



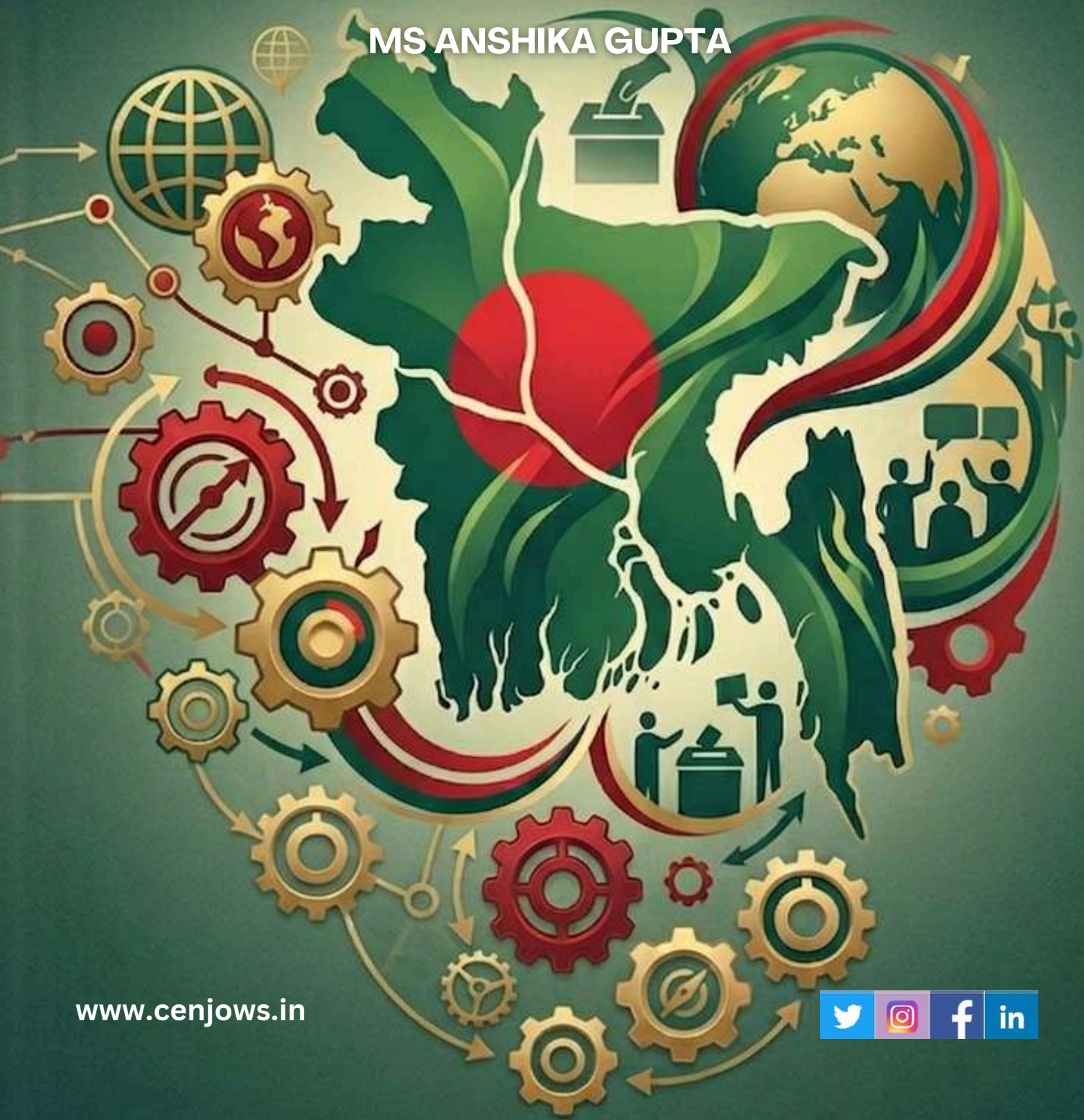
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BANGLADESH: POLITICAL ENGINEERING AND DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY

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Bangladesh: Political Engineering and Democratic Fragility



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Abstract

Bangladesh occupies a strategically critical position in South Asia, sitting at the convergence of South Asian and Southeast Asian geopolitical dynamics. Over the past five decades, its political trajectory has been shaped not merely by the intensities of domestic contestation but by intersecting currents of external strategic competition, economic engineering, and security frameworks associated with United States-led global interventions. This paper examines how Bangladesh's democratic institutions, political economy, and security orientation have been progressively shaped and, in key respects, distorted by broader international structures. The paper further illustrates with empirical specificity how U.S. intervention through the Global War on Terror (GWOT) produced tangible proxy dynamics, non-state actor proliferation, and covert financing networks that continue to jeopardise regional stability, using the theoretical lens of state fragility as an externally constituted condition. The study makes the case that understanding the nation's vulnerabilities requires placing them in the context of the systemic forces of the global security and economic order,

including the strategic fallout from American military and political intervention in South Asia. This paper also highlights the implications of these dynamics for India's national defence doctrine, the security of its northeastern states, and its strategic calculations in the Bay of Bengal.

Keywords: Bangladesh; India; Proxy Wars; Non-State Actors; Indo-Pacific

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh's strategic importance in South Asia has increased significantly. Bangladesh is a key player in the regional security architecture because of its location at the meeting point of South and Southeast Asia, its 4,000-kilometre border with India, and its extensive coastline along the Bay of Bengal. It is an essential factor in bilateral and multilateral security calculations due to its close proximity to the northeastern states of India, its involvement in regional connectivity corridors, and its potential as a maritime strategic hub.

Despite this significance, internal governance metrics, electoral competitiveness, corruption indices, poverty rates, and institutional capacity have continuously been given priority in academic and policy analyses of Bangladesh as the main factors influencing its political stability or fragility. The degree to which forces functioning within the international political economy and global security order have constituted, or at least exacerbated, Bangladesh's political situation is often obscured by these indicators, despite their undeniable relevance.

M. Z. Islam Khan (2013) argues that state fragility is more precisely understood as "the extent to which the actual practices and capacities of states differ from their idealised image engendered by global structures," a definition that shifts analytical attention from domestic pathology to systemic causation (Khan 2013, 22-47).¹ This paper deploys that framework while enriching it with empirical evidence on non-state actors and covert financing networks to demonstrate how Bangladesh has been shaped by the strategic ripples of external intervention.

Proxy Dynamics and State Fragility: The Bangladesh Case

Proxy war, in its classical Cold War incarnation, denoted the indirect prosecution of strategic competition through the support of local combatants. In the post-Cold War and contemporary Indo-Pacific context, proxy dynamics have assumed more diffuse and structurally embedded forms. Economic leverage, development assistance conditionality, ideological influence through civil society organisations, and security sector training programmes collectively constitute what Carment, Stewart, and Samy (2010, 15)² describe as the new grammar of proxy competition.

Bangladesh presents a particularly acute case of these dynamics. Its fragile institutions, contested political identities, and high dependence on external economic flows create precisely the conditions in which proxy instruments are most effective. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has recognised eight global factors affecting fragile states: international trade barriers, transnational organised crime, military goods markets, engagement with non-state armed groups, radical ideological diffusion, migration, economic and financial liberalisation, and post-conflict economic aid (OECD 2012, 18).³ Virtually all of these factors have been operative in Bangladesh at different historical junctures, functioning not merely as background conditions but as active shapers of domestic political outcomes.

Therefore, proxy dynamics in Bangladesh must be understood not only in terms of the country's susceptibility to external influence but also in terms of the concrete mechanisms through which U.S. intervention generated new threat actors.

Historical Evolution: External Imprinting and Constitutional Erosion

- **The Birth of Bangladesh and Early Geopolitical Imprinting**

The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was itself a product of Cold War geopolitical calculations. The Bengali nationalist movement unfolded within an international environment in which great-power interests substantially constrained the options available to smaller actors. The United States, prioritising its strategic relationship with Pakistan as part of Cold War containment and its developing rapprochement with China, voted alongside Pakistan in the United Nations Security Council despite

widespread documentation of Pakistani military atrocities against the Bengali population (Khan 2013, 27-28; Baxter 1997, 145-148).⁴ This initial positioning in which Washington prioritised strategic alignment over democratic self-determination established a template that would recur across subsequent decades of U.S. engagement with Bangladesh.

The Soviet Union's veto of two Security Council resolutions ultimately provided the political cover that facilitated Bangladesh's emergence. India's military intervention, which proved decisive in the conflict, was itself enabled by the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, providing a strategic counterweight to potential American or Chinese intervention (Baxter 1997, 145-148).⁵ Bangladesh was, from the very moment of its birth, a product of major-power politics as much as of Bengali self-determination.

- **Military Rule, Islamisation, and the Seeds of Militant Mobilisation**

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 ushered in a prolonged period of military governance that fundamentally reshaped Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policy orientation. Successive military administrations under Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990) sought external legitimacy through strategic realignment and the gradual incorporation of Islamic identity into state ideology. The secularist principle of the 1972 constitution was progressively diluted in exchange for political and economic support from oil-rich Arab states and access to the Middle Eastern labour market. Under the 8th constitutional amendment of 1988, Islam was declared the state religion (Baxter, 1997, 168-171; Khan, 2013, 29).⁶

This Islamisation of the state was not merely a domestic political adjustment; it had direct consequences for the emergence of terrorist networks. During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), Bangladeshi volunteers were drawn to fight with Mujahideen forces, gaining exposure to combat training, explosives expertise, and Salafi-jihadist ideology in camps supported by Saudi and Pakistani patrons and enabled by a CIA-coordinated covert assistance programme whose strategic ripples would reverberate across South Asia for decades (International Crisis Group 2017; Ganguly 2006).⁷ Returning fighters leveraged this experience in domestic terrorist

activities, culminating in the formation of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) in April 1992, led by a core group of Afghan war veterans.

In Bangladesh, the military regimes of the period did not merely fail to contain these returning fighters; they actively created political and institutional space for Islamist mobilisation as part of their own legitimacy-seeking strategies (Khan 2013, 29; International Crisis Group 2017).⁸

- **Democratisation and Structural Constraints**

Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy in 1991 following mass popular agitation against military rule. However, the restoration of competitive politics occurred against a background of deep structural vulnerabilities. The political system that emerged was marked by intense polarisation between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), organisationally structured around patron-client networks that reproduced instability across successive governments (Jahan and Amundsen 2012).⁹ The percentage of businessman-legislators in the national parliament increased from less than 30 percent in the 1970s to 56 percent by the early 2010s (Jahan and Amundsen 2012)¹⁰, reflecting what Sobhan (2004, 4101-4108)¹¹ identified as the growth of a parasitic domestic bourgeoisie whose interests were tied to external linkages rather than productive domestic capacity.

- **Global Economic Structures and Bangladesh's Political Fragility**

Bangladesh's integration into the global economy has been the central axis around which its development trajectory has rotated. While this integration has facilitated sustained GDP growth of approximately 6 percent per annum over the decade preceding 2012, it has simultaneously produced structural dependencies that amplify political and economic vulnerabilities (Khan 2013, 37)¹². The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, which accounts for over three-quarters of Bangladesh's export earnings, exemplifies this dynamic. A sewing machine operator in Bangladesh earned approximately US \$584 per year against US \$22,418 in Australia and US \$22,402 in the United Kingdom (World Development Report 2013, cited in Khan 2013, 41).¹³

Market access asymmetries further compound this vulnerability. In 2001, the United States collected duties of approximately US \$331 million on US \$2.5 billion of Bangladeshi RMG imports, slightly more than the US \$330 million collected on US \$30 billion of imports from France (Smith 2002).¹⁴ This asymmetry illustrates what Muhammad characterised as a situation in which "the fate of Bangladesh is now being determined not by any elected bodies... but by bureaucratic global institutions." A political class dependent on external economic flows has strong incentives to maintain relations with external patrons, even at the cost of domestic political autonomy.

Sobhan (2004)¹⁵ documented that the process of dependent development created a domestic elite whose fortunes were tied to the maintenance of external linkages. This structural feature had direct implications for Bangladesh's susceptibility to proxy dynamics: an elite whose political survival depended on external economic favour was simultaneously an elite whose domestic political choices were constrained by external preferences. The result was a Bangladesh whose internal political settlements were perpetually subject to renegotiation under external pressure, the condition that makes proxy competition both possible and effective (Carment, Stewart, and Samy 2010, 22-24).¹⁶

The Global War on Terror: Strategic Ripples, Proxy Dynamics, and Terrorism in Bangladesh

- **The GWOT as a Structural Force**

The security dimension of Bangladesh's political fragility was substantially transformed by the United States-declared GWoT following the events of September 11, 2001. The GWoT reshaped security frameworks across South Asia, but its impact on Bangladesh warrants specific analytical attention because it operated through two distinct and partially contradictory mechanisms. On the one hand, the GWoT narrative securitised Bangladesh as a potential hub for extremist organisations, creating external pressure for institutional reform and counter-terrorism cooperation. On the other hand, U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, the strategic

heart of the GWoT, generated blowback effects that strengthened transnational jihadist networks whose operational tentacles reached into Bangladesh (Fink 2010; International Crisis Group 2017).¹⁷

The United States redesignated its foreign assistance and military training priorities after 2001, channelling resources toward Pakistan as the primary operational partner in the GWoT. Before 2002, India and Bangladesh were the largest recipients of U.S. bilateral aid in South Asia. After 2001, Pakistan became the primary focus of U.S. assistance (Lum 2006; Vaughn 2010, 13).¹⁸ The allocation for counter-terrorism programmes, under the Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related Programs of Bangladesh, increased from nil in 2003 to US \$6,301 thousand in 2008, while International Military Education and Training and Foreign Military Financing allocations also registered consistent upward trends (Lum 2006; Vaughn 2010, 13).¹⁹ This reconfiguration of assistance channelled heavily through Pakistan had the effect of strengthening Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), whose role in sponsoring terrorist networks operating in Bangladesh has been extensively documented.

- **Non-State Actor Networks: HuJI-B, JMB, and Their Transnational Connections**

Bangladesh's jihadist landscape is dominated by two organisations: Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), the latter now complemented by Ansarul Islam, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda's South Asian branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Both organisations have demonstrated the capacity to conduct attacks that cross Bangladesh's borders into Indian territory, constituting a direct and ongoing threat to India's national security.

HuJI-B, formally established in April 1992 by returning Afghan Mujahideen veterans, provides the most direct institutional link between the U.S.-backed covert proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the emergence of terrorist networks threatening India (International Crisis Group 2017; Ganguly 2006).²⁰ HuJI-B's declared objective was to overthrow the secular Bangladeshi government and establish Sharia law, and its leadership, including Mufti Abdur Rauf, endorsed Osama bin Laden's February 1998 fatwa calling for attacks on American and allied interests. This nexus enabled HuJI-B to train hundreds of members in Bangladesh and send

fighters abroad. Its operational relationships included groups such as Pakistan's Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami and al-Qaeda's early networks (International Crisis Group 2017).²¹

The Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point has documented HuJI-B's cross-border threat to India: "Attacks attributed to jihadist groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI) are believed to have been launched from the country. Bangladesh's political instability and weak state capacity, however, make it difficult for India to consistently shape Bangladeshi counterterrorism policy" (Shapiro and Fair 2010)²². HuJI-B was implicated in a 2004 grenade attack in Sylhet that injured a British High Commissioner, and its operatives have been arrested in connection with attacks on Indian territory.

JMB, founded in 1998 and publicly prominent from 2001, provides a second critical case study. Its most dramatic action was the near-simultaneous detonation of approximately 459-500 improvised explosive devices across 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts on 17 August 2005, which demonstrated both operational sophistication and nationwide organisational reach (International Crisis Group 2017; IPCS 2014)²³. The group's cross-border activities targeting India have been extensively documented. JMB operatives have been convicted for the 2014 Burdwan blast in West Bengal, where an accidental explosion at a JMB bomb-making facility exposed the group's Indian operations, and for the 2018 Bodh Gaya bombing in Bihar (IPCS 2014; Observer Research Foundation 2019)²⁴.

The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs formally banned JMB and all its factions through a gazette notification on 24 May 2019, citing alerts from the Central Intelligence Bureau about planned attacks in West Bengal (Observer Research Foundation 2019)²⁵. JMB maintains Indian affiliates operating under the designations Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Hindustan. Indian intelligence agencies have reported that JMB and HuJI-B are "increasingly going to use their proxies while carrying out activities in India", seeking to create home-grown outfits to provide Bangladesh with plausible deniability "similar to what the Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammad have been doing in India" (Prokerala 2026)²⁶.

- **Covert Financing: Mechanisms and Networks**

The financing of Bangladeshi terrorist networks constitutes a particularly significant dimension of the broader proxy war dynamic. The Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point has produced a comprehensive account of the funding methods of Bangladeshi terrorist groups, identifying multiple channels: robbery, smuggling, domestic donations, subscriptions, "taxation", foreign NGO funding from West Asian and European countries, hawala networks, and overseas diaspora fundraising (Roul 2011; CTC West Point 2009).²⁷

ISI financing of JMB has been documented through two separate incidents in 2015, in which JMB was found to be receiving financing from officers at the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka. In April 2015, Visa Attaché Mazhar Khan was caught meeting a JMB operative and was implicated in pushing large consignments of fake Indian currency into West Bengal and Assam. In December 2015, Second Secretary Farina Arshad was expelled by Bangladesh after a JMB operative admitted to having received funds from her (Roul 2011; CTC West Point 2009)²⁸. Pakistani diplomats used the cover of official diplomatic status to channel covert financial support to Bangladesh-based terrorist networks, a classic proxy financing mechanism.

JMB's links with the UK-based Bangladeshi diaspora community are well established. Direct communication between al-Muhajiroun's Omar Bakri and JMB chief Abdur Rahman was coordinated by two al-Muhajiroun members, identified as Sajjad and Habibur Rahman, UK-based Bangladeshis who reportedly provided £10,000 to JMB for establishing bomb-making facilities, some of which financed the August 2005 serial bombings (Roul 2011). Known Lashkar-i-Taiba operatives such as Abdul Karim Tunda and Mufti Obaidullah also facilitated JMB's recruitment and training in India and Pakistan (Roul 2011)²⁹.

The broader financing ecosystem identified by the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point also includes what has been described as an "Islamist economy within an economy" in Bangladesh, centred on Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB). JIB controls the largest bank, i.e., Islami Bank of Bangladesh, six universities, and a think tank in Dhaka. The JIB-affiliated economy was reportedly registering annual growth of 7.5-9 per cent against the mainstream economy's 4.5-5 per cent in the late 2000s, leading

analysts to warn that if this differential continued, "there might be a time in 15 years where their economy will be difficult to fight in a monetary sense" (CTC West Point 2009)³⁰. The politicisation of Islamic finance and economic institutions as long-term instruments of power building represents a structural form of covert financing that operates beneath the threshold of conventional counterterrorism monitoring.

- **The GWOT's Democratic Distortions**

The GWoT framework had concrete and measurable consequences for Bangladesh's domestic political institutions that compounded rather than resolved the terrorist threat. The government enacted successive anti-terrorism legislation that expanded the discretionary authority of security agencies. After two amendments, Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Act allowed authorities to seize "suspicious accounts" and arrest individuals on terrorism charges without court orders (Khan 2013, 32; Vaughn 2010, 8-9)³¹. Opposition politicians argued publicly that these provisions were instrumentally deployed against political opponents rather than genuine security threats.

The relationship between external security demands and internal power consolidation is particularly illustrated by the 15th constitutional amendment of 2011. The amendment, ostensibly aimed at reviving Bangladesh's secular constitutional heritage, simultaneously abolished the provision for a neutral caretaker government to oversee elections, which was the central mechanism through which Bangladesh's previous three democratic elections had been conducted (Mostofa and Subedi 2021, 434-436)³². As Khan (2013, 36)³³ identifies, external influence metamorphosed into domestic politics, with "the concept of national security becoming ambiguous and transforming into regime protection and consolidation of the regime's political power, while conforming to the dominant narratives of GWoT fulfilling the need of external powers."

The Global Terrorism Index (2012) reported that after September 2001, global terrorism remained below late-1970s trend levels, only increasing significantly after the United States invasion of Iraq, a finding that implicates U.S. intervention itself as a driver of terrorist mobilisation. The index found no significant correlation between terrorism and key fragility indicators such as poverty, weak governance, or unequal

resource distribution (Global Terrorism Index 2012, 6-7)³⁴. This evidence suggests that the securitisation of Bangladesh under the GWoT framework was as much a product of geopolitical narrative construction as of genuine empirical threat assessment.

- **The AQIS Dimension: U.S. Intervention's Regional Ripples**

The establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014 represents the most direct institutional link between U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and the emergence of a new transnational threat vector operating through Bangladesh. AQIS was formed under the leadership of Asim Umar, an Indian national subsequently killed in a joint U.S.-Afghan military operation in 2019, as a regional affiliate of the core Al-Qaeda organisation, seriously degraded but not destroyed by U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Congressional Research Service 2021)³⁵.

AQIS has involved Bangladeshi members in regional plots, including the 2014 attempt to hijack a Pakistan Navy frigate and the targeted killings of secular bloggers and activists in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2016 (Congressional Research Service 2021; International Crisis Group 2017)³⁶. The organisation represents a structural legacy of U.S. intervention: as core Al-Qaeda was degraded in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its residual networks dispersed across South Asia, finding operational space in states like Bangladesh, whose weak institutions and political instability provided both sanctuary and recruitment pools.

With AQIS designating Bangladesh as part of its operational theatre, the country has been drawn into a transnational terrorist network, whose genesis lies directly in the strategic environment created by U.S. intervention. The U.S. Treasury Department's National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment has noted that "since 9/11, U.S. authorities have made significant progress in addressing some of the key vulnerabilities that AQ and other terrorist groups have been able to exploit" but has also acknowledged that the dispersal of Al-Qaeda affiliates across the region has created new and varied threat vectors (U.S. Treasury Department 2022, 2024)³⁷. For India, AQIS-connected networks operating through Bangladesh represent a qualitatively different threat from localised groups: they bring transnational financing

capabilities, ideological networks, and operational planning expertise that exceed the capacity of purely domestic Bangladeshi terrorist organisations.

- **Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific Strategic Theatre**

The geopolitical significance of Bangladesh has grown considerably as the Bay of Bengal has emerged as a central arena in Indo-Pacific strategic competition. Bangladesh's coastline stretches across key sea lanes connecting South Asia to the Strait of Malacca. The development of deep-sea port capacity at Matarbari and Payra and the potential expansion of Chittagong port, have therefore attracted the attention of multiple external actors with competing strategic interests (Lowy Institute 2019; MEA 2024)³⁸.

China has emerged as one of Bangladesh's most significant external economic partners since the mid-2000s, with current Belt and Road Initiative-branded projects valued at approximately US \$10 billion (Afzaal and Naqvi 2024; Jamestown Foundation 2016)³⁹. Beijing's engagement with Dhaka accelerated notably during periods of strained India-Bangladesh relations, suggesting a degree of opportunistic positioning. India, as Bangladesh's most consequential neighbour and historical partner, has deepened economic and security cooperation with Dhaka, with bilateral trade reaching approximately US \$14.01 billion in fiscal year 2023-24 (MEA 2024; ORF 2025)⁴⁰. The construction of over 4,096 kilometres of border fencing by India between 2002 and 2008, justified on security grounds, contributed to bilateral tensions (Yoganandham 2025, 10)⁴¹.

The convergence of these external interests has positioned Bangladesh within a complex web of strategic competition. For India, the prospect of China deepening its strategic foothold in Bangladesh even through predominantly economic channels represents a significant concern given Bangladesh's geographic position along India's most sensitive eastern flank. The risk that Bangladeshi port facilities could carry latent dual-use strategic implications requires ongoing assessment, particularly given China's established pattern of leveraging infrastructure investments for strategic positioning across the Indo-Pacific (Lowy Institute 2019)⁴².

The Crisis of 2024-2025: Convergence of Internal and External Pressures

- **Structural Preconditions**

The political upheaval of 2024 that culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina did not emerge from a political vacuum. Its structural preconditions had been accumulating over a decade of governance that combined impressive macroeconomic performance with systematic erosion of democratic safeguards. The abolition of the caretaker government system in 2011, successive elections marked by credibility deficits, expanding restrictions on media and civil society, and the detention and legal harassment of opposition figures created an environment in which formal democratic architecture coexisted with a substantive democratic deficits (Mostofa and Subedi 2021; Roy, Debnath, and Islam 2026)⁴³.

Economically, the contradiction between aggregate growth indicators and the lived experience of large sections of the Bangladeshi population had sharpened considerably by the early 2020s. A politically active youth cohort confronted a labour market incapable of absorbing their aspirations within existing patronage-based employment structures, creating conditions of social frustration that external actors could exploit (Carment, Stewart, and Samy 2010, 22-24)⁴⁴.

- **The Protest Movement and the Terrorist Resurgence Risk**

The immediate trigger for the 2024 protests was the reintroduction of a quota system for government employment, reserving positions for descendants of 1971 Liberation War veterans. Many young Bangladeshis perceived it as a mechanism for perpetuating patronage networks rather than a genuine commitment to historical justice (Mostofa and Ullah 2026, 2; OHCHR 2025, 4)⁴⁵. Following weeks of sustained demonstrations, Sheikh Hasina resigned on 5 August 2024. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights subsequently estimated up to 1,400 protest-related deaths between 1 July and 15 August 2024 (OHCHR 2025, 1 -2)⁴⁶.

The political transition that followed introduced a dimension of acute security concern: the interim administration oversaw the release of individuals affiliated with JMB, HuJI-B, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), and Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisations blacklisted not only by Bangladesh but also by international counterterrorism frameworks. Among those released were individuals convicted of the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack,

which left 22 people dead, and individuals involved in targeted killings of secular bloggers and activists between 2013 and 2016 (NewKerala 2025)⁴⁷. This development has reinvigorated fears of a terrorist resurgence in Bangladesh with direct implications for India's northeastern security environment.

ORF has warned that the collapse of effective counter-terrorism cooperation "threatens to reverse decades of painstaking efforts to curb terrorism and radicalisation in the region" (ORF 2025)⁴⁸. AQIS and ISIS-inspired groups have already begun exploiting the political vacuum, spreading propaganda and seeking to recruit unaffected youth (NewKerala 2025)⁴⁹. ISI, with the help of elements within Bangladeshi intelligence and military institutions, has maintained Bangladesh, especially Cox's Bazar, as a regional hub for terror coordination, weapons trafficking, fake currency circulation, and drug smuggling, with the purpose of weakening India economically, inflaming communal tensions, and keeping the northeast unstable (Sentinel Assam 2025)⁵⁰.

- **The Interim Administration and Democratic Reconstruction**

The interim administration formed under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was tasked with restoring institutional stability and preparing for credible elections. The 2026 national elections resulted in a decisive victory for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (ORF 2025)⁵¹. The incoming BNP-led government inherited a political environment characterised by deep polarisation, weakened institutional norms, and acute security challenges rooted in the release of terrorist figures during the transition. The BNP's historical association with Jamaat-e-Islami, whose student wing has overlapping membership with JMB, raises substantive concerns about the sustained commitment of the new government to counter-terrorism cooperation with India (Vaughn 2010; IPCS 2014)⁵².

Implications for India's National Defence Doctrine

Political and security developments in Bangladesh carry direct and significant implications for India's national security and evolving defence doctrine. The framework of India's defence posture, historically characterised by what Gateway House (2025)⁵³ describes as "strategic restraint and escalation management", is being subjected to fundamental reassessment in

response to the compounding threats from proxy networks and non-state actors operating across India's extended neighbourhood.

- **The Evolving Doctrine of Proactive Deterrence**

India's defence doctrine has been undergoing a significant evolution, moving toward what analysts have characterised as "proactive deterrence underpinned by calibrated coercive capability" (Gateway House 2025)⁵⁴. A core tenet of this evolving posture is the redefinition of *casus belli*: major terrorist attacks are no longer viewed solely as criminal acts by non-state actors but as acts of war orchestrated and supported by state actors. The doctrine signals a default military response designed to inflict tangible costs on the "military-terrorist complex", the institutional nexus between state intelligence agencies, particularly the ISI, and non-state terrorist organisations (Gateway House 2025)⁵⁵.

This doctrinal evolution has immediate relevance for Bangladesh. The ISI-JMB financing nexus documented in Section 5.3, along with the operational connections between Bangladesh-based groups and Pakistan-sponsored transnational organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, all constitute elements of the "military-terrorist complex" that India's evolving doctrine seeks to deter and punish (Roul 2011; CTC West Point 2009)⁵⁶. Bangladesh's political fragility and particularly the post-2024 weakening of counter-terrorism cooperation frameworks create conditions in which that complexity can operate with reduced friction.

- **Migration, Demographic Pressures, and Internal Security**

Cross-border migration from Bangladesh into India has been among the most persistent security challenges in the bilateral relationship. Large-scale migration into Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and Meghalaya has generated demographic, economic, and political pressures that domestic politics in both Bangladesh and India have amplified (Yoganandham 2025, 6-8)⁵⁷. The Supreme Court of India's Foreigners Tribunal process in Assam and the National Register of Citizens exercise reflect the extent to which Bangladeshi migration has become integrated into India's domestic political contestation.

Renewed political instability in Bangladesh carries the risk of intensifying migration pressures. More significantly for India's security doctrine, mass migration creates demographic conditions that terrorist organisations have demonstrably exploited for recruitment and operational cover. Indian intelligence agencies have reported that JMB and HuJI-B are deliberately seeking to push illegal immigrants across the border "with the intention of recruiting them into the proxy groups that are operating in India" (Prokerala 2026)⁵⁸. The migration challenge is therefore not merely a humanitarian or demographic issue but a vector for the insertion of terror operatives into Indian territory.

- **Northeast India: The Counter-Insurgency and Cross-Border Terrorism Nexus**

The security of India's northeastern states represents a critical dimension of the India-Bangladesh defence nexus. With the deterioration of counter-terrorism cooperation following the 2024-2025 political transition, the ISI support channels to insurgent groups in Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, as documented in Section 8.2 above, risk reconstitution with reduced friction (Yoganandham 2025, 10-12; ORF 2025)⁵⁹.

New terrorist groups, including the Islamic Liberation Army of Assam, MULFA, and MULTA, emerged during the mid-1990s with networks in Barpeta, Nalbari, Dhubri, and Goalpara districts, building on ISI support channels routed through Bangladesh (Sentinel Assam 2025)⁶⁰. These groups operate an extensive financial network using NGOs, madrasas, and religious donations, often functioning as hawala channels for international terror funding. Since the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016, jihadist organisations have increasingly penetrated educated and urban youth networks in Bangladesh, a demographic transformation that qualitatively changes the threat profile for India (International Crisis Group 2017)⁶¹.

As noted in Section 5.2, the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point has identified Bangladesh's political instability and weak state capacity as structural constraints that prevent India from consistently shaping Bangladeshi counterterrorism policy. The implication is that doctrinal responses cannot rely on Bangladeshi institutional cooperation as a stable input; they must incorporate contingency planning for scenarios in which such cooperation is absent or actively obstructed.

- **Maritime Security and the Bay of Bengal**

The maritime dimension has assumed increasing importance in the India-Bangladesh security relationship as both countries develop their capacities in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone of approximately 118,813 square kilometres, its developing port infrastructure, and its geographic position astride key sea lanes give it strategic salience beyond its land borders (Lowy Institute 2019; MEA 2024)⁶². India's Maritime Security Strategy requires a cooperative and stable Bangladesh as a necessary condition for securing the Bay of Bengal as a zone of Indian strategic primacy. The risk that Chinese infrastructure investments in Bangladeshi port facilities could carry dual-use implications requires sustained intelligence assessment and diplomatic engagement (Afzaal and Naqvi 2024)⁶³.

- **The Proxy Competition Risk and India's Strategic Response**

The broader risk for India in the context of Bangladesh's democratic fragility is that the country's political vulnerabilities could be exploited by external actors, most plausibly, China but also through ISI-mediated networks, to build strategic influence that constrains India's options in the region. All three categories of proxy instrument are already visible in Bangladesh: Chinese BRI-linked infrastructure commitments noted in Section 7 above create financial dependencies that may constrain Dhaka's policy autonomy (Afzaal and Naqvi 2024)⁶⁴; information operations framing India as responsible for the Hasina government's excesses have been amplified through social media ecosystems reflecting patterns documented across fragile-state contexts (Carment, Stewart, and Samy 2010, 22 -24)⁶⁵; and the uncertainty introduced into counter-insurgency cooperation following the 2024-2025 transition illustrates how political discontinuities in fragile states translate directly into security vulnerabilities for their neighbours (Yoganandham 2025, 10 -12)⁶⁶.

India's response to this constellation of risks must operate across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The evolving doctrine of proactive deterrence provides a framework for addressing the most acute threats, particularly the ISI-JMB financing nexus, but it must be complemented by a comprehensive political and economic strategy that deepens the substantive value of the India-Bangladesh partnership for Bangladeshi citizens and institutions. Economic integration that generates tangible benefits for the

Bangladeshi middle class, security cooperation premised on Bangladesh's autonomous interests, and sustained engagement with democratic institution-building are more durable foundations for strategic partnership than arrangements perceived as serving Indian interests at Bangladeshi expense (ORF 2025; Yoganandham 2025, 12)⁶⁷.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's trajectory since 1971 illustrates, in concentrated form, the dynamics of political engineering, non-state actor proliferation, covert financing, and democratic fragility that constitute the central analytical concern of this paper. The country's institutional vulnerabilities have been shaped, distorted, and periodically subverted not merely by the political shortcomings of its domestic actors but by the structural pressures of an international order whose proxy dynamics, including those generated by U.S. intervention through the GWoT and the Cold War-era covert support for anti-Soviet Mujahideen, have created enduring threat vectors. These are not historical observations. The threat vectors traced in Sections 5 and 6 regarding HuJI-B, JMB, AQIS, and ISI's use of Bangladesh as a forward base are live and intensifying in the context of the post-2024 political transition.

The doctrinal framework of proactive deterrence elaborated in Section 9.1 provides the appropriate starting point but must be calibrated to Bangladesh's distinctive profile of a weak state whose political transitions create temporary windows of opportunity rather than the systematic state complicity characteristic of Pakistan. Deterrence must therefore be paired with resilience-building across the bilateral relationship.

The following policy observations can be incorporated by India in the forthcoming era: First, India should deepen intelligence cooperation with Bangladesh's security services at the institutional level, creating frameworks that persist across political transitions to monitor and disrupt the ISI-JMB-HuJI-B financing networks. The bilateral intelligence architecture should be insulated from political fluctuations in Dhaka to the maximum extent possible. Second, India should engage the Financial Action Task Force and other multilateral counterterrorism financing bodies to press for systematic monitoring of hawala networks, Islamic bank flows, and NGO-mediated funding that supports terrorist organisations operating in Bangladesh with India as a target. The "Islamist economy" identified by analysts at the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point requires sustained financial intelligence attention. Third,

economic integration initiatives, including connectivity projects, trade facilitation, and joint infrastructure development, should be structured to maximise visible benefits for the Bangladeshi population, counteracting narratives that frame such arrangements as serving Indian interests exclusively and reducing the domestic political space available to ISI-aligned actors seeking to exploit anti-India sentiment.

Security cooperation frameworks, particularly those addressing counter-terrorism, border management, and counter-insurgency, should be institutionalised through mechanisms that survive political transitions rather than depending on the personal commitments of specific governments. The loss of counter-terrorism cooperation following the 2024-2025 transition illustrates the fragility of purely relationship-dependent security arrangements. India should also engage proactively with multilateral frameworks in the Bay of Bengal, including BIMSTEC, to embed Bangladesh in cooperative security architectures that reduce the strategic vacuum into which competing external actors might otherwise expand. Maritime security cooperation in particular offers opportunities for relationship-building that transcend bilateral political fluctuations. Finally, New Delhi should support Bangladesh's democratisation process as a strategic interest, recognising that democratic institutions capable of managing political competition peacefully reduce the systemic risks that fragile states generate for their neighbours while simultaneously engaging with all major political stakeholders to prevent the bilateral relationship from being held hostage to partisan alignments in Dhaka.

Bangladesh's path from 1971 to the present has been marked by remarkable resilience alongside profound fragility. India's task is to cultivate conditions in which that resilience predominates, both for the benefit of the Bangladeshi people and for the stability of a region in which India's security interests are deeply and irreversibly invested.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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