

THE MODI-HASINA ERA: A DECADE OF DIPLOMATIC AND STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT IN INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS (2014-2024)

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Abstract. Over the past decade, the relationship between India and Bangladesh has progressed significantly. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the former Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, described their partnership as “*a model for bilateral relations for the entire region*” (*Joint Statement Issued on the Occasion of the Visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh, n.d.*). Bangladesh holds considerable significance for India, transcending basic neighbourhood policies, as it serves as an essential liaison in the pursuit of regional harmony. This paper will analyse the decade-long collaboration on key policies-diplomatic, economic, and security and the development of bilateral relations under the leadership of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, specifically from 2014 to 2024. The assessment will focus on expanding security collaboration, especially in areas such as counterterrorism and border management, along with collective initiatives to tackle transnational issues like organized crime and migration. This study aims to explore the development of regional cooperation in South Asian geopolitics by examining the progress and ongoing challenges in India-Bangladesh relations, and the future possibilities for collaboration. The relationship between two nations, while facing occasional challenges, has established a robust foundation of interdependence that is crucial for the stability, security, and economic dynamics of the entire South Asian region. .

Keywords: India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations, Geostrategic Partnership, Regional Security and Integration, South Asian Region.

1. Introduction

The period from 2014 to 2024 highlighted significant progress in the relationship between India and Bangladesh, marked by a noticeable shift toward a stronger strategic partnership

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and improved regional stability. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, initiated his tenure in 2014, concluded his second term in April 2024, and embarked on a new term. During this time, Sheikh Hasina, at the helm of the Awami League, oversaw the Bangladeshi government. This decade witnessed significant accomplishments, particularly in tackling challenges such as border disputes, managing shared water resources, strengthening trade alliances, and reinforcing defence and counterterrorism initiatives. The partnership between India's "Neighbourhood First Policy" and the evolution of the "Look East Policy" into the "Act East Policy" under the Modi administration in 2014, coupled with Bangladesh's dedication to its relationship with India, as articulated in its constitutional principle of "*friendship to all, malice toward none*," has successfully fostered collaborative initiatives (Deb, 2024).

In recent years, the political landscape of Bangladesh experienced a notable transformation, culminating in the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government in mid-2024. This development signified a notable shift in the India-Bangladesh relationship, represented by a blend of unpredictability and promising prospects. This may profoundly influence the future of diplomatic relations, especially in key domains such as defence cooperation, trade relationships, and regional connectivity. Furthermore, the increase in domestic political unrest, driven by opposing factions, may impede Bangladesh's international relations, potentially impacting regional stability and India's strategic interests in South Asia. The assessment of this decade-long partnership is important for examining the progress made, while also addressing the persistent challenges that remain in bilateral relations. It will aid in the identification of potential avenues for future collaboration and will also help to understand the shifting contours of South Asian geopolitics and its implications for regional stability. The insights and suggestions are designed to assist decision-makers, security agencies, and academics in formulating informed strategies that will promote a secure and prosperous future for both nations.

2. From Partition to Partnership: A Historical Overview of India-Bangladesh Relations Prior to 2014

The historical development of India-Bangladesh relations is shaped by the lasting effects of partition, conflict, and the pursuit of autonomy. The bilateral relationship has its roots in the Partition of British India in 1947, leading to the formation of two separate nations: India and Pakistan. Bangladesh, formerly part of East Pakistan, emerged as a distinct nation, and this division, marked by differences in religion, language, and culture, laid the foundation for numerous conflicts, particularly related to water distribution, border definitions, and political independence.

The military intervention by India in 1971, along with significant backing for the Bengali independence movement, ultimately resulted in the formation of the independent nation of Bangladesh (Pattanaik, 2021). The conflict significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia and strengthened India's position as a key contributor to the early phases of Bangladesh's nation-building efforts. However, post-independence, the relationship was marked by a deep-seated mutual distrust, largely arising from unresolved issues concerning border management, the distribution of transboundary rivers, and the refugee crisis caused by the influx of migrants from Bangladesh into India.

Turbulent Waters and Fractured Borders: An Analysis of Diplomatic Struggles in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1970s and 1980s highlighted sporadic diplomatic engagements; nonetheless, the relationship remained largely pragmatic, defined by a mixture of cooperation and conflict. The issue of water-sharing related to the Ganges, especially regarding the Teesta River, had emerged as a critical point of contention, particularly after the signing of the Indo-Pakistan Ganges Water Treaty in 1977, which did not resolve the pending bilateral water-sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh (Waslekar et al., 2013). Additionally, territorial disputes and the surge of displaced populations exacerbated tensions, particularly during periods of political instability in both countries (Rahman & Islam, 2024).

The 1990s: Shift towards Cooperation and Diplomatic Engagement. During the 1990s, both nations acknowledged the prospects for enhanced cooperation, primarily motivated by the necessity for regional stability and economic advancement. The ratification of the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty in 1996 represented a significant advancement in diplomatic relations. This accord, coupled with ongoing initiatives to delineate boundaries and foster economic collaboration, marked a transition from past hostilities to a more productive interaction (Rao, 2012). Nonetheless, the relationship continued to be tenuous, frequently compromised by internal political turbulence in Bangladesh, the emergence of militancy, and persistent challenges.

Early 2000s: Incremental Thawing and the Land Boundary Agreement (2011). The early 2000s experienced a consistent enhancement in relations, reaching a pivotal moment with the 2011 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), which addressed a prolonged territorial conflict and facilitated the exchange of enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border. This agreement marked a significant diplomatic turning point that helped the bilateral relationship to be recontextualised in a more positive way.

Cautious Optimism and Growing Cooperation (Pre-2014). The period preceding 2014 exhibited a measured sense of optimism, as both nations gradually acknowledged the significance of collaboration, especially in areas such as commerce, security, and regional

connectivity. In light of the ongoing complexities surrounding the Teesta River dispute, India and Bangladesh have made notable progress in their collaborative efforts, motivated by common economic interests and a collective aim to improve regional stability. By 2014, the relationship between India and Bangladesh transformed from a backdrop of mistrust and conflict into a practical alliance, enabling enhanced cooperation in the future. This agreement signifies a notable diplomatic accomplishment, improving the bilateral relationship within a more advantageous framework.

3. From Trade Deals to Diplomatic Seals: India-Bangladesh Relations (2014-2024)

The period spanning from 2014-2024 had been pivotal in redefining India-Bangladesh relations, as both nations transcended their historical conflicts to cultivate a partnership grounded in strategic collaboration and shared economic interests. This era is identified by a pragmatic methodology aimed at addressing enduring challenges, fortifying diplomatic relationships, and augmenting collaboration on both regional and international stages. During his visit to Bangladesh in 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked that Bangladesh is *"not just a neighbour,"* but *"a country with which India shares deep and enduring ties,"* emphasizing the significance of the bilateral relationship between the two nations (PM's address at the Bangabandhu International Convention Centre, n.d.).

Economic Cooperation and Trade Relations. One of the most significant features of the India-Bangladesh relationship during this period was the impressive growth of economic connections. The exchange of goods between the two nations experienced consistent growth, with India establishing itself as one of Bangladesh's principal trading partners. During the period of 2016-2017, Bangladesh emerged as India's foremost trading partner within South Asia, representing 35% of India's overall exports to the region, which constituted 83% of India's total exports to South Asia (Singh, 2019). The 2018 agreement enabled India's assistance in the infrastructure development of Bangladesh, especially in sectors like roadways and railways, thereby reinforcing India's position as a crucial ally in the economic advancement of Bangladesh (Singh, 2019). Furthermore, the India-Bangladesh Trade Agreement (2020) established a more systematic framework for trade, incorporating measures to alleviate cross-border trade barriers and enhance connectivity. During the fiscal year 2023-24, Bangladesh's exports to India reached a value of \$1.97 billion, contributing to an overall trade volume of \$14.01 billion for the year. The 15th Joint Working Group on Trade (JWG) meeting, convened in Dhaka in September 2023, made significant strides in enhancing bilateral cooperation, with particular emphasis on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) aimed at fostering trade, generating employment, and improving living standards. Furthermore, the two nations

had reached an accord to conduct a portion of their trade in Indian Rupees (INR) and Bangladeshi Takas (BDT), thereby diminishing their dependence on the US dollar (15th Meeting of the Joint Working Group on Trade between India and Bangladesh, n.d.). By 2024, bilateral trade approached an impressive \$18 billion, not only highlighting the economic integration between the nations but also emphasizing the escalating interdependence that influenced their bilateral relations (India Foundation, 2023).

From Railways to Roadways: The Future of Regional Ties. The partnership between India and Bangladesh has emphasized the enhancement of regional connectivity, which serves as a crucial element in the economic integration and geopolitical stability of both nations. The Act East Policy underscores the importance of improving connectivity between India and Southeast Asia, necessitating the active involvement of neighboring nations such as Bangladesh. Bangladesh occupies a pivotal position as a crucial conduit for India's engagement with Southeast Asia, and enhancing the infrastructure of roads, railways, and ports will facilitate increased economic interactions throughout the region (*Distinguished Lectures Details*, n.d.).

The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA, 2015) represents a noteworthy endeavour to enhance the mobility of goods and individuals across India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, thereby fostering improvements in cross-border trade and transportation. This accord is anticipated to significantly diminish transportation expenses, improve trade dynamics, and foster more profound economic collaboration within the region (*The Motor Vehicle Agreement for the Regulation of Passenger, Personal and Cargo Vehicular Traffic Amongst Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal* (BBIN), n.d.).

Significant advancements in regional connectivity were achieved during Prime Minister Hasina's visit to India in September 2022, during which both countries pledged to enhance infrastructure connections, especially in the railway and road domains (*Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India* (September 05-08, 2022), n.d.). The initiatives aimed to improve rail connectivity, facilitating the movement of goods and individuals between India and Bangladesh, and simultaneously fostering regional integration.

Alongside the advancement of railway systems, both nations underscored the significance of improving road connectivity via the establishment of container depots and various infrastructure initiatives, such as the Khulna-Darshana and Parbotipur-Kaunia railway lines, which will facilitate the optimization of trade routes. In 2023, both nations have successfully implemented the Agreement concerning the utilization of Chittagong and Mongla Ports. This will enable India to utilize the services of these ports in Bangladesh

for the transit of cargo between the Northeast and the mainland diminishing both the expenditure and duration associated with transportation. The collaboration between the two entities on connectivity encompassed not only terrestrial transport but also aerial and maritime communications. These efforts reinvigorated and enhanced the connections, facilitating uninterrupted regional mobility (*Joint Statement Issued on the Occasion of the Visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh*, n.d.).

Diplomatic and Geopolitical Engagement. India perceives Bangladesh as a significant neighbour, with Bangladesh being as a valuable partner in India's neighbourhood-first strategy. Diplomatically, the period from 2014 to 2024 witnessed a convergence of India and Bangladesh's strategic interests. India has endorsed Bangladesh's diplomatic endeavours on the international stage, especially within institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, thereby strengthening their cooperative strategy in global governance. In 2017, the India-Bangladesh Friendship Day celebrations were instituted to further symbolize the shared commitment to a peaceful, prosperous South Asia and the increasing warmth in diplomatic relations (India-Bangladesh Maitri Diwas, n.d.).

In a strategic move to enhance diplomatic relations, India relaxed its visa regulations for citizens of Bangladesh. With 16 Indian Visa Application Centres (IVACs) across Bangladesh, the Indian government expanded services to meet the rising demand, particularly for medical visas. A special provision allows up to three medical attendant visas for each patient, a unique facilitation extended to Bangladesh. India's visa operations in Bangladesh are the largest globally, both in the number of application centres and the volume of visas issued, reflecting the robust and growing people-to-people connections between the two nations (And Bangladesh, 2024).

In June 2024, during the State Visit of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh to India, both leaders reiterated their dedication to a partnership based on transformative collaboration and mutual advancement. Their discourse highlighted the interconnectedness of their national development aspirations, "Viksit Bharat 2047" and "Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041", while acknowledging one another as "indispensable partners" in the pursuit of regional advancement. The two leaders underscored the significance of digital and green technologies, articulating a "*Shared Vision for India-Bangladesh Digital Partnership*" and emphasizing "*green technologies*" as pivotal for sustainable development. The leaders reached a consensus to expedite trade via a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) while also fostering cultural exchanges and promoting youth development initiatives. In unison, they dedicated themselves to regional integration via frameworks such as BIMSTEC and SAARC, aspiring towards a partnership that

is prepared for the future (*India-Bangladesh Shared Vision for Future: Enhancing Connectivity, Commerce and Collaboration for Shared Prosperity*, n.d.).

4. Threads of Friendship

socio-cultural relationship between India and Bangladesh has long been a cornerstone of their bilateral ties, providing a strong foundation for deeper collaboration. Cultural exchanges, particularly since Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bangladesh, have become central to enhancing people-to-people contact and mutual understanding. Initiatives such as cultural exchange programs (2015–2017) and the establishment of 'Border Haats' have played a key role in promoting direct interaction between citizens. These Border Haats, which began in 2012, are vital hubs that encourage both trade and cultural exchange, strengthening community bonds across the border (*Border Haats are Places for Socio-cultural Exchanges: Bangladesh MP | CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre*, n.d.). Cultural institutions such as the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre and the Indian Cultural Centre in Dhaka have significantly enhanced engagement, providing programs in dance, music, language, and yoga, thereby enriching the cultural relations shared by both nations. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at engaging the youth, exemplified by the Bangladesh Youth Delegation established in 2022, have facilitated the exchange of young talent from Bangladesh to India, promoting enduring relationships and intercultural discourse. These initiatives underscore the crucial importance of socio-cultural diplomacy in strengthening India-Bangladesh relations and crafting a collective future (Brief on India-Bangladesh, 2024).

5. From Challenges to Collaboration: Security Ties Between India and Bangladesh (2014-2024)

The security dynamics between India and Bangladesh have experienced a notable evolution from 2014 to 2024, marked by an increase in collaboration and mutual strategic interests. Historically encumbered by dilemmas, both nations have progressively acknowledged the significance of collaboration in bolstering their security and fostering regional stability. This transformation has been propelled by shared challenges, economic interdependence, and an aspiration to cultivate enduring stability in South Asia. However, several challenges remain, including:

Illegal Migration. The phenomenon of unlawful migration originating from Bangladesh is regarded as a significant vulnerability in the bilateral relationship. Migration from Bangladesh is perceived to have caused a major demographic shift in the bordering Indian states and has been a cause of ethnic and social tension. It is widely assumed that people

from Bangladesh are illegally migrating to India for reasons such as employment, education, and health. India has persistently urged Bangladesh to take steps to control cross-border migration, but Bangladesh has consistently declined India's claims of unchecked migration from that country. Illegal Bangladeshi migrants have paid and manipulated touts and local politicians to manage their ration cards and voter cards. This is one of the ways that affect the illegal migration problem which is constantly hampering bilateral relations between the two countries. (Sharma, 2024)

Rohingya Refugee Crisis. The Rohingya refugee crisis continues to pose a significant challenge, presenting a complex liaison of humanitarian concerns and security dilemmas for both India and Bangladesh. (Meena et al., n.d.). The arrival of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar into Bangladesh has intensified pre-existing security issues in the area, especially in relation to the potential infiltration of militant groups. Bangladesh has demonstrated significant humanitarian dedication in accommodating the refugees; however, India has articulated apprehensions regarding the potential security threats associated with their presence, especially considering that certain individuals may become radicalized or engage in cross-border terrorism. Addressing this matter with diplomacy necessitates meticulous coordination, as both countries navigate the complexities of security imperatives alongside their humanitarian responsibilities.

Cross-Border Crime. The persisting concern of cross-border crime along the Indo-Bangladesh border presents a considerable security dilemma, attributed to its permeable characteristics, which enable the unlawful movement of various contraband, including narcotics, counterfeit currency, arms, and victims of trafficking. The engagement in such illicit activities presents significant risks to public safety, undermines local economies, and carries far-reaching financial consequences.

In the year 2022, the Border Security Force (BSF) in Meghalaya adeptly countered a multitude of smuggling endeavours, confiscating significant amounts of illicit goods at the border. This emphasizes the persistent security challenges in the region, accentuating the necessity for proficient border management and enhanced collaboration between India and Bangladesh. The augmentation of intelligence sharing, surveillance, and transnational cooperation is essential for addressing these criminal networks and maintaining regional stability (Rather, 2013).

6. Areas of Collaboration

Despite the persistent challenges, both nations have made significant strides in addressing these issues through collaborative efforts. The essential domains of collaboration encompass border management, counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security, and collective endeavours in upholding regional tranquillity.

Border Management. The Land Boundary Agreement (2015), which addressed enduring territorial disputes, marked an important chapter in the diplomatic progression, illustrating the dedication of both nations to resolving lingering issues through peaceful negotiation (Nayar, 2020). India-Bangladesh Border Management Agreement (2018), which emphasized the necessity for enhanced communication and coordination between the border forces of both nations, represents a significant milestone in the advancement of bilateral security cooperation. This accord enabled the development of border infrastructure, encompassing watchtowers and surveillance systems, while establishing more efficient avenues for intelligence exchange, thereby contributing to the mitigation of cross-border crime and violence. The deployment of Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS) has established a "Virtual Fence" for automated border surveillance, thereby diminishing the necessity for human involvement. The recent developments significantly bolster border security and facilitate swift reactions to potential threats along the Indo-Bangladesh border (Pti, 2019).

7. Counter-Terrorism

There is a looming threat of terrorism and extremism, resulting in cross-border attacks and the emergence of support networks. Indian insurgent groups have infiltrated Bangladesh, establishing secure hideouts and training facilities with support from Pakistani and Bangladeshi intelligence agencies (*Bangladesh Factor Affecting Insurgency in North-East* | IPCS, n.d.). The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh has led to a significant influx of economic migrants and people associated with jihad terrorism and pan-Islamic fundamentalism into India. This trend has the potential to destabilise the region and pose a threat to national security. Bangladesh's willingness to crack down on militant groups such as the Indian Mujahideen, Northeastern insurgents, and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has been crucial in preventing the cross-border flow of extremism into India. Further, both nations coordinated in fighting the growing threat of Islamic State (ISIS) recruits in the region, with Bangladesh taking significant steps to prevent radicalization and dismantle ISIS cells operating within its borders (*Security of India's Northeast: External Linkage*, n.d.).

Defence Cooperation. India and Bangladesh's defence cooperation is multifaceted encompassing border security, counter- terrorism, joint military exercises, and regional security. In November 2016, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar paid his first visit to Bangladesh as the country's defence minister. During this visit, both countries emphasized the importance of their security ties. India's proposed defence agreement would cover "greater military cooperation, the sale and supply of military hardware from India to Bangladesh, and coordinated operations against mutually perceived threats". India offered a 500 million USD line of credit to Bangladesh for the purchase of military hardware from India (Peri, 2016).

In 2019, during Sheikh Hasina's visit, India urged Bangladesh to expedite the implementation of the line of credit that was offered in the field of defence cooperation, which was strengthened by the Army-to-Army and Navy-to-Navy talks between India and Bangladesh. The year of 2023-2024 saw significant exchanges between India and Bangladesh. The 5th Annual Defence Dialogue and 4th Tri-Services Talks in August, 2023 strengthened cooperation, with both countries reviewing joint defence initiatives. In December 2023, Muktiyoddha delegations participated in 'Vijay Diwas' celebrations in Kolkata, while Indian war veterans took part in Bangladesh's Victory Day events (And Bangladesh, 2024). These exchanges reflect the growing and robust defence cooperation between the two nations which is essential for both nations to ensure a stable and peaceful South Asia.

Cooperation in Maritime Security. The realm of maritime security has emerged as a fundamental aspect of the bilateral collaboration between India and Bangladesh, especially within the context of the Bay of Bengal. The two nations possess maritime boundaries within this strategically important region, rendering the safeguarding of these waters essential for regional security and economic stability, particularly in light of the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Bangladesh Maritime Boundary Agreement (2014) represented a notable diplomatic milestone. It established a foundation for improved cooperation in addressing piracy, unlawful fishing, and external maritime threats. Moreover, connectivity has emerged as a crucial element in the relations between India and Bangladesh, embodying the overarching objectives of Narendra Modi's foreign policy-commerce, culture, and connectivity. By enhancing marine security and improving connectivity, India and Bangladesh are not only strengthening their bilateral relations but also significantly contributing to regional stability and development, with substantial ramifications for the broader South Asian context (IPD Forum, 2024).

Regional and Multilateral Cooperation. Regional entities such as SAARC, and BIMSTEC are also instrumental in the governance of the Indo- Bangladesh relations as it provides member nations with a platform for dialogue, the sharing of experiences, and the advancement of collaboration on issues pertaining to border management, concentrating on counter-piracy strategies and the protection of essential sea routes (Sridharan, 2007). The two nations have participated in collaborative maritime drills and global naval missions, motivated by mutual apprehensions regarding the increasing influence of Chinese naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean. The political shift may affect Bangladesh's commitment to multilateral organizations such as BIMSTEC, which focuses on regional connectivity and shared economic development (Ray, 2024). The emergence of a new political leadership could potentially reinvigorate Bangladesh's dedication to these forums or redirect its attention towards alternative regional alliances, including those associated with China or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc. These platforms have functioned as essential instruments for fostering regional collaboration in domains including connectivity, trade, and environmental stewardship (India Today, 2024).

8. Conclusion: Charting a New Course for India-Bangladesh Relations

The relationship between India and Bangladesh is entering a pivotal stage in its development, represented by both opportunities and challenges that will influence the future direction of this bilateral partnership. Over the past decade, both the nations have moved from historical conflicts to a more collaborative and beneficial interaction. The forthcoming decade will be defined by the responses of India and Bangladesh to the shifting domestic political environments, especially in Bangladesh, alongside the overarching regional security dynamics. The ambiguous political transition in Bangladesh, particularly in light of prospective leadership changes, may introduce complexities; however, it ought not to eclipse the enduring, fundamental aspects of their partnership.

Furthermore, the increasing focus on interpersonal connections, the involvement of civil society, and the facilitation of transnational academic and cultural exchanges will be essential in maintaining a strong and enduring relationship. Enhancing these foundational connections will cultivate a more profound comprehension and establish enduring relationships among the populace of both nations. This will consequently offer a safeguard against political instability, aiding in the establishment of the relationship within a more expansive and lasting social and cultural context. The likelihood of sustained collaboration is considerable, accompanied by the promise of a more cohesive and robust South Asia.

The course of this relationship will hinge upon their capacity to uphold a strategic foresight for the future, one that harmonizes national interests with the collective welfare of the region.

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