



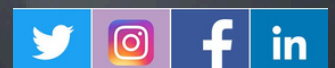
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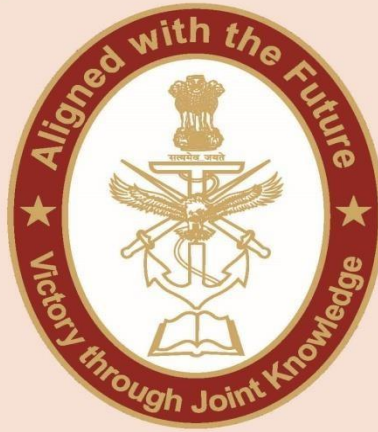
THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF INDIA- BANGLADESH RELATIONS- NAVIGATING COOPERATION AND CHALLENGES

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The changing dynamics of India-Bangladesh Relations- Navigating cooperation and challenges



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Abstract

Factors like culture, history, and geography have molded the India and Bangladesh ties for decades. India played an important role in the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.¹ Thereafter, their relations have been characterized by both cooperation and conflict. Trade, water-sharing, border management, and security have been key areas of engagement. The recent change of government in Bangladesh and coming up of the interim government has brought a change in the dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh relations, while also impacting the security apparatus of the South Asian region. This paper explores the evolving landscape of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral ties while analyzing the main areas of collaboration and friction.

Timeline of Indo-Bangladesh relations

The beginning of the relations (1971-1975)- The seeds of the relationship were sown in 1971, when India provided support to the Bangladeshi freedom movement. India gave military and humanitarian aid to Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh was carved out as a separate nation from Pakistan under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.ⁱⁱ The initial four years were of close cooperation, as both nations signed the Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace in 1972.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regime Changes and its impact (1975-2008)- The Bangladesh premier, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated in 1975.^{iv} This development led to drastic changes in the political landscape of the country. The following years first saw the coming of military regimes and then the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. This continuous shift in the leadership of Bangladesh amalgamated in tense relations as cross- border terrorism grew. Illegal migration from Bangladesh to the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam saw an alarming upsurge.^v Another area that sparked friction was the water-sharing arrangement of the Ganga and Teesta rivers. Security issues also acquired the main stage as rebel groups from northeastern states of India were finding shelter in Bangladesh.

Restoration and deepening of Ties (2009-Present)- Things started to change in a positive light with the coming of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina. The Awami League took initiatives to resolve security disputes and shut down anti-India insurgent activities. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in the year 2015 settled the border enclave issues by transferring 111 Indian enclaves to Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves to India.^{vi} This relationship progressed further by signing of agreements on energy cooperation and regular high-level visits.

Areas of collaboration between India and Bangladesh

India and Bangladesh have built a very strong and comprehensive relationship over the decades. Their collaboration ranges from initiatives surrounding maritime security in the

Bay of Bengal to successful counter terrorist operations. They both have been part of key alliances in the region. Key areas of cooperation are discussed below:

Bilateral trade relations- In the financial year 2024, bilateral trade between the two countries stood at US\$ 11.06 billion.^{vii} In Bangladesh's trade partner list, India stands at second position. India exports machinery, chemicals and food products to Bangladesh, while importing garments, jute and leather. Connectivity through rivers and ports has been enhanced by the signing of the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade. Economic interdependence has led to mutual prosperity between the two countries. Since the last two decades, Indian investments in Bangladesh have been rising, especially in the energy and infrastructure sectors. Bangladesh's economic progress has made it an ideal trade partner for India.

Counter-Terrorism and Cross-Border Crimes- Due to the presence of an open border, it forms a vital aspect of India Bangladesh relations. Initiatives like joint border patrols have led to a significant reduction in transnational crimes. Nowadays, use of drones for surveillance in the border areas has become a game changer. Joint operations between India and Bangladesh have successfully nabbed terrorists and criminals who function along the border.^{viii} In the battle against extremism, intelligence-sharing arrangements have proved to be quite effective. Collaborative efforts in drug and human trafficking cases help to safeguard regional stability. India offers training sessions in combating terrorism to empower the Bangladeshi security agencies. Joint Working Groups on Surveillance and Border Management are also in place to deal with the rising new issues.

Maritime Security in Bay of Bengal- The maritime boundary dispute in the Bay of Bengal was resolved in 2014 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration by clearly demarcating territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) for both the countries.^{ix} It has led to mutual benefit as both nations could focus on developing the "Blue Economy." Since then, bilateral ties have improved and unlocking the prospects for fishing, oil, and gas exploration.

Stability and Peace in Northeastern states of India- The northeastern states of India, namely Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, share a border length of approximately 1800 km.^x The insurgents had been active in the border area, creating havoc in these states. Bangladesh used to provide a safe haven to them. The strengthening of ties between India and Bangladesh led to a decline in such activities. Bangladesh no longer permits anti-India activities from its soil. This has led to stability in India's northeast, thus culminating in the development of infrastructure.

Regional Alliances- India and Bangladesh are part of regional cooperative frameworks like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN, and IORA and play a crucial role in their functioning. Together they promote collective security and regional integration. Formed in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has come a long way. With both countries' joint efforts, "GSAT-9," also known as the SAARC Satellite, was launched in 2017 to provide telecommunication, tele-education, and weather alerts services.^{xi} They have strongly supported endeavors like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). Bangladesh often plays a mediation role to lower tensions among member states of SAARC.

In Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), both nations are part of the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement which focuses on enhancing ocean trade in the Bay of Bengal.^{xii} Together they participate in various joint military exercises and disaster management mock drills. Through Bangladesh Bhutan India and Nepal (BBIN) initiative, India and Bangladesh are carrying out development projects in means of transport, like rail, road, and waterways. Timely revision of the India-Bangladesh Protocol Route leads to the addition of new routes.^{xiii} Along with the emphasis on economic boost, it also calls for an eco- friendly mode of cargo transport. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) prioritises coastal community development. Both countries strive to combat marine pollution and sign environmental protection deals to secure the Indian Ocean region.

Balancing China's Belt and Road Initiative- Bangladesh is part of the Belt and Road

Initiative of China. Padma Bridge Rail Link, Payra Deep Sea Port, and Karnaphuli Tunnel Project are a few projects where Bangladesh took Chinese investments.^{xiv} Despite this, Bangladesh is quite cautious to maintain its strategic balance by diversifying its funding needs through other countries like Japan, the US, and European countries. It is also getting involved in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with India, Japan, and ASEAN countries. India also tries to engage more in the region and present itself as an alternative to China through its Act East policy and Mausam project.^{xv} Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link and Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant are a few infrastructure projects in Bangladesh in which India has invested.^{xvi} Time and again Bangladesh has received credit lines and development assistance from India.

Challenges in India-Bangladesh relations

Several obstacles need to be cleared for boosting ties between India and Bangladesh. This ranges from trade related concerns, border management and regional politics. The fall of Sheikh Hasina's government last year, has amplified these issues. The following section covers an overview of key challenges:

Current challenges- In the constantly changing geo-political scenario, India and Bangladesh are witnessing evolved nature of challenges. The recent transition of power in Bangladesh has strained its diplomatic relations with India. After the fall of Awami League government in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina sought political refuge in India. And now, India is facing pressure to accept the extradition request of the current government of Bangladesh. The bilateral relationship of India and Bangladesh stands at crossroads today. The anti-India elements are gaining ground, as witnessed in attacks on Hindu temples in Bangladesh. Recently, India has backed out from a trans-shipment facility that permitted exports from Bangladesh to enter other countries through Indian borders. This move will severely impact Bangladesh's trade especially in the garment arena as it will give rise to cost of logistical operations.

Cross-border Management and Safety- India shares the longest border with

Bangladesh, spanning over four thousand kilometers; it serves as an ideal ground for offenses like

smuggling, illegal border crossing, and trans-border crimes.^{xvii} Illegal immigration has created numerous political and social strains, especially in the state of Assam. Cattle smuggling has become rampant in recent times. Border Security Force (BSF) of India and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) often clash resulting in border killings at times.^{xviii}

China Factor- Given the fact that China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, India is wary of China's increasing influence in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has received support from the Chinese government in its port projects. As compared to the Indian projects in Bangladesh, the Chinese projects get completed at a faster pace. Thus India needs to deliver the projects on time. In the defence sector, Bangladesh imports tanks, submarines, fighter jets, etc. from China. Thus, constituting around 70 percent of its military requirements from China.^{xix} In 2016, China supplied two Type 035G submarines to Bangladesh.^{xx} Both the nations are also involved in talks for Bangladesh to acquire New-Generation Multirole Fighter Jets from China. This economic overtake of China as a key supplier in the region, creates instability not only for India but also for the whole South Asian region.

Water Sharing Disputes- There are 54 rivers along the borders of India and Bangladesh, and mainly the Teesta River has been an area of concern.^{xxi} River water disputes have repercussions on agriculture and related occupations. Bangladesh has put forward a demand to have 50% of the Teesta's water during December – March, which is a dry season in Bangladesh.^{xxii} West Bengal has opposed this proposal as it is concerned that it will impact its water requirement. The usage of the Ganga River is regulated by the Ganges Water Treaty signed in 1996.^{xxiii} This 30-year water-sharing agreement between both states has till now proved successful but is badly affected by fluctuating flow of water during scarcity seasons. At other times, silt and sand accumulate in the riverbeds, leading to reduced water flow and navigation issues. India sometimes fails to share upstream data, which makes it difficult for Bangladesh to

forecast flood levels and manage water assets efficiently.

Trade and Economic Challenges- Though India is having a positive balance of trade with Bangladesh, Bangladesh still struggles to gain access to Indian economic markets. Trade flow is impacted by complicated procedures and policies followed by India. Connectivity is another major block for the two countries as rail, road, and waterway projects are delayed.^{xxiv} Revenue collection is adversely affected by informal trade across the borders. Also trade negotiations are occurring at a slow pace, which results in the accumulation of unresolved disputes.

Menace of Biased Reporting- Despite the strong ties; distortion of facts by the media creates confusion in both the countries. Sometimes, small conflicts are presented as major disputes, while other time, only one side of the event is covered. It influences the perception of masses at both the sides of borders and leads to lack of public trust. For example, on the issue of illegal migration, Bangladeshi media reports Indian response, as unnecessarily aggressive, while the Indian media exaggerates the scale of people illegally crossing the borders without mentioning the proper causes for the migration.

Conclusion

With more than five decades of partnership between the two countries, the progress made in trade, regional connectivity, and border management reflects the strong nature of friendship between Bangladesh and India. For two reasons, it is critical for India to sustain a resilient partnership with Bangladesh- one is to protect its northeastern borders, and the other is to secure stability in the South Asian region and keep it away from any external impact. The relationship is mutually beneficial for Bangladesh too, as it leads to its security and economic growth. Along with indulging in dialogues to resolve current issues, enhancing maritime security and collaboration on climate change initiatives will boost the ties. Though, the current challenges deeply impact the bilateral ties between the two nations.

The BIMSTEC Summit, which is scheduled to take place this year, is providing a hope

where leaders of both India and Bangladesh might be involved in a direct dialogue.^{xxv} The recent remark by the current Bangladesh leader Muhammad Yunus “Bangladesh has no option but to have good ties with India” showcases the realisation by Bangladesh of Delhi's importance.^{xxvii} Still at the present moment, expecting normalcy too soon is not feasible. Stability in the South Asian region has been the prime focus of India. And this can be secured through addressing the current issues of Bangladesh with caution.

Recommendations for improving relations

Boosting Economic and Trade Ties- There is a need to tackle the trade imbalance suffered by Bangladesh by reducing taxes and simplifying the policies. Border *haats* which are the marketplaces along the border should be promoted. Border trade points should be upgraded. Investments should be made by India especially in sectors like technology and manufacturing which will help Bangladesh to elevate its status of Least developed country.^{xxvi}

Resolving Water Disputes- Negotiations regarding Teesta River water should be done at a faster pace to ensure fair water distribution. Timely disposal of water flow information should be given by upstream state-India, this can be made possible by enhancing cooperation through Joint rivers commission (JRC). Joint initiatives should be taken into account for flood control.

Enhancing Connectivity- For regional integration, connectivity needs to be strengthened across all the modes of transport. Existing projects should be completed timely, and new infrastructure projects should be explored. Regional air corridor networks to be boosted by increasing daily direct flights between key cities. The number of Integrated Check

Posts (ICPs) to be increased to promote hassle-free movement of commodities and people travelling for tourism.^{xxvii}

Promoting Cultural and People-to-People Ties- To honor historical and cultural

connections, joint events like festival celebrations, music & art fairs and exhibitions should be organized. Universities and colleges should annually hold student exchange programmes. Sports events especially related to the games which are popular in both the countries like Cricket and Football should be held to engage the youth population. Visa regulations should be eased so that students and tourists and even businessmen can move across the border seamlessly.

Climate and Environmental Cooperation- Efforts for Joint Disaster Management should be made to manage natural disasters like managing floods and cyclones impacting both India and Bangladesh. Projects covering hydroelectricity, solar and wind power should be fast tracked. Joint studies led by expert groups on the consequences of climate change will help both the countries to come up with sustainable practices. Wetlands spanning India and Bangladesh to be protected by working on cross -border conservation projects.

Diplomatic Engagement- Both the nations should maximise their cooperation by working closely in the regional alliances like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN. Understanding the significance of Bangladesh at the broader level, frequent official visits should be scheduled to solve the emerging issues at the earliest.

Advocate unbiased reporting- Efforts should be made to stop the spread of misleading information, it can be made possible by ensuring media across the borders act responsibly especially on sensitive issues. Fact checking mechanisms should be in place for authentic reporting. People should be educated to filter out false news and critically analyse any news item without any bias.

DISCLAIMER

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