

## **From Strategic Bonhomie to Uncertainty: Bangladesh's Post-Hasina Realignment and Implications for India's Geopolitical Interests**

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### **Abstract**

The article critically examines the reorientation of Bangladesh's foreign policy under the post-Hasina government and its effects on the Indian strategic environment in the east. It argues that the dramatic fall of the Sheikh Hasina regime following the July revolution and the formation of an interim government under Muhammad Yunus were not merely a political shift within the country but a structural shift in Bangladesh's foreign policy focus. Given the historical trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations, this study sheds light on three critical objectives: first, it strives to elucidate the recent shift and rewriting of Bangladesh's foreign policy and its worsening impact on India-Bangladesh relations. Second, it assesses how Bangladesh's contemporary drift towards the new axis of China and Pakistan poses a new threat to India's national and regional interests on the eastern front. Third, it proposes India's policy alternatives with respect to Bangladesh through improved connectivity, calibrated diplomacy, and reinvigorated sub-regional cooperation. Methodologically, this study follows a qualitative, process-tracing research approach, relying on primary sources like joint statements and declarations, government-linked media briefings, and other official documents, supplemented by a range of secondary literature. The research findings of this article reveal that Bangladesh's changing position has reduced India's strategic comfort zone in South Asian geopolitics; external forces are gaining influence in India's eastern periphery; and therefore, it is the dire need of the hour for India to adopt a strong but flexible, incentive-driven engagement strategy to stabilise its regional order.

**Keywords:** Post-Hasina Realignment, India-Bangladesh Relations, Eastern Strategic Challenge, Bangladesh's Foreign Policy, South Asia Geopolitics.

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## Introduction

It is geography that makes India and Bangladesh permanent neighbours and creates the destinational interdependence that makes cooperation not a discretionary choice but a strategic necessity. "You can change friends but neighbours", as Atal Bihari Vajpayee notes (PTI, 2024), underscores the rationality of peaceful coexistence. Bangladesh has been a strategic buffer state for India and a critical linkage with the eastern sub-region. It has always played, and continues to play, a decisive role in India's national interests and regional stability. The 50th anniversary of India-Bangladesh relations in 2021 must be recognised as a historic milestone for reflecting upon a partnership ingrained in the civilisational, linguistic, and cultural solidarity of the eastern subcontinent. This profound congruity has historically cultivated the emotional and social ground for India's decisive aid to the Liberation War of 1971. It turned collective historical recollections into what, in scholarly terms, can be called a bond of blood and sacrifice. The song "Shono Ekti Mujiborer Theke" (Listen, from one Mujibur...), composed by Gouri Prasanna Majumdar and performed by Anshuman Roy during the 1971 Liberation War, was aired on Akashvani (All India Radio) and became the expression of Indian support to the Bangladeshi cause, striking a chord with the voice of millions of people shouting the slogan of freedom. This song, written by an Indian lyricist, transformed a territorial battle into an emotional movement. It became a lifeline to the Mukti Bahini, which assured them that they were not alone, that the hearts of millions in India were thumping in tandem with their demand for sovereignty. A few lines of this melody require a reiteration to understand the historical bond between the two nations:

*Tagore's Golden Bengal,  
Nazrul's Bangladesh,  
Jibanananda's Enchanting Bengal—  
of whose beauty  
there is no end: Bangladesh.*

*When I say "Joy Bangla,"  
Why does my heart still wonder—  
that my lost Bengal  
I shall yet reclaim?  
  
From the darkness,  
in the eastern sky,*

the sun of a new day  
Will rise again.....(Translated from the Bengali patriotic Song  
“Shono Ekti Mujiborer Theke”) (Bhattacharjee, 2019)

The song is one of the testimonials to a time when art and politics intertwined. It forged a connection of blood that integrates them into a core of partnership grounded in mutual sacrifice rather than mere diplomatic convenience. Thus, beyond political cooperation, the India-Bangladesh friendship has been nourished by their shared ethos in literature, music, and the arts, as reflected in the perennial works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, which continue to shape modern cultural discourse between the two countries. This legacy is the primary driver of regional peace, symbolising a "Golden Chapter" of cooperation that transcends conventional diplomatic prototypes and necessitates further interdisciplinary study. The article by Kanti Bajpai in the Times of India, titled Why Bangladesh should matter to us, argues that Bangladesh is strategically central to India's security, stability, and long-term development. Yet, it is not accorded due significance in Indian strategic discourse. He emphasises that there must be cooperation with Bangladesh to ensure the security of the northeastern frontier of India, management of cross-border movements of insurgents and avert the cross-border spread of extremism and instability. Bajpai also highlights the common river systems and ecological interdependence, whereby environmental mismanagement or political instability in Bangladesh could have serious consequences for India. In addition to the security factor, he sees Bangladesh's social and economic developments as opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. On the whole, the article asserts that the best way to serve the country's national interest is not to overlook or mistrust, but to continue to engage a stable and well-being Bangladesh (Bajpai, 2011). Md Shariful Islam, in his book *Fifty Years of Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues, Challenges and Possibilities*, argues that the relations between Bangladesh and India, which were based on the experience of the 1971 Liberation War, have a strategic indispensability that reaches far beyond the traditional diplomatic relations. The combination of geographic location, the historical interrelation, cultural similarity, economic interdependence, security collaboration, trade relations, tourist movement, and geopolitical necessity makes the long-term bilateral cooperation between the two neighbouring states inevitable. Although the existing literature has extensively focused on the 1971 period, transboundary water conflicts, and refugee concerns, the critical issues of infrastructural connectivity, development cooperation, security cooperation, and the role of China have been underexplored, revealing a relevant knowledge gap. The argument has also been made that

deepening Bangladesh-India relations is necessary not only to ensure that both countries become economically prosperous but also to ensure peace in the region, initiate a post-pandemic recovery, and maintain the general stability of South Asia (Islam, 2021, pp. 1-7). S. K. Bhardwaj, in his thought-provoking article *Tenets of India-Bangladesh Relations* argues that the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh is not dictated by transient policy rhetoric as much as by structural, political, and functional underpinnings, grounded in shared civilisational attachment, contested identities, and security imperatives. Though the inherent geographical location, the cultural similarities, and the long history of the 1971 struggle have given Bangladesh a natural platform to work together with India, the domestic political currents in the country, which keep on swinging between liberal-secular, religious-nationalist, and development-focused discourse, have continually redefined the India factor either as a prospect or a challenge. Despite occasional outbreaks of suspicion over border demarcation, water-sharing agreements, and power asymmetries, the relationship has grown increasingly closer due to more or less unilateral Indian initiatives, landmark accords (such as the LBA, the water-sharing accord, and connectivity accords), and increased growth in economic, energy, and security cooperation, especially since 2009. Finally, this paper argues that pragmatic developmental interdependence, sub-regional connectivity, mutual security interests, or, more precisely, identity politics are the most resilient foundations of a stable and visionary India-Bangladesh relationship (Bhardwaj, 2020).

The India-Bangladesh relations have been characterised by an impressive level of stability, significant development and security cooperation since 2009, a period led by Sheikh Hasina. In addition to complementing India's various connectivity initiatives, such as the BBIN and multimodal connectivity with the Northeast, Dhaka played a key role as a buffer against insurgent networks in the Northeast and facilitated growing energy cooperation. These years witnessed a most favourable strategic environment along the longest international border of India, thanks to the favourable attitude of Bangladesh towards India. By the time Hasina came to power, India-Bangladesh ties had developed into what many strategic experts termed New Delhi's most effective bilateral partnership in South Asia. This golden chapter has seen the two nations partner like never before across the spheres of security, economy, and connectivity (Islam, 2022, p. 107). In that regard, Bangladesh has become an important pillar of "India's Neighbourhood First policy" and "Act East" strategy, providing key access to Southeast Asia. It acts as a stabiliser on the tumultuous north-eastern frontier of India. The bilateral relationship during the Hasina regime transcended the typical politics of mistrust and competition among

South Asian nations, exemplifying what can be accomplished by political commitment and shared strategic visions among neighbours.

However, the political turmoil in Bangladesh in August 2024 reversed this trend; it marked a breaking moment in South Asian geopolitics, with effects felt far beyond Dhaka. A sudden exit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, whose rule had influenced the political course of the country during the last 15 years, and the subsequent formation of an interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, marked a historic juncture in one of the robust bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, this transition was not a usual shift of power. It is an indication of a deeper restructuring of Bangladesh's foreign policy, subject to the dismay of existing political clout, which has been brewing for a long time. (Rizve, 2025)

Following the departure of Sheikh Hasina, relations between India and Bangladesh have fallen on woeful terms. The International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh has issued a death sentence in absentia against former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, accusing her of crimes against humanity, on charges of the violent repression of student-led protests in 2024 that had overthrown her Awami League government. The tribunal convicted her on various offences, especially incitement to violence and the order to use deadly force against protesters. However, India's unwillingness to extradite the former PM of Bangladesh in the absence of a legitimate government has contributed to anti-Indian feelings in Bangladesh as well as the rise of allegations of political interference. Mutual mistrust has deepened further, as Bangladesh seeks to intensify its engagement with China and Pakistan, as reflected in the Kunming trilateral meeting, which has caused India significant concern (Rizve, 2025). The new interim government led by Yunus is reportedly supported by the nationalist and Islamist-populist forces. It has tried to re-align with China and Pakistan, which India traditionally viewed as its strategic rivals. This action is not merely a repositioning of their diplomatic approach; rather, it carries undertones, driven by the radicalisation of Islam in Bangladesh in general. It can also lead to regional rebalancing, which could threaten India's eastern strategic posture. This has intensified insecurity in India due to the risk of encirclement and strategic isolation in its neighbourhood, given the establishment of a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh trilateral framework in June 2025, the first institutionalised cooperation among the three countries. This trilateral cooperation is grounded on "the principles of good-neighbourliness, equality and mutual trust, openness and inclusiveness, common development, and win-win cooperation" and directed towards their vision of "multilateralism" and "open regionalism" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs

of the People's Republic of China, 2025). Hence, the changing trajectory of Bangladesh's foreign engagements poses considerable challenges to India's regional policy dynamics. Also, Dhaka's staunch positions on border and water-sharing issues, smuggling activities, and transit pricing, as well as its willingness to accept Chinese arms and lending facilities, posed new challenges for India. These rearrangements directly affected the eastern flank of India, which includes the stability of the Northeast, the security of the Siliguri Corridor, and the effectiveness of India's overall Indo-Pacific strategy.

India is also closely monitoring the growing security and economic concerns arising from Bangladesh's political instability and the consequent expansion of Chinese influence, particularly in infrastructure development, port expansion, and defence cooperation, as delineated by a Parliamentary Committee devoted to the "Future of India-Bangladesh Relationship". According to the committee's findings, political turmoil in Bangladesh has significantly disrupted travel and trade; cross-border travel to India has dropped by almost 90%. Dhaka has imposed restrictions on a range of Indian imports, including yarn and grains, which in turn has triggered reciprocal restrictions from New Delhi (Defence Monitor, 2025). The panel further drew attention to the potential threat posed by the influx of Chinese goods into Indian markets under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) framework. In this regard, the Committee's reference to the influx of Chinese goods under the umbrella of SAFTA addresses India's concern about the entry of Chinese products into Indian markets at concessional or zero tariffs via Bangladesh as a transit or re-export route (Defence Monitor, 2025). Such activities can adversely affect local industries in India, undermine fair competition, and impose economic and strategic weakness, as China becomes more established commercially and strategically in Bangladesh. It stressed the need for India to develop effective strategies to counterbalance the influence of Chinese interests while maintaining national security (India Tribune, 2025). This multifaceted transition across the military, diplomatic, and economic fronts has pushed India for the reconsideration of its strategic engagements. The crucial role of the 22-kilometre-wide Siliguri Corridor, the sole land link between mainland India and its eight north-eastern states, is likely to rise owing to the dominant Chinese military presence in Tibet, the intensifying Pakistani involvement in Bangladesh, and the consolidation of radical Islamist forces in Dhaka. In response, India has embarked on one of the most massive augmentations of military presence since independence, developing three new garrisons along the Bangladeshi frontier and deploying high-end hardware and ordnance, including S-400 air defence systems, Rafale aircraft and BrahMos missiles (Sharma, 2022). While such measures

are considered indispensable for immediate deterrence, they do not adequately reflect the underlying political and economic drivers that are transforming Bangladesh's foreign policy direction in the contemporary context.

Given this background, this article examines the central question of why a stable Bangladesh under Hasina's leadership was necessary in relation to India's strategic concerns. It further tries to address the fact that although the recalibration of foreign policy orientation of Bangladesh may be considered a rational response to their domestic political pressures and emerging regional opportunities, the policy, at the same time, subverts the regional order, which India has long established based on geographical, economic and political proximity. Against this backdrop, the following analysis sheds light on three main objectives:

First, to assess the threats to India from Bangladesh's recent ideological shift, especially in the context of the recent deterioration in India-Bangladesh relations.

Second, it seeks to understand the political and strategic incentives underlying Bangladesh's recent realignment and diversification of alliances, particularly the trilateral arrangement among Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan.

Third, to sketch out the policy options available to India for establishing a stable relationship with Bangladesh based on enhanced connectivity and carefully calibrated diplomacy.

## **Research Methodology**

The current research is based on a qualitative, interpretive research design, in which historical analysis will be combined with an evaluation of Bangladesh's contemporary foreign affairs within the broader geopolitics of South Asia. Primary data used in this study includes official documents, press releases, and joint declarations issued by the governments of India, Bangladesh, and China. These primary materials are supported by secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, think-tank reports, and credible media analyses, which can be used to place the evolving diplomatic and security dynamics in context.

The paper further employs process tracing to explain the causal pathway linking the domestic political rupture in Bangladesh in 2024 to the resulting foreign-policy realignment and the strategic implications for India. This approach is justified by the fact that the post-Hasina transition is a critical point rather than a long-term trend, and that it requires an understanding of the actual change rather than merely validating it. It enables the study to trace the causal pathways that indicate policy realignment of Bangladesh, its growing proximity to

China and Pakistan in the changing landscape of South Asian geopolitics, and its deepening impact on India-Bangladesh relations and India's neighbourhood policy at large.

## **From Solidarity to Uncertainty: Tracing the Trajectory of Indo-Bangladesh Relations through History – A Brief Overview**

The relations between India and Bangladesh in the twenty-first century have developed in a complex and dynamic manner due to a confluence of historical memory, domestic political trends, and newly emerging regional geopolitical factors. In the context of its historiographical analysis, the bilateral relationship may be split into three main stages. The initial phase, which began in 1971, was foundational: India's active role in Bangladesh's quest for independence established strong political, military, and emotional ties between the two nations. The next stage, often described as a golden age, is commonly attributed to the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. Despite persistent challenges related to water and border sensitivities, it can be marked by strong security cooperation, broadened economic activities, and strategic alignment. The third stage, initiated by the interim government led by Yunus, represents a fundamental shift in Bangladesh's domestic politics, accompanied by heightened anti-Indian sentiment and a redefinition of bilateral relations. All these phases require critical observation focused on the transforming character of India-Bangladesh relations and their likely impact on regional politics.

### **The Liberation War and the Beginning of India-Bangladesh Friendship**

India and Bangladesh share a profound historical legacy, and there has been a strong cultural interconnection and political convergence between the two countries. The 1971 independence of Bangladesh is an emblematic example of this. India played a decisive role in Bangladesh's liberation campaign. Throughout the nine-month-long conflict with Pakistan (West Pakistan), it provided military aid and humanitarian aid to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters, known as the Mukti Bahini. This culminated in the creation of a sovereign nation, Bangladesh, on 16 December 1971, and the day is commemorated annually as "Victory Day" in Bangladesh. As the former High Commissioner to India remarked: "The emotional bonds stemming from the invaluable contributions of the government and people of India during the Liberation War remain a dominant factor in Bangladesh's political, cultural and social wave. The spirit of comradeship of 1971 remains the foundation stone of the two countries' ties" (Islam, 2021, p.8). In the aftermath of the war, India and Bangladesh strengthened their bilateral ties by signing the Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1972 (Ministry of

External Affairs, Government of India, 1972), which outlined potential areas of cooperation between the two countries. This period marked the beginning of a profound interdependence between the two countries, grounded in their mutual reliance on shared water resources, trade, and security arrangements. The Indira-Mujib Treaty, formally the Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace, was signed on 19 March 1972 by India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to cement close bilateral relations in the wake of Bangladesh's independence. The treaty implies a commitment by both nations to lasting peace and friendship, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and broad cooperation in economic, scientific, cultural, and security sectors. The agreement, which was made effective for a twenty-five-year period, further specified how joint consultation on threats, trade, and the management of transport and river basins would be conducted.

However, most of the time after 1971, relations between India and Bangladesh were held hostage by deep historical grievances and politicised nationalism. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's short-lived rule set a precedent later adopted by regimes headed, respectively, by General Ziaur Rahman under the banner of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and, later, Hussain Muhammad Ershad. It gave rise to discourses of Indian "foreignism" and the questioning of India's role in the liberation of Bangladesh. These narratives have dominated bilateral differences on water sharing, migration, border fencing, and connectivity. Moreover, the restoration of democracy in 1991 did not significantly alter this trajectory. Under Begum Khaleda Zia's Nationalist Party, anti-India sentiments continued to be mobilised; issues such as the Farakka project were internationalised; and the Awami League's cooperative approach toward India was actively opposed, despite some sporadic attempts at engagement. It was only with the Awami League's return to power in 2009 that the relationship decisively moved beyond these ideological barriers, enabling bilateral ties to resume a sustained improvement (Pattanaik, 2020, pp.212-2013).

### **The Strategic Convergence of India-Bangladesh Relations under the Hasina Era: The Golden Era**

From 2009 to 2024, Sheikh Hasina oversaw a period which many scholars have described as New Delhi's 'golden chapter' in its South Asian diplomacy. The Modi-Hasina partnership was broad and multifaceted, covering security cooperation, trade, connectivity infrastructure, energy collaboration, and defence partnerships. India approved a US\$4.5 billion credit facility for Bangladesh in 2017 to support a range of essential infrastructure projects,

including ports, shipping, roads, railways, electricity, and power generation. The signing took place during the high-level bilateral engagements in Dhaka, with 17 priority projects, a 20-year flight period, a one per cent concessional interest rate, and a five-year grace period. The provision is part of the larger Indian developmental alliance with Bangladesh under the Sheikh Hasina government, which has increased the total lines of credit to Bangladesh through India to about US\$8 billion. It underpinned India's strategic and economic investment in its eastern neighbour (IANS, 2017).

The India-Bangladesh Joint Statement, signed on 8th April 2017 during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's state visit to New Delhi, marked a turning point in bilateral relations, grounded in the shared historical memory of the 1971 Liberation War and a longstanding political confidence between the two governments. This initiative gained additional impetus with the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement, which resolved 162 enclaves and benefited more than 50,000 residents (South Asians for Human Rights, 2015). The area of cooperation studied by the interlocutors encompassed security, defence, trade, connectivity, and energy, with Bangladesh underscoring its zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism and anti-India insurgent groups operating from its territory. The announcement of 22 agreements and MoUs, including the Defence Cooperation Framework, and a USD 500 million Indian Line of Credit to purchase defence equipment, served as a signpost to the visit, the first of its kind with a neighbouring state. The leaders emphasised advances in connectivity, including the restoration of rail links, inland waterway transport, seaport agreements, and the Petrapole-Benapole Comprehensive Checkpost, which handles approximately one-third of India-Bangladesh cargo. Power trade across borders has enhanced energy cooperation of more than 660MW, joint ventures in civil nuclear energy, space technology (ISRO-Bangladesh cooperation), cyber security and digital connectivity. In addition to acknowledging significant achievements, both sides expressed a desire to resolve the remaining river-water-sharing challenges, primarily those related to the Teesta River, through long-term dialogue, with an emphasis on the strategic, developmental, and people-centric aspects of the partnership (MEA, 2017). On the occasion of 'Maitri Diwas' commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India-Bangladesh diplomatic relations, Hasina remarked:

"We continue to believe in the importance of our relationship. At the same time, this (50th) anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the foundation of our bilateral relations and the path ahead. It is an occasion also to recommit ourselves to work towards further strengthening the long-standing dynamic

partnership between Bangladesh and India". Referring to this golden jubilee of Bangladesh's relations with India, Hasina further remarked: "Our partnership is not confined to the treaties, MoUs, bilateral agreements that provide the formal structures for our working relations. Today, our broad partnership has matured, taking dynamic, comprehensive and strategic shape, and is based on sovereignty, equality, trust and mutual respect" (Bangladesh Awami League, 2021).

It is further important to note that Bangladesh is strategically located within the Indian Neighbourhood First Policy, with over 4,000km of land border with India and serving as a focal point for the North-Eastern states. Their bilateral interdependence has been strengthened through economic and connectivity cooperation in railways, ports, inland waterways, and energy trade. The security cooperation, especially, has been strong, with the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, who acted decisively against the militant organisations which are hostile to India and also coordinated well with the Indian intelligence agencies. The government of Bangladesh has launched a full crackdown on anti-India militant groups operating on its soil, extradited several wanted militants, and enhanced bilateral security cooperation with India in the quest to achieve better stability of the region under the zero-tolerance policy against terrorism. According to scholars of security studies and current reporting, Bangladesh under Hasina has successfully curbed activities by Indian insurgent groups, most prominently the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a terrorist insurgent organisation in Assam. It has reportedly reduced the role of Bangladesh as a safe haven and pressuring some militant leaders to engage in negotiations.

The pragmatic cooperation between India and Bangladesh has further significantly enhanced security in the North-East of India (Karmakar, 2023). Another key aspect is that Bangladesh is central to India's regional connectivity policy, including the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) frameworks, which also align with India's Act East Policy. On this note, Dhaka is considered to be one of the most reliable and strategically important neighbours of India in South Asia. Relations between India and Bangladesh under Hasina have acquired greater strategic salience through connectivity-based regional frameworks, specifically the BBIN and BIMSTEC, in which Bangladesh is central to India's eastern connectivity vision. Under the BBIN, the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), signed in 2015 (Press Information Bureau, 2017), was intended to facilitate the movement of goods and

passenger vehicles across borders without increasing the time and costs incurred in transporting them. Although Bhutan was hesitant to ratify the agreement for entry into force 2015 (Press Information Bureau, 2017), India and Bangladesh proceeded bilaterally to operationalise cargo movement through land ports such as Petrapole and Benapole, which alone account for almost three-quarters of India-Bangladesh land trade. Such efforts are directly aligned with India's goal of increasing access to its Northeastern regions, for which Bangladesh offers the shortest and most cost-effective routes. The Passenger Terminal Building and Maitri Dwar ICP cargo gate, constructed at Petrapole, were formally inaugurated on 2 March 2024 by the Honourable Amit Shah, Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation. The largest India-Bangladesh land trade county, Petrapole-Benapole, remains a strategic logistics hub. These improvements were aimed at reducing congestion, improving clearance times, and minimising transaction costs for cargo and passengers. In turn, this advancement reinforces India-Bangladesh connectivity and is consistent with India's vision of seamless trade operations, particularly with respect to access to the Northeast via Bangladesh (Press Information Bureau, 2024).

In BIMSTEC, India and Bangladesh have worked closely on multimodal connectivity, coastal shipping, and energy cooperation, thereby making the Bay of Bengal a common ground for economic and strategic partnership. India Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement (2015) (Press Information Bureau, 2015) led to a sharp improvement in bilateral trade through direct sea routes, and inland waterway agreements have enabled Indian cargo to access Tripura, Assam, and Meghalaya via Bangladeshi rivers. It has reduced logistics costs by approximately 3040. Bangladesh's involvement in BIMSTEC has also played a crucial role in India's Act East Policy, as it links South Asia and Southeast Asia through road, rail, and sea. Together, the BBIN and BIMSTEC have also changed the way India and Bangladesh relate, shifting from a border-based to a connectivity-based model, and the bilateral relationship has been integrated into a wider regional integration framework. Nonetheless, recent political developments in Dhaka have cast doubt on the pace and orientation of this partnership.

The bilateral relationship at present, which has alternated between cooperation and friction, is shaped primarily by recent political developments in Bangladesh and its foreign policy direction. The historical trajectory of Bangladesh's domestic and external politics, therefore, remains very important for understanding its current geopolitical position vis-à-vis India. The memories of the 1971 conflict continue to cast a shadow over public opinion and diplomatic relations between the two countries. For example, the government of India's efforts to promote a shared cultural heritage, as evidenced by its willingness to cooperate with the

Bangladeshi government to rehabilitate the ancestral property of the Oscar-winning filmmaker Satyajit Ray, attest to enduring cultural ties that transcend momentary political frictions (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025). However, this apparently affable relationship has been marred by serious internal conflicts and unfulfilled grievances in Bangladesh in recent times. Following the ethnic cleansing operations of the Burmese government in Myanmar in 2017, the Rohingya refugee issue has become a significant humanitarian and security issue, with Bangladesh hosting more than 1 million refugees in large refugee camps (Poidevin, Reuters, 2015). While India recognised the humanitarian aspect of the problem, the country's policy responses were limited by security concerns about the security risks of illegal migration and infiltration of terrorist camps into India from the camps through the region's porous borders and the threat they pose to India's eastern states. The porous Indo-Bangladesh border has been used by the migration of millions of Bangladeshi people into different states in India. It is this migration that is supported by organised networks of agents. This phenomenon was initially concentrated in West Bengal, Assam, and the northeastern states, but has now expanded to other states of India. For instance, they are estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands in Maharashtra, with high concentrations in urban centres such as Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Pune, Aurangabad, Bhiwandi, Malegaon, and the coastal regions. These migrants are often employed in intensive labour industries, such as construction, roadwork, and metro work. More and more, the Bangladeshi migrants are opting to use sea routes. They are also accessing new areas, such as Odisha, by boat, which has led to a surge in illegal settlements across districts, including Kendrapara, Nawarangpur, Malkangiri, Bhubaneswar, Puri, Chilika, Ganjam, Balasore, and Keonjhar (Mahajan, 2025). Moreover, transboundary water sharing became one of the most delicate yet structurally constrained aspects of the India-Bangladesh relationship during Hasina's rule. Although the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty (1996) was a rare model of bilateral collaboration, the inability to finalise the Teesta River treaty, despite its near-finalisation in 2011, exposed the constraints of executive diplomacy in India-Bangladesh relations, where the subnational interest of West Bengal outweighed strategic considerations. Hasina, in the face of successive water scarcity, dry-season flows, and river pollution, consistently framed water as a function of existential development in Bangladesh, unlike in India, where domestic political vetoes and hydrostrategic prudence influenced policy responses. However, Hasina adopted a pragmatic approach of gradual involvement of the Joint Rivers Commission and selective agreements, such as the 2022 Kushiyara River MoU, indicating an effort to compartmentalise the unresolved conflict and maintain cooperation at the broader strategic level. The water problem was therefore a

structural nuisance. This issue was addressed but not resolved, underlining the imbalance between political will and institutional capacity in India-Bangladesh hydro-diplomacy.

## **The Emerging Uncertainties under Younis's Leadership and the Changing Dynamics of India-Bangladesh Relations**

There has been a noticeable decline in bilateral relations between the governments of India and Bangladesh under the interim government led by Yunus, marked by diplomatic restraint, a lack of strategic trust, and an increasing prevalence of hostility between the two nations. Unlike the Hasina period, which was characterised by strong security coordination, economic interdependence, and political alignment, the Yunus government has sought to reposition Bangladesh's foreign policy. The shift has undermined the mutual strategic understanding between the two countries, which had previously guided bilateral relations in a positive manner, particularly in counterterrorism, border control, and regional connectivity. It has led New Delhi to view Dhaka as less predictable and less reliable as a partner. At a more analytical level, this relational degradation represents an ideological shift in Bangladeshi domestic politics which has increasingly worked against India's strategic interests. The temporary political space has eased the reinforcement of nationalist, Islamist, and anti-establishment discourses, which present India as a hegemonic, intrusive and complicit factor in Bangladesh's historical political imbalances. The contrast between this ideological realignment and India's interests in a stable, secular, and India-friendly Bangladesh is so sharp that it has, in turn, given way to other external forces. As a result, India's long-standing political, economic, and security investments in Bangladesh have grown increasingly vulnerable to local political sentiments.

During Muhammad Yunus's interim rule in Bangladesh, a perceptible shift in the country's geopolitical orientation away from India has become evident. It has gradually revealed through symbolic statements and revisionist rhetoric that directly challenge India's sovereignty and the delicate regional equilibrium. A salient point of this trend is the propagandist portrayal of Bangladesh as the purported "guardian of the Seven Sisters of India" (Roy, 2025). This representation tacitly challenges India's sovereign claim over its Northeastern States and reopens narratives of latent irredentism. The rhetoric was further heightened when a controversial map reportedly surfaced during diplomatic exchanges with Pakistan, showing how parts of India's northeast were subsumed under Bangladesh's strategic ambitions (The New India Express, 2025). In the world of geopolitics, cartographic symbolism of this kind is not merely rhetorical; maps act as spatial claims. Nevertheless, for New Delhi,

these developments forecast a deliberate attempt to mark a shift in the structural dynamics of India-Bangladesh relations. According to a few, it was deliberately intended to supersede the spirit of cooperation and security that was part of the cooperative security structure established during the Hasina administration and to replace it with strategic indeterminacy and nationalist posturing.

Concurrently, the underlying rationale for this strategic shift is evident in Bangladesh's growing receptivity to Chinese investments in ports and connectivity projects linked to sea routes. A concrete example is Payra, where Chinese enterprises, particularly China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), have been involved in the construction of core port infrastructure under major agreements (New Age, 2016). Mongla has also taken a central role in China's financing and modernisation plan; reports conducted in line with the 2025 plan indicate Beijing's intention to extend several hundred million dollars in loan capital for the modernisation of Mongla port, thereby cementing China's enduring logistical footprint (Paul, 2025). Furthermore, analysts regularly highlight Beijing's role in developing the ports and related infrastructure connected to Chattogram (Chittagong), one of the most important junctions for Bangladesh's foreign trade (Davis, 20325). Taken together, these China-centric initiatives heighten Bangladesh's physical economic dependence on China while simultaneously fostering strategic anxiety in India.

The India-Bangladesh bilateral relations worsened after the killing of a youth leader, Sharif Osman Hadi, on 18 December 2025, the co-founder and spokesperson of radical Inquilab Mancha. It served as a trigger for the mass mobilisation and the loud anti-India outcry across different parts of Bangladesh. The incident sparked extensive protests as well as violent unrest across Bangladesh, which included attacks against major media houses and the growing rise of anti-India sentiments. Participants expressed intense criticism of the authorities' seeming failure to ensure justice; furthermore, some expressed their anger against India, alleging that the purported assassins of Hadi had taken refuge in India. It further strained bilateral relations. The subsequent protests, accompanied by political organisations and social media narratives, portray India as a morally complicit and strategically overbearing nation. It has escalated widespread resentment. Furthermore, fringe political entities - including the National Citizen Party (NCP) - called in public for the Indian High Commission to be closed down until alleged accountability was met. Following this civil unrest, the Republic of Bangladesh has decided to suspend its visa and consular service within the territorial boundaries of the Republic of India, citing what officials have referred to as "unforeseen or unavoidable circumstances," in response

to growing diplomatic unrest, and extended the suspension to the High Commission based in New Delhi, as well as the ones located in Tripura and Siliguri (Firstpost, 2025). The situation reflects the political uncertainty ahead of the next elections in Bangladesh in February 2026 and how such anti-Indian framing is shaping the development of domestic mobilisation in crisis conditions.

## **The New Bangladesh-China-Pakistan Axis: A New Challenge for India's Regional Interests**

The development of strategic convergence among Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan has raised significant concern in India, as it has direct implications for India's security posture in the eastern and northeastern regions. Already a leading defence supplier to Bangladesh, China has increasingly become the dominant source of arms supplier of Dhaka in the last ten years, equalling approximately 5770 per cent of Dhaka's defence imports, including Type035 submarines, guided missile frigates, Bangladeshi Air Force fighter planes and advanced missiles, all of which would strengthen the Chinese power grip in the Bay of Bengal and also indicate the strengthening of the defence relationship. Meanwhile, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Bangladesh, including the Payra Power Plant and financing for the Dhaka Elevated Motorway, have enhanced Beijing's economic influence in the region.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's increased assurance in its relations with Pakistan stands in sharp contrast to a more conservative stance under Sheikh Hasina. Defence contacts have been revived, high-level visits have occurred, and Pakistan has been seen to support each other in multilateral forums. It has become alarming for New Delhi, especially since Pakistan has long-time connections with insurgents in the Northeast of India. India has been pointing out the security weaknesses of its eastern borders, in particular, in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, where the issue of illegal migration, cross-border crimes and radicalisation has posed a persistent threat to the security strategist of India. These fears were further heightened by the recent trilateral meeting in Kunming in 2025, at which officials from the foreign ministries of Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan agreed to strengthen cooperation in trade, investment, agricultural technology, maritime cooperation, and connectivity infrastructure (Tiwari, 2025). Additionally, they decided to establish a joint working group to expedite this cooperation. Although it is often framed as an economic affair, the institutionalisation of the Bangladesh-China-Pakistan trilateral platform indicates a substantial shift from conventional bilateralism, with significant geopolitical implications. This growing China-Bangladesh and Pakistan axis

has evolved into a nascent eastern strategic axis that challenges the strategic depth of India's Neighbourhood First and Act East policies.

### **Policy Recommendations to India**

The above discussion highlights the urgency of a set of future-oriented policy options that will enable India to respond responsibly to Bangladesh's evolving politics and strategic orientation while preserving domestic interests, maintaining regional stability, and rebuilding bilateral trust over the long term.

First, the recalibration of contemporary Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis Bangladesh should not be conceived in the existing security-centric or personality-driven paradigm. While the preservation of strategic assets - such as the Siliguri Corridor - remains non-negotiable, for New Delhi, there needs to be a greater degree of diplomatic outreach to the broadest spectrum of Bangladeshi political stakeholders, including civil society and youths, as well as key economic actors. Restoration of trust requires challenging perceptions of inequality and asymmetry, with a focus on mutual benefit, sovereign equality, and non-interference, alongside a strong strategy to combat misinformation that fuels anti-India sentiment. A renewed focus on cultural diplomacy, a standard historiography of 1971, and subnational cooperation, particularly in border regions, can help reconstitute the emotional and social links that underpin a sustainable bilateral relationship.

Second, India will have to address Bangladesh's tilt towards China and Pakistan through a paradigm of competitive, rather than coercive, regionalism. It requires the expeditious implementation of high-impact connectivity and development initiatives, the disbursement of Lines of Credit, and the provision of credible alternative financing mechanisms, with transparency, local employment, and sustainability at the forefront. At the strategic echelon, India should strengthen multilateral institutions such as BIMSTEC and simultaneously develop economic interdependence at the bilateral level, making strategic drift a costly decision for Dhaka. Concurrently, stringent governance at the nation's borders must be ensured, along with protection of trade against SAFTA circumvention, and measured security preparedness must be harmonised with continuous political preparedness. An equilibrium among deterrence, diplomacy, and developmental statecraft is the only viable way for India to safeguard stability in its eastern neighbourhood.

Thirdly, India should pursue a well-calibrated regional and extraregional counterbalancing policy to address the emergent Bangladesh-China-Pakistan axis. New Delhi

needs to strengthen its strategic coordination with like-minded partners such as Japan, along the lines of the "ASEAN" and the Indo-Pacific on a selective basis, in the areas of infrastructure, maritime security and supply chain resilience in the Bay of Bengal. By promoting joint or triangular development projects in Bangladesh, particularly in ports, energy, and digital connectivity, India can reduce unidirectional Chinese influence without forcing Dhaka to make dichotomous choices. At the same time, strengthening cooperation in intelligence and maritime domain awareness, as well as the counter-battle terrorism framework with regional partners, will help India protect its eastern flank while retaining strategic flexibility in a more and more multipolar South Asia.

Alternatively, the Modi government may indulge the United States' involvement in a more nuanced, issue-by-issue manner rather than through an overt strategic alignment. New Delhi needs to pursue selectively coordinated engagement with the United States, over the areas like economic resilience, governance reforms, climate financing and humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh, where Washington has an institutional leverage and normative influence. By aligning US developmental engagement with India's priorities on connectivity and the neighbourhood, while avoiding the securitisation of the relationship, India can influence Bangladesh's external choices through incentives rather than coercion. Such an approach would reduce Dhaka's excessive reliance on China and curtail Pakistan's strategic latitude.

## **Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations illustrates how history, ideologies, and the diverse influences of national leaders intersected to shape the evolving dynamics of South Asian geopolitics. For more than ten years under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has been a stabilising pillar in the Indian neighbourhood in the East. Bangladesh has been central to enhancing connectivity for the Northeast and to solidify a rules-based regional order aligned with the Indian Neighbourhood First and Act East policies. However, the sudden political shift in Dhaka and the resulting reconfiguration of the foreign policy of the interim Yunus regime were not part of commonplace political transfers; rather, they were a strategic perturbation. It has disrupted the existing power equilibrium in South Asia.

The latest outbreak of anti-India rallies taking place within Bangladesh, which was furthered with nationalist and Islamist (rhetorical) elements, has further undermined people-to-

people goodwill, which has historically been nurtured by the shared recollections and memories of the 1971 Liberation War. This is because India is increasingly being portrayed as hegemonic and intrusive in Bangladeshi domestic discourse. It transformed bilateral clashes, once mourned by elite politics, into mass-level sentimental aggression. This ideological realignment has created fertile ground for external actors to expand their influence, undermining India's long-term strategic investments in Bangladesh.

More critically, the new axis between Bangladesh, China and Pakistan represents a structural challenge to India's national security architecture. The rise in China's defence sales, infrastructure investments, and strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal, combined with Pakistan's renewed diplomatic and security advances toward Dhaka, all indicate India's diminishing strategic space in the east. The institutionalisation of trilateral cooperation, as evident in the recent Kunming meeting, adds to India's apprehensions regarding encirclement, the security of the Siliguri Corridor, and the stability of the Northeast. Although the deployment of Indian troops along the eastern border provides short-term deterrence, it is time to devise a sustainable political and diplomatic mechanism suited to the rapidly realigning neighbourhoods.

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