



India-Bangladesh Relations Under The Recent Interim Government Of Bangladesh: A New Era Of Diplomacy And Challenges Ahead

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Abstract:

Following intense political unrest sparked by the quota reform movement, an interim government was established in Bangladesh on August 5, 2024, after the resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. On August 8, 2024, Dr. Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as Chief Advisor along with sixteen other advisors. This political transition marks a pivotal moment in the country's political history, with profound implications for Bangladesh's bilateral relations, particularly with neighboring India. This article examines the changing nature of India-Bangladesh relations in the post-Sheikh Hasina period, under the interim government, focusing on areas of collaboration as well as emerging challenges. Through an analysis of the historical context, current diplomatic landscape, and prospects, this paper aims to provide insights into the complexities of bilateral relations between the two nations. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering strong diplomatic ties, given the countries' shared history, cultural affinities, and economic interests. The study finds that shared cultural heritage, common historical narratives, and mutual economic interests offer a strong foundation for deepening bilateral ties. However, persistent issues such as border security concerns, trade disputes, transboundary water sharing, livestock-related conflicts, illegal immigration, the Farakka Barrage, the strategic significance of the Siliguri Corridor, and the spread of misinformation in mainstream and social media present ongoing obstacles. Additionally, the broader geopolitical context—marked by the growing influence of China and the United States in South Asia, as well as the expansion of BRICS—may further shape the future of India-Bangladesh relations.

By introducing the context of the interim government, this study adds a fresh perspective to the existing discourse on India-Bangladesh diplomacy. It offers meaningful insights for scholars, policymakers, and diplomatic analysts seeking to understand and navigate the region's shifting strategic landscape. regional geopolitics.

Keywords: India-Bangladesh relations, interim government, diplomatic relations, bilateral cooperation,

Introduction

India and Bangladesh share a relationship rooted in geography, history, culture, and mutual interests. Since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, with India's crucial support during the Liberation War. The diplomatic relationship between India and Bangladesh has historically been one of the most significant in South Asia, marked by cooperation, shared heritage, and occasional tensions. With the recent formation of an interim government in Bangladesh, a new and sensitive phase has begun—one that carries both the promise of deepening bilateral ties and the challenge of managing political uncertainties. India, as a regional power and Bangladesh's largest neighbor, plays a vital role in ensuring stability and democratic continuity in Dhaka while safeguarding its own strategic and security interests.

The 2024-25 interim government in Bangladesh, intended to ensure free and fair elections, has received mixed reactions both domestically and internationally. For India, this creates a diplomatic challenge—balancing support for democratic values with its strategic and economic interests. At the same time, the shifting political context opens the door to revisit key bilateral issues such as border security, water-sharing, trade imbalances, and regional connectivity. However, the situation is far from straightforward. The rise of internal political polarization in Bangladesh, concerns over human rights and electoral transparency, and the increasing influence of external players like China, Turkey, and Gulf countries pose fresh diplomatic challenges for New Delhi. At the same time, This new political phase offers India a crucial opportunity to promote democratic values and regional stability through a mature and non-interventionist approach. In the face of growing uncertainty, the future of India-Bangladesh relations will depend on mutual respect, strategic foresight, and realistic cooperation. Beyond diplomatic engagement, resolving long-standing bilateral issues will now require clear intent and sustained political will.

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Historical Relation between India and Bangladesh

The connection between India and Bangladesh is built upon a rich heritage of shared history, language, and culture that spans centuries. Politically and diplomatically, the bond reached a pivotal moment in 1971 when India played a crucial role in supporting Bangladesh's struggle for independence by providing training, arms, and diplomatic backing to the freedom fighters. Following Bangladesh's independence on December 16, 1971, both countries formally established diplomatic relations. A landmark step in resolving long-standing border disputes was the signing of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 1974, which helped settle the complex issues related to enclaves and border demarcation.

Subsequently, key water-sharing agreements such as the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty and the 2015 Feni River Agreement have further fostered cooperation and mutual trust. In trade, as of 2023, bilateral commerce between India and Bangladesh stands at nearly 15 billion USD, with India being Bangladesh's largest export destination. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain, including border security concerns, trade imbalances, and ongoing water-sharing disputes. Moreover, while Bangladesh has imposed some restrictions on Indian market access since 2015, infrastructure and connectivity projects funded by institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) continue to strengthen regional ties. Overall, built on a foundation of historical friendship and mutual interests, the India-Bangladesh relationship remains one of South Asia's most significant diplomatic partnerships, crucial for the political, economic, and regional stability of the area.

Challenges in India-Bangladesh Relations

Although the relationship between India and Bangladesh has long been built on shared history, culture, and mutual interests, the reality is that it has not always progressed in a linear or harmonious fashion. Over the decades, various political, strategic, and economic factors have introduced friction into this bilateral partnership. In recent years, new complexities have emerged—such as the formation of an interim government in Bangladesh, the growing influence of China, recurring border tensions, and electoral challenges—which have reshaped the landscape of India-Bangladesh relations.

In this context, the following section critically examines the key challenges currently facing the bilateral relationship between the two nations.

1. Water Disputes between India and Bangladesh

Water disputes between India and the interim government of Bangladesh are part of a long-standing issue rooted in the shared river systems between the two countries. Bangladesh and India share 54 rivers, including the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Teesta (GBT). Changes in the GBT's flow from India have significantly impacted the lower reaches of Bangladesh. Since 1975, India has diverted the Ganges by constructing barrages at Farakka and Gazaldoba, depriving Bangladesh of its fair share and sparking water disputes between the two countries. The Farakka Dam's construction has been a major point of contention, with disagreements over water sharing. A 1977 agreement allocated 62.5% of the water to Bangladesh and 37.5% to India during the low-flow season, but it faced opposition and was eventually abrogated in 1982. Since 1996, both countries have worked to resolve the water dispute. One proposed solution was the Ganga-Brahmaputra Link Canal, which would increase the Ganges' flow but requires land acquisition in both countries. The 1996 treaty stipulated that India would provide Bangladesh with a minimum amount of water based on historical data, but experts argue that the agreement relies on outdated information and that water availability has decreased since 1988. The Teesta River dispute remains unresolved, with a 2013 agreement failing to materialize. Despite a 2015 understanding between the prime ministers to share Teesta water fairly, the issue persists. The existing water-sharing agreement is set to expire in 2026, and future arrangements will require diplomatic negotiations between the two countries, particularly given Bangladesh's current interim government.

1.1. Farakka Barrage

The Indian government commissioned the Farakka Barrage on April 21, 1975. Subsequently, a 30-year agreement was signed between India and Bangladesh on December 12, 1996, regarding the sharing of the Ganges waters. However, Bangladesh has consistently claimed that India's unilateral diversion of Ganges water through the Farakka Barrage has resulted in flooding in low-lying areas of Bangladesh during the monsoon season due to sudden water releases, causing significant damage to homes and crops and adversely impacting the country's economy. Furthermore, river erosion has become a major issue, with the Padma River experiencing reduced flow during the monsoon season. This has led to environmental and agricultural problems in Bangladesh, disrupting the livelihoods of its people. Bangladesh attributes these issues to India's water diversion practices.

1.2. Brahmaputra River

Although the Brahmaputra River has not yet become the center of a major bilateral water dispute between India and Bangladesh, it holds significant potential for future tensions. India is actively developing several hydroelectric projects in Arunachal Pradesh, including the Lower Subansiri and Dibang Multipurpose projects. These initiatives are a major concern for Bangladesh, as they could potentially alter the natural flow of the river—especially during the dry season—impacting agriculture, fisheries, and overall water availability downstream. Adding to these concerns are China's upstream activities on the Yarlung Tsangpo (the upper stretch of the Brahmaputra), where large-scale dam and hydropower projects are underway. These projects could reduce water flow or change the river's seasonal patterns, indirectly affecting both India and Bangladesh. The absence of a comprehensive trilateral water-sharing agreement among China, India, and Bangladesh increases the strategic vulnerability of the river system and may exacerbate geopolitical tensions in the future.

1.3. Teesta River Dispute

Background: The Teesta River originates in the Indian state of Sikkim and flows through West Bengal before entering Bangladesh. It is crucial for irrigation in both countries. Dispute: A 2011 draft agreement proposed sharing the Teesta waters with India receiving 42.5% and Bangladesh 37.5%. However, the deal was stalled due to opposition from the West Bengal state government, particularly under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Current Status (as of 2025): There has been no final agreement, and Bangladesh continues to express concern about reduced dry-season flows affecting agriculture in its northern regions.

2. Trade disputes between India and the interim government of Bangladesh

During the 2024–25 interim government in Bangladesh, trade relations between India and Bangladesh have encountered fresh challenges. Issues such as trade imbalance, tariff inconsistencies, and logistical complexities at the border have contributed to rising bilateral tensions. The interim government's limited mandate and prevailing political uncertainty have made these disputes more sensitive, potentially affecting the economic interdependence between the two nations.

2.1. Political Shift and Strategic Realignment

In August 2024, Bangladesh's longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was ousted amid mass protests; a new interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus came to power. These developments triggered a realignment in Bangladesh's foreign policy, including a pivot toward China and cooling ties with India. Yunus openly criticized India's regional role during a March 2025 visit to China, describing India's northeast as landlocked and inviting China's involvement via Bangladesh—sparking a political backlash from New Delhi.

2.2. Bangladesh's Trade Curbs on Indian Goods

Starting in April 2025, Bangladesh imposed restrictions including a ban on Indian cotton yarn imports via land ports, a stop to rice exports from India through key crossings, and a new transit fee of 1.8 taka per ton-kilometre on Indian cargo moving through Bangladesh. Border enforcement also tightened: Indian trucks faced aggressive inspection regimes, causing operational delays at crossings between the two countries.

2.3. India's Retaliatory Measures

On April 9, 2025, India revoked a multiyear transshipment facility established in 2020. This had previously allowed Bangladesh to route exports via Indian land ports and airports to third countries (e.g., the EU, Middle East). The revocation significantly raised logistics costs for Bangladeshi exporters. On May 17, 2025, India's Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) issued sweeping restrictions: imports of ready-made garments, processed foods, plastics, wooden furniture, etc., from Bangladesh could only enter via seaports Kolkata or Nhava Sheva, banning those goods at land customs stations in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and border points in West Bengal. Tripura traders welcomed these curbs as support for domestic production, claiming Bangladeshi imports were mainly used because of geographic proximity.

3. India-Bangladesh Boarder Disputes and security Concerns

The India-Bangladesh border issue has a long history, but it reached a critical juncture after Sheikh Hasina's resignation and the formation of an interim government led by Mohammad Yunus. During this period, border-crossing violence escalated, often due to miscommunication or clashes between border patrols. This includes incidents of border killings of civilians or farmers who inadvertently cross the border, as well as border clashes between security forces over fence construction.

3.1. Border Fencing: India has been constructing fences along its border with Bangladesh, claiming it is necessary to prevent illegal immigration, trafficking, and smuggling. However, this fence has led to occasional confrontations between border security forces and local populations, particularly in areas like West Bengal and Tripura.

Kodalia River Region: A dispute has arisen between the border guards of the two countries over a 5-kilometer stretch of the Kodalia River on the India-Bangladesh border, where Bangladesh objected when India tried to build a fence.

West Bengal-Malda Border: Disputes emerged between India's Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh's Border Guard (BGB) regarding the erection of a border fence in the Malda region of West Bengal. Despite the disagreements, local residents on both sides of the border expressed support for the security measures and the construction of the fence.

3.2. Illegal Immigration:

The issue of unauthorized migration, particularly from Bangladesh into India, has remained a persistent challenge. It has contributed to ongoing tensions due to its implications for border control, changes in population demographics, and concerns over national security. Following the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, millions of refugees fled to India, especially to states like West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura. In the post-independence period, continued economic hardship and political instability in Bangladesh led to further illegal migration. This problem became more prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. A major milestone in addressing the issue was the Assam Accord of 1985, which aimed to identify and deport illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam. In 2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) initiative aimed to verify the legal residents of Assam. However, it sparked controversy as a large number of Bengali-speaking Muslims were left out, raising concerns about the possibility of them becoming stateless. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 further complicated matters. Though it did not directly address illegal immigration, the Act sparked debates over citizenship, religion, and immigration, particularly in regions like Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura, where many Bengali-speaking residents were considered "illegal immigrants".

3.3. Cross-Border Militancy:

India and Bangladesh face several challenges related to cross-border militancy. Bangladesh has been a haven for various militant groups involved in terrorist activities in both countries. The porous border between India and Bangladesh makes it difficult for security forces to prevent the movement of militants. The Indian government has expressed concerns that some militant groups are using Bangladesh as a safe haven to train, plan, and launch attacks. While Bangladesh has agreed to cooperate on counter-terrorism, there have been instances of limited or inconsistent cooperation. Some notable militant groups include:

Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI): A Bangladeshi militant group affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB): A Bangladeshi militant group involved in terrorist activities.

ULFA and other Northeastern insurgent groups: These groups have been known to have links with Bangladeshi militant groups and have used Bangladesh as a safe haven.

4. Cross-Border Smuggling and Security Challenges

India and Bangladesh share a long border of over 4,096 kilometers, and while the two countries have made strides in improving relations in recent years, there remain serious issues related to smuggling across the border. Smuggling activities involve the illegal trade of goods and often pose economic, security, and social challenges for both countries. Let's break down some of the major issues surrounding India-Bangladesh smuggling relations: Smuggling between India and Bangladesh is often connected to various illegal goods, which include:

4.1. Drugs and Narcotics: Bangladesh, in particular, is a major transit point for smuggling drugs like methamphetamine and yaba tablets (a combination of meth and caffeine) from Southeast Asia into India. These drugs often come from Myanmar or the Golden Triangle region.

4.2. Arms and Ammunition: Smuggling of small arms, explosives, and ammunition is a serious concern, as it can fuel terrorism and insurgency on both sides of the border. There have been instances where weapons from Bangladesh have been smuggled into India for use in various militant activities.

4.3. Fake Currency: Another significant issue is the smuggling of counterfeit currency from Bangladesh to India. This illegal activity has contributed to the circulation of fake Indian Rupees in the Indian market, which harms the economy.

4.4. Cattle Smuggling: One of the largest illegal trades between India and Bangladesh is cattle smuggling. Cattle are illegally transported from India, primarily from West Bengal, to Bangladesh for sale, especially during religious festivals.

4.5. Gold and Electronics: Smuggling of gold, mobile phones, and other high-value electronic goods also exists between the two countries, often to avoid customs duties.

5. The Siliguri Corridor or Chicken Neck

The Siliguri Corridor is a vital region in India, measuring approximately 60 kilometers in length and 42 kilometers in width. It is commonly referred to as the Chicken Neck due to its strategic location as the sole land connection between India's northeastern states (Seven Sister States of India) and this landmass shares its eastern border with Bangladesh, its western boundary with Nepal, and its northern edge with Bhutan. The corridor's security and strategic importance have raised concerns between India and Bangladesh. The relationship between the two countries was cordial under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, but the current interim government's perceived alignment with China has sparked concerns in India. Some reports suggest that China is trying to build an air base in Bangladesh, which is located near the Siliguri corridor at Lalmonirhat in Bangladesh. This type of activity further increases India's security concerns. Specifically, potential Chinese activities such as the construction of an Air base near the Siliguri corridor at Lalmonirhat in Bangladesh have heightened India's security concerns.

6. Misinformation in both Countries' Media and Social Media

The India–Bangladesh bilateral relationship has become increasingly sensitive due to the spread of misinformation and disinformation through both traditional media and social media platforms. Political instability, religious tensions, and strategic concerns have often been distorted and exaggerated in both countries, contributing to mutual suspicion and deteriorating trust between their peoples.

For instance, in late 2024, a fake open letter allegedly signed by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina went viral, claiming that she endorsed India's ruling BJP. The letter was later declared fabricated by the Bangladeshi authorities. Similarly, on 22 April 2025, a brutal terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Jammu & Kashmir, killed 26 civilians and injured many more. In retaliation, India launched Operation Sindoor on 7 May 2025, targeting terror infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Following these events, several fake news items began circulating on social media. One viral claim falsely stated that Pakistan's military had shot down an Indian Rafale jet over Bahawalpur. However, India's Press Information Bureau (PIB) clarified that the image was related to a MiG-21 accident in Moga, Punjab, in the year 2022, and not from any recent conflict. Meanwhile, some Bangladeshi online portals exaggerated human rights abuses by Indian border forces, which were later proven to be unverified or manipulated reports. Additionally, misleading posts emerged showing old videos of communal violence or military drills, falsely labeled as recent incidents involving India. Such content, especially when spread by politically motivated pages, not only fuels hostility but also obstructs constructive diplomacy between New Delhi and Dhaka.

Similarly, incidents involving attacks or persecution of Bangladesh's Hindu minority population have often been exaggerated by certain segments of the Indian media. While the safety of religious minorities in Bangladesh remains a genuine concern. Over the past few decades, the Hindu population has declined, partly due to land grabs, social discrimination, and occasional violence. While such incidents are not widespread or systemic, challenges persist in ensuring minority rights and protection. It is important to approach the issue from a factual and human rights-based perspective, without exaggeration. In some cases the reporting has been sensationalized or distorted. This pattern of overstatement damages mutual trust between the two countries and fuels unnecessary tension at the societal and diplomatic levels.

It is evident that unchecked misinformation undermines bilateral trust, fosters polarization, and may even derail diplomatic progress. Therefore, both nations must prioritize the development of joint fact-checking mechanisms and promote media literacy to safeguard regional stability and mutual respect.

A New Era of Diplomacy between India and Bangladesh

India and Bangladesh have entered a new diplomatic era where mutual interests, regional stability, political realities, and people-to-people cultural diplomacy play a crucial role. Both sides are showing renewed interest in border management, trade, water sharing, security cooperation, and humanitarian and development initiatives. Despite past challenges, the current context opens the way for a balanced and pragmatic diplomatic approach between the two nations.

1. Humanitarian diplomacy

Humanitarian diplomacy between India and Bangladesh has been a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship, particularly evident during times of crisis such as the 1971 Liberation War, when India provided refuge to millions of displaced Bangladeshis. In recent years, this cooperation has extended to disaster relief, medical aid, and pandemic response, with India supplying vaccines, medical equipment, and essential goods during the COVID-19 crisis. Both countries have also collaborated on cross-border river management and climate resilience initiatives, reflecting a shared commitment to addressing human security challenges. This ongoing humanitarian engagement underscores the broader strategic and cultural ties that bind the two neighbors.

On July 21, 2025, a Bangladesh Air Force F-7 BGI jet crashed into Milestone School and College in Dhaka, resulting in the deaths of at least 22 to 24 children and injuring around 170 people. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his condolences and assured Bangladesh of India's full support and assistance. In response, India dispatched a specialized medical team of burn specialists from Delhi's Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital and Safdarjung Hospital to Dhaka. The team arrived on the evening of July 23 and immediately began assessing and treating burn victims. Additionally, the Indian High Commission formally communicated with the Government of Bangladesh, offering to arrange medical treatment in India.

2. People-to-people and cultural diplomacy

The people-to-people ties between India and Bangladesh have always been strong and are considered a vital foundation for maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding. These connections, along with cultural diplomacy, form the bedrock of their enduring bilateral relationship, which is rooted in a shared history, language, traditions, and the legacy of the 1971 Liberation War. Cultural exchanges through art, literature, music, and cinema have fostered mutual respect, while initiatives such as academic collaboration, tourism, and cross-border festivals have further strengthened grassroots connections.

3. Regional co-operation

India and Bangladesh share strong regional cooperation based on historical, cultural, and geographical ties, particularly through platforms like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN. Their cooperation spans multiple areas, including trade, energy, water resources, and connectivity. Key initiatives such as cross-border rail and road connectivity, power grid connectivity, and joint river management highlight their commitment to regional integration. Both countries have also worked closely on security and counter-terrorism, ensuring stability in South Asia. These cooperative efforts have deepened mutual trust and contributed to regional growth and development. Recently, during a bilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok on April 4, 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh's interim Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus discussed a range of sensitive issues. These included the security of minority communities in Bangladesh, the need for a fair and balanced water-sharing agreement on the Ganges and Teesta rivers, Bangladesh's request for the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and the importance of maintaining stability along their shared border. They also addressed broader international concerns, such as climate change. Additionally, Prime Minister Modi urged Yunus to refrain from making inflammatory statements that could negatively impact bilateral relations.

4. Economic growth and trade

Economic growth and trade between India and Bangladesh have strengthened significantly in recent years, reflecting a new era of diplomacy. India and Bangladesh have developed a strong economic and trade relationship characterized by growing connectivity, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development. Bilateral trade has expanded steadily, reaching around \$14 billion in 2023–24, though the balance heavily favors India. India exports goods such as machinery, cotton, and petroleum products, while Bangladesh mainly exports garments, textiles, and jute. To address this imbalance, both countries are negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), especially as Bangladesh prepares to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026. India has committed over \$8 billion in development assistance for major infrastructure projects, including cross-border railways, inland waterways, and power plants. Energy trade is also robust, with Bangladesh importing over 1,100 MW of electricity from India and participating in joint ventures like the Maitree power plant. Despite occasional political tensions and calls for more balanced trade, both nations continue to emphasize economic cooperation as a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

The relationship between India and Bangladesh is deeply rooted in shared history, cultural ties, and strategic interests. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, this bilateral partnership reached what many consider a “golden chapter,” marked by notable advancements in border agreements, trade, transit access, security cooperation, and equitable water-sharing arrangements.

However, the emergence of an interim government in 2024–25 introduced new political dynamics and challenges. Growing closeness with China, economic difficulties, electoral uncertainty, human rights concerns, rising border tensions, trade imbalances, and the proliferation of misinformation have all contributed to a breakdown in trust and diplomatic balance between the two nations.

Despite these complications, the current environment presents an opportunity for renewal. The interim administration, led by Muhammad Yunus, has pledged to hold national elections by early 2026 an event that could help restore political stability and foster stronger bilateral engagement. If both nations embrace a relationship grounded in mutual respect, pragmatic diplomacy, and people-centered cooperation, there remains strong potential to rebuild a more resilient and future-oriented partnership.

Ultimately, collaboration between India and Bangladesh is not just beneficial for both countries, but is also essential for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development across the wider South Asian region.

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