, and efforts are underway to finalize agreements for the sharing of water from other common rivers as soon as possible. As a shared biodiversity legacy, both nations are working together to conserve the entire Sunderbans ecosystem. (De & Kathuria, 2012). The two countries are yet to reach an agreement with regard to the Teesta Water dispute. Talks about sharing the waters of the Teesta and Feni rivers, as well as the other six common rivers—the Manu, Muhri, Khowai, Gumti, Jaldhaka, and Torsa—have continued between the two countries. The Indian government is working to reach a consensus with Bangladesh regarding the sharing of Teesta and Feni river waters that is acceptable to all parties and safeguards the interests of all parties. On October 5, 2019, the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of the Republic of India, and the Ministry of Water Resources, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding India’s withdrawal of 1.82 cubic feet per second of water from the Feni River for the purpose of supplying drinking water to Sabroom town, Tripura, India. On September 6, 2022, the Indian Ministry of Jal Shakti and Bangladesh’s Ministry of Water Resources signed a second Memorandum of Understanding regarding the withdrawal of up to 153 cusecs of water each by Bangladesh and India from the shared border river Kushiya during the dry season for their respective countries’ consumptive water needs (Indo-Bangladesh Cooperation, 2023).



India has been pressuring Bangladesh to take actions to halt illegal migration for a long time. However, Bangladesh has consistently denied any such migration. Undoubtedly, the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh presents significant challenges for India, chief among them being the effect it has on the demographic makeup of the northeastern states. Local communities in several northeastern states are furious about the flood of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh. In states like Assam, this has frequently resulted in conflicts between the native populace and the immigrants, seriously impairing law and order. The security of India was threatened by the large number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, according to a 2008 report by the Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs. The report raised concerns about the possibility of terrorist groups recruiting illegal migrants. Maybe there isn't a simple answer for this controversial issue. Nonetheless, both nations need to think carefully about this issue and come up with solutions that take humanitarian and security concerns into account.

For an extended period, Bangladesh was hesitant to confront India's security issues, primarily the multiplicity of insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern region, which found a safe haven in Bangladesh and allowed them to continue their operations across the border. India also thought that Bangladesh was being used as a transit country by extremist groups with ties to or origins in Pakistan. India had persuaded Bangladesh to act against these groups on several occasions, but all Bangladesh would do was deny their existence. Upon assuming office in 2009, Prime Minister Hasina vowed to take action against organizations operating in Bangladesh that posed a threat to India's interests. Bangladesh implemented policies that aided in the capture of high-ranking rebel commanders among them were Ranjan Daimary of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and Arabinda Rajkhowa, the chairman of the United Liberation Front of Assam. The bilateral relationship experienced a sea change as a result of these actions (Karmakar, 2023).

On December 29 2023, ULFA, the Indian central government, and the Assam government signed a tripartite memorandum of settlement in New Delhi. This has led to ULFA being disbanded on January 23 2024 as per the tripartite agreement (Parashar, 2024). The ULFA leaders stated that due to the mounting pressure and crackdown upon them by Bangladesh's government they were at a loss of hiding spaces, and that is a reason behind them finally agreeing on a settlement. This makes a positive development in Indo-Bangladesh relations. However, the ULFA-independent faction is still active (Karmakar, 2023).

India and Bangladesh settled their disagreement over their maritime border in 2014. The defense relationship has expanded significantly since Bangladeshi Army Chief Gen Moeen Ahmed visited India in 2008 (Habib, 2008). The 11th annual Joint military exercise between India and Bangladesh, known as SAMPRITI, was conducted in October 2023. Strong bilateral defense cooperation initiatives are indicated by this exercise, which is alternately organized by the two nations. Enhanced defence cooperation between Bangladesh and India began in 2018, marking a shift from earlier skepticism. India and Bangladesh inked their first defense contract in 2022 during the fourth Annual Defence Dialogue between India and Bangladesh under the \$500 million line of credit (LoC), which India extended in response to growing discontent within the Bangladeshi armed forces regarding the caliber of Chinese



defense hardware in their arsenal. The fifth Annual Defence Dialogue between India and Bangladesh took place in Dhaka on August 28, 2023.

India's current involvement in the South Asian region is evidence of its desire to see a prosperous, stable, and secure South Asia, and New Delhi is prepared to take the lead in forging significant alliances with its neighbors. In a period of volatility, the Delhi-Dhaka relationship can serve as a crucial stabilizing force for South Asia. The fact that the leaders are taking steps to protect the relationship is evidence of South Asia's increasing maturity (Pant, 2022). On December 16, 2020, Bangladesh and India celebrated —Bijoy Dibosh, or Victory Day, which marked the end of the War of Liberation in 1971. The next day, on December 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Shaikh Hasina held a virtual summit to discuss agenda items for 2021 and beyond. (ORF, accessed on January 17, 2021.) On January 26, 2021, to commemorate 50 years of Bangladesh's independence and the establishing of diplomatic relations, an Indian Air Force aircraft flew in a historic first: a 122-member tri-services contingent of the Armed Forces from Bangladesh to take part in India's Republic Day parade. As the largest contingent of active military personnel, the Bangladeshi contingent was accorded a special place in the parade (Chakravarty, 2020).

India-China rivalry in Bangladesh

The South Asian region is the primary site of intensifying power competition between the two Asian giants China and India. In the current scenario, Bangladesh's tendency to play the China card and China's role in Bangladesh are more important than ever. China's "unpeaceful rise", supported by its financial might, has resulted in power plays and aggressive incursions into South Asia. South Asian political elites are susceptible to financial inducements, and China has not shied away from using its checkbook diplomacy to purchase influence. India believes that China's increasing sway over the region has made them rivals and forced India to reevaluate its foreign policy. China's goals are fueled by mercantile interests, hegemonic ambition, and a desire to deny India any space in her neighborhood. The most notable example is the client-patron relationship between China and Pakistan. The antagonistic China-Pakistan axis has been strengthened by the convergence of interests with regard to India. This axis is equally eager to use Bangladesh to further its goals in opposition to India. China tried to make inroads into Bangladesh in lieu of this axis during BNP's rule as illustrated above. The rise of Islamic nationalism coincided with a tilt towards China in Bangladesh politics. China is now eager to introduce other South Asian nations to its "successful" model. Relations between Bangladesh and India may suffer as a result of the China factor, particularly if Bangladesh begins to use it as a weapon against India's security interests. Bangladesh has so far exercised caution to avoid becoming embroiled in China's debt-trap diplomacy, which could give the latter greater leeway to pursue its anti-Indian policies. India will always be concerned about any joint infrastructure project involving China and Bangladesh because of the delicate geostrategic situation surrounding the Siliguri Corridor. (Chakravarty, 2020)

The World Bank's public accusation of corruption by Bangladeshi government officials in a massive bridge project over the River Padma in 2012 marked a turning point in the country's relationship with China (World Bank Group, 2012). Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister of



Bangladesh, saw the World Bank's accusation as an attack on her reputation and turned to China for assistance in finishing the project. The \$3.6 billion Padma Bridge, which was constructed in 2022, links 21 districts in southwest Bangladesh with the nation's capital, Dhaka (World steel, 2023). The Padma Bridge project exemplifies Bangladesh's desire for development initiatives that align with China's desire to increase its strategic influence in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is interested in having Chinese partners in its infrastructure projects because, in contrast to Western, particularly American, projects, they—and to some extent Indian development projects as well—adhere to lower levels of regulatory compliance. Plus, they're less expensive. Therefore, politicians and officials in Bangladesh favor these projects because they are profitable (Hasan, 2023).

Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world. It is largely dependent on foreign aid and loans. China's influence in Bangladesh has increased dramatically in recent times. Bangladesh became a member of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016. According to reports, the Awami League government gave priority to 17 projects, which included building roads, railways, power plants, river tunnels, port modernization, and information and communication technology development (Financial Express, 2024).

China has become more important to Bangladesh in terms of defense cooperation; from 2015 to 2019, 74% of Bangladesh's imports of weapons came from China (ORF, 2021). For India, China's increasing influence in Bangladesh's defense industry is a serious source of concern. Dhaka has purchased weapons from China totaling \$2.37 billion since 2010 (Sharma, 2024). Currently, there is over \$25 billion in bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China. By contrast, trade between Bangladesh and India stands at \$18 billion. After Pakistan, Dhaka is China's second-largest export market for armaments (Khasru, 2024).

In honor of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh opened a \$1.2 billion (€1.1 billion) submarine base in Cox's Bazar last year. China assisted in the construction of the base, raising fears in India that the PLA was attempting to stealthily expand its influence into India (Chari, 2023). A report published in 2023 by the US Department of Defense cautioned that China may consider constructing PLA military logistics facilities in Bangladesh. The Chinese Foreign Ministry reports that the nation has invested roughly \$1.5 billion in Bangladesh to date. Nonetheless, Hasina's administration has made it clear to India time and again that China is Bangladesh's economic ally rather than a security ally, and India need not be concerned about China's growing influence in Bangladesh (The Times of India, 2018). Sheikh Hasina has skillfully navigated the Indo-Chinese rivalry while acknowledging India's concerns about Bangladesh's increasing ties to China. Sheikh Hasina gave up on the Sonadia deep-sea port project after years of pursuing it, refusing to allow China to build it at India's insistence and giving Japan the go-ahead for a different project at Matarbari (Sharma, 2024).

Some are worried that Chinese development initiatives in Bangladesh could push the country into a debt trap similar to that of Sri Lanka. However, because the return on investments is significantly higher than the cost of funds, there is little chance of it falling into a Chinese debt trap. Furthermore, China is not Bangladesh's primary or exclusive lender. Bangladesh has expanded the sources from which it gets its loans. According to Bangladeshi Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen, of the current "\$72.3 billion foreign loan, the World Bank



accounts for \$18.2 billion, followed by the Asian Development Bank (\$13.3 billion), Japan (\$9.2 billion), Russia (\$5.1 billion), China (\$4.8 billion), and India (\$1.02 billion).” (The Daily Star, 2023).

In the recent parliamentary election in Bangladesh, the US sided with the opposition parties, Bangladeshi human rights advocates, and the public and critics of the Awami League government;. The US put substantive pressure on the Sheikh Hasina administration in its quest for free and fair elections within Bangladesh (Patro & Abbas, 2023). India and the US are strategic partners whose cooperation is mainly driven by their anti-China stance. Although India maintained that free and fair elections are important, India’s position was that elections were Bangladesh’s ‘internal matter’ and New Delhi did not interfere in it (Deccan Herald, 2024).

While China had a different way to deal with the US interference in Bangladesh. Assuring Hasina that she could rely on China in the face of American pressure, Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly told her when they met in 2023 on the fringes of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg that China would oppose external interference in Bangladesh and would expand economic cooperation with it (Lashkar, 2023).

The recent election in Bangladesh had high stakes for India. This is because the opposition Bangladesh National Party was running an anti-India campaign and were likely to tilt Bangladesh’s foreign policy towards China, had they won. India’s cordial relationship with Bangladesh is contingent upon Sheikh Hasina. Sheikh Hasina’s electoral victory in Bangladesh’s recent parliamentary election is a good sign for Indo-Bangladesh relationship. Through the 2002 Defense Cooperation Agreement, Beijing was able to groom Dhaka’s successive governments as possible buyers of weapons. Bangladesh has become a key component of China’s plans to expand its influence throughout South Asia since 2002. Beijing has been able to persuade Bangladesh to increase its military stockpile in order to project power in the event of maritime conflicts with Myanmar, which incidentally occurred in 2016 (Vasani, 2020).

Meanwhile, Dhaka needs economic development, trade, and industrial technology to address its unemployment problems. In the same year, China sent Bangladesh two 056 corvettes, designated BNS Shadhinota and BNS Prottoy, each equipped with anti-ship and surface-to-air missile systems, as well as 76 mm and 30 mm naval guns (Jha, 2016).

Following the announcement in 2019 of India’s \$500 million credit line to Bangladesh, which was operationalized in 2022, Dhaka expressed interest in acquiring military hardware from New Delhi. This included helicopters, all-terrain special purpose vehicles, and a maintenance contract for Russian-origin weapons like the MiG 29 jets, Antonov An-32 planes, and Mi-17-1V helicopters, all of which India is also making extensive use of. It’s crucial to convince Bangladesh’s political establishment that an unnecessary arms race in the region would be pointless, even though New Delhi must assist Dhaka with its Forces Goal 2030 program. China’s long-term goal is to subjugate South Asian nations through arms sales and false trade models, trapping them in an arms race that never ends and entangling them in debt (Chari, 2023).



Conclusion

Although the domestic politics in Bangladesh under the military and BNP's rule tilted Bangladesh away from India, Sheikh Hasina's return to power has been instrumental in redefining Bangladesh's relationship with India. Sheikh Hasina has been in power in Bangladesh since 2009, making her the longest serving female head of a nation in the world. During her long tenure Indo-Bangladesh relations have seen an upward movement. Currently, Bangladesh is one of India's closest neighbors in South Asia. Amid widespread protests, opposition boycotting the elections and international pressure about free and fair elections, Sheikh Hasina won her fifth victory in the recent January 2023 parliamentary election in Bangladesh. While her victory may be a blow to free and fair elections, it is undoubtedly positive for the current prospects of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh continues to hold primacy in India's Neighbourhood first policy. India's developmental assistance to Bangladesh is a core component of India's Neighbourhood first policy vis-a-vis Bangladesh. While the Sheikh Hasina administration has enhanced economic and defence cooperation with China to a grotesque extent, it has carefully considered India's concerns about the Chinese presence in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina has skillfully juggled through the India-China rivalry. The involvement of Indian states of Assam and West Bengal in paradiplomacy remains a potential prospect in the Indo-Bangladesh relation. India and Bangladesh continue to explore newer avenues of cooperation such as capacity building and space cooperation.

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