



India-Bangladesh Relations: A Geopolitical Overview

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Abstract

India's policy has always been to cultivate friendly and harmonious relations with its neighbours. The importance of neighbouring countries for maintaining balance in South and Southeast Asia is crucial for India from a geopolitical perspective. India has consistently strived to strengthen its ties with its neighbours through cooperation and agreements. India's neighbours include Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. India's relations with these countries are developing through cooperation and trade in various sectors. Several factors underpin this policy, one of which is promoting regional stability and security. Furthermore, India aims to boost its economic development by strengthening economic ties with its neighbouring countries. India has historically maintained cordial relations with its neighbour, Bangladesh. The two countries are partners in cultural exchange, trade, and security matters. However, the recent political turmoil in Bangladesh has created instability in these relations. Since the ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the formation of a new interim government, a shift has been observed in India-Bangladesh relations. It is crucial for India to maintain a delicate balance during this period and cultivate positive political and diplomatic relations with Bangladesh, a country located in Southeast Asia, as this is essential for the overall political stability of the entire Southeast Asian region.

Key Words: Neighbouring Countries, South-east Asia, Regional Stability, Cultural Exchange, India-Bangladesh Relations.

On August 15, 1947, India gained independence but also suffered the trauma of partition. After the partition, two countries, India and Pakistan, were created. Pakistan was formed by combining two parts of undivided India. These two parts were East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Present-day Bangladesh was called East Pakistan, and present-day Pakistan was called West Pakistan. However, East Pakistan had already started its struggle for independence in 1952.

Review of Literature

India-Bangladesh relations have been a subject of interest for researchers from the very beginning. The study of India-Bangladesh relations has been in a constant state of flux. From the time of Bangladesh's independence, the study of India-Bangladesh relations has often been conducted in the context of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. However, following the coup in Bangladesh in 2024, triggered by the Gen Z revolution, the study of India-Bangladesh relations is now being approached from a transformed perspective. Datta, Sreeradha. in 2002 done a strategic analysis of Indo-Bangladesh relations in the reference of limitations and constraints. Kashem, Md. in 2016 analysed the recent Issues in Bangladesh-India relations from the perspective of Bangladeshi. In 2021 Hoque, NM & Rahman, Md. Zarif conducted a study on the understanding the relationship between Bangladesh and India. The study was undertaken in the Bangladesh perspective. Hossen, Md. Enayet in 2023 analysed the relations of Bangladesh-India during 2001to 2006. This study was done in the context of political and economic relations. Mr. Mahirul Islam in 2023 studied the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. This study was conducted in the reference of post 2014 scenario of India-Bangladesh scenario.

Methodology

The research paper is based on the combined research approach. Qualitative and Quantitative data are used for analysis purpose. The sources of quantitative data include reports published on international relationships, online articles, international and national newspapers etc. While Qualitative data is collected form policy documents, government reports, news archives, and expert interviews to understand geopolitical contexts, Indian foreign policies and contemporary scenario of India Bangladesh relationships.

Formation of Bangladesh

In 1971, East Pakistan separated from Pakistan and became a new country, which is currently known as Bangladesh. India played a crucial role in the independence of Bangladesh. Some of the main reasons for the formation of Bangladesh were:

1. Geographical Barriers - The main geographical barrier between East (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) was the vast Indian territory of more than 1,600 kilometres (over 1,000 miles) that separated the two parts. This distance, along with differences in language, culture, and weak transportation links, became a major reason for the separation of East Pakistan (the emergence of Bangladesh) in 1971. India's vast geographical expanse lay between the two parts. The lack of direct contact made unity between the two regions difficult. West Pakistan had an arid, mountainous terrain and the plains of Sindh, while East Pakistan (Bengal) was a low-lying, humid, and riverine region.
2. Cultural Dominance - Since the partition of India and Pakistan, Bengali was predominant in East Pakistan, while Punjabi and Urdu were dominant in West Pakistan. From the time of Pakistan's formation, there was a language dispute between East and West Pakistan. West Pakistan tried to make Urdu the national language. East Pakistan had 56% of Pakistan's population, who spoke Bengali. However, the granting of official language status to Urdu led to discontent in East Pakistan. Urdu was given the status of the official language in government offices and for general work. Pakistani leaders stated that Pakistan was created at the demand of millions of Muslims of the subcontinent, and the language of the Muslims is Urdu; therefore, it is important that Pakistan has a common language, which can only be Urdu. The people of East Pakistan also suffered from cultural inequality and discrimination in various forms.
3. Injustice and Inequality - Along with cultural discrimination, East Pakistan faced economic, political, and even military discrimination. Influential individuals and politicians from West Pakistan were appointed to important political, economic, and military positions. East Pakistan's agricultural resources were a major source of income for Pakistan, yet most of the income generated from agriculture was spent on development projects in West Pakistan. The main issue was the injustice done to East Pakistan, whether it was cultural discrimination, linguistic discrimination, or economic discrimination, they never received justice.

4. The 1970 General Elections - The 1970 general elections in Pakistan proved crucial for the creation of Bangladesh. In these elections, the Awami League of East Pakistan, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, achieved a landslide victory. His party won 167 out of 169 seats in East Pakistan. Mujibur Rahman had a clear majority to form the government in the Pakistani parliament, but the rulers and military officers in Pakistan were unwilling to accept this. This discrimination against Mujibur Rahman fuelled the flames of rebellion throughout East Pakistan. People took to the streets in large numbers.

5. Operation Searchlight - To suppress the growing discontent in East Pakistan, the Pakistani army resorted to brutal repression. Pakistani dictator General Yahya Khan laid the foundation for this operation. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, the Pakistani army entered Dhaka, shut down radio stations, and detained journalists. On March 25, 1971, 40,000 Pakistani soldiers and artillery divisions unleashed a brutal and horrific scene of violence that still sends shivers down people's spines today. This campaign is known as Operation Searchlight. According to estimates, more than 3 million people were killed in this operation. It is believed that this massacre cannot be compared to any other massacre since World War II. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then chairman of the Pakistan People's Party, commented, "Thank God, Pakistan has been saved." The main targets of this operation were intellectuals and the teachers and students of Dhaka University, who were the backbone of this liberation movement. This brutality of the Pakistani army continued until its surrender to the Indian army. The renowned Bangladeshi historian Muntassir Mamoon said that "despite overwhelming evidence, footage of killings, mass graves, eyewitness accounts, and factual coverage by foreign journalists, this massacre has not been recognized as a genocide by the United Nations. Nor does Pakistan officially acknowledge the fact." Professor Ehsan Butt says that the inequality and all kinds of discrimination against the Bengali population of East Pakistan led to suffering and anger among the population, which culminated in the events of 1971.

Stages of Bangladesh's formation

According to Professor Ehsan Butt and Dr. Tariq Rahman, the events of 1970 and 1971 sealed the partition. The formation of Bangladesh from East Pakistan can be understood in four stages:

1. Formation of the Mukti Bahini and the Liberation War - East Pakistani leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was struggling for the autonomy of East Pakistan. He announced a six-point program for this purpose. Due to his separatist activities, he had become a thorn in Pakistan's side. He was also prosecuted for conspiracy and separatist activities, but this backfired, making Rahman a hero in East Pakistan. Due to strong opposition, Pakistan had to withdraw the case against Mujibur Rahman for conspiracy and involvement in separatist activities.

2. Agartala Conspiracy - The Agartala Conspiracy case (1968) was a sedition case filed by the Pakistani government against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 34 others (mainly Bengali military officers). In 1967-68, Pakistan alleged that a conspiracy was being hatched in India (Agartala, Tripura) to separate East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from Pakistan. They were accused of plotting to secede East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) with India's support. This case became a turning point in the Bangladeshi independence movement, fuelling public anger and ultimately leading to the emergence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as 'Bangabandhu' (Friend of Bengal).

3. The 1970 General Election- The 1970 general election in Pakistan proved crucial for the creation of Bangladesh. In these elections, the East Pakistan Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, achieved a landslide victory. Mujibur Rahman's party won 167 out of 169 seats in East Pakistan. Mujibur Rahman had a clear majority to form the government in the Pakistani parliament, but the authorities in Pakistan were unwilling to accept this. This discrimination against Mujibur Rahman intensified the flames of rebellion in East Pakistan. People took to the streets in large numbers. To suppress this fierce movement, the Pakistani authorities sent the army to East Pakistan. To quell the rapidly escalating movement, the Pakistani army resorted to brutal repression. In March 1971, the Pakistani army launched the brutal "Operation Searchlight." Murders and rapes reached their peak. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the East Pakistan Awami League, was arrested. To avoid arrest, Awami League leaders fled to India for refuge. The general public also started seeking refuge in India in large numbers. During this time, more than one crore refugees took shelter in India. This increased the pressure on India to take action against Pakistan.

Meanwhile, on March 26, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh and formed an organization called Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army). Formation and Role of the 4. Mukti Bahini- The Mukti Bahini was formed in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Following the declaration of independence of East Pakistan in protest against the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army, it was formed by Bengali citizens and regular soldiers. In the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, the Mukti Bahini fought alongside India and played a crucial role in the independence of Bangladesh.

Immediately after the declaration of independence of Bangladesh on March 26, 1971, Bengali citizens and regular soldiers of the Pakistani army formed the Mukti Bahini. Initially, it was a guerrilla organization, but later regular forces were incorporated into it. In September 1971, regular Mukti Bahini battalions were formed, which increased its effectiveness. It was led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who is considered the founding father of Bangladesh. Later, on April 17, 1971, General M.A.G. Osmani was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh forces.

India's role in the independence of Bangladesh was decisive, including providing refuge to refugees, training and arming the Mukti Bahini, and direct military intervention in 1971. India provided crucial support in the war against Pakistan, which paved the way for Bangladesh's victory with the surrender of the Pakistani army on December 16, 1971.

5. India's Intervention: Due to the atrocities being committed against the people of East Pakistan, a large number of refugees fled to India. It is believed that socio-political and economic pressures compelled India to intervene in this problem. At the end of March 1971, the Indian government decided to intervene in the matter. On March 31, 1971, Indira Gandhi, while addressing the Indian Parliament, spoke about helping the people of East Bengal. On July 29, 1971, it was publicly announced in the Indian Parliament that the Mukti Bahini would be provided with assistance and training. During this time, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Europe and America in October-November 1971. During this visit, she met with US President Richard Nixon. Indira Gandhi presented her perspective on East Pakistan to Richard Nixon. Nixon remained non-committal regarding Mujibur Rahman. The US feared that the separation of East Pakistan would weaken Pakistan's influence. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi clearly stated that the current situation in East Pakistan was explosive. She said that only the release of Mujibur Rahman could create a positive atmosphere. However, Richard Nixon also said that if Pakistan provoked India, it would not back down.

India's Role:

India provided refuge to millions of East Pakistani refugees fleeing the war. India provided training, weapons, and logistical support to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters, the Mukti Bahini. This operation was codenamed Operation Jackpot. India also made political efforts to garner international support for the Bangladesh independence movement. After the Pakistani air force launched a pre-emptive attack on India on December 3, 1971, India officially entered the war. The Indian forces launched coordinated attacks and forced the Pakistani army to surrender in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.

The 1971 Indo-Pakistan War and the Creation of Bangladesh:

The 1971 Indo-Pakistan war was initiated by Pakistan. This war lasted for 13 days. The main reason for this war was the atrocities being committed in East Pakistan and the influx of millions of refugees into India, which led to India supporting the Bangladesh liberation movement. India achieved a major victory in this war, and Bangladesh emerged as a new nation. The war began on December 3, 1971, when Pakistan launched several air strikes on Indian airfields under the name Operation Chengiz Khan. The Pakistani army carried out continuous air attacks on India's western border. In response, India declared war and launched a ground offensive into East Pakistan.

The Major Events of the war

The Battle of Longewala: On the night of December 4th and 5th, 120 Indian soldiers held off 2000 Pakistani soldiers and tanks at Longewala throughout the night. In the morning, the Indian Air Force attacked the tanks and destroyed them.

Operation Trident- On December 4, the Indian Navy attacked Karachi port and inflicted significant damage. The Indian Air Force also played a crucial role in this war. The Indian Air Force conducted air strikes for approximately 13 days, with Hunter aircraft bombing Pakistani tanks. The Indian armed forces effectively encircled Pakistan on the eastern front. The Indian Army advanced rapidly into Bangladesh and began moving towards Dhaka. Major General Jacob surrounded the Pakistani army as they advanced towards Dhaka.

On December 16, 1971, the Pakistani army surrendered, and India achieved a major victory. As a result of this war, a new nation, Bangladesh, was formed from East Pakistan. After the war, the Shimla Agreement was signed between India and Pakistan on July 2, 1972. Pakistan ultimately faced a humiliating defeat, which led to its division into two parts. Immediately after the war, India recognized the newly formed Bangladesh and established political relations. India also signed a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union, which provided India with crucial support during the war.

Outcome:

India's decisive participation played a vital role in Bangladesh's victory and ensured its creation as an independent nation. In this process, India also suffered heavy human and military losses, including the lives of approximately 3873 soldiers. At the end of the war, nearly 90,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered to the Indian forces, and consequently, Bangladesh declared its independence on December 16, 1971.

India-Bangladesh Relations After Independence:

India was one of the first countries to recognize Bangladesh and establish political relations immediately after its independence in December 1971. Member states of the United Nations also promptly recognized Bangladesh's independent identity.

Défense Cooperation:

India and Bangladesh share a 4096-kilometer-long border, which is the longest international border shared by India with any of its neighbouring countries. Assam, West Bengal, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura share a border with Bangladesh. The two countries have also been conducting joint military exercises: Army - Sampriti military exercise, Navy - Milan military exercise.

Economic Relations

In 2021-22, Bangladesh emerged as India's largest trading partner in South Asia and the fourth largest destination for Indian exports globally. Exports to Bangladesh increased by over 66%, from US\$9.69 billion in fiscal year 2020-21 to US\$16.9 billion in fiscal year 2021-22.

Bangladesh Current Political Scenario

A "Generation Z (Gen Z)" revolution unfolded in Bangladesh in 2024, culminating in a massive student movement that led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It is considered the world's first successful Gen Z revolution.

The movement began in June 2024 in protest against a High Court ruling reinstating the quota system in government jobs (specifically, a 30% reservation for descendants of 1971 freedom fighters). Although the High Court later rescinded the order, students viewed it as an injustice against merit-based opportunities. The government's harsh response, police action, and attacks on protesters by groups affiliated with the ruling party transformed the movement into a full-blown popular uprising. Gen Z protesters extensively used social media platforms (such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) for coordination and awareness-raising. They circumvented government control over traditional media, mobilizing public support through viral videos and hashtags. Following widespread protests and violence, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country on August 5, 2024. An interim government was formed under the leadership of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus.

A new student-led political party, the National Citizen Party (NCP), which emerged from this movement, has struggled to gain political traction. Its electoral alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami in December 2025 has

led to internal strife within the party and the resignation of some key members, raising questions about its future prospects. The political situation in the country remains unstable ahead of the upcoming elections on February 12, 2026.

Geopolitical Issues

Several major geopolitical challenges exist between the two countries, including the unresolved issue of the Teesta river water sharing, which remains a significant point of contention. Bangladesh has always been crucial to India's security and foreign policy in South Asia. India needs Bangladesh's cooperation to counter China's "String of Pearls" strategy. Bangladesh is located at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia and is vital to India's Look East policy, which aims to forge deeper political ties with Southeast Asian countries. The attempts by Bangladeshi citizens to illegally enter India and the deaths of Bangladeshi citizens at the hands of Indian soldiers also pose challenges to India-Bangladesh relations. India has consistently strived to improve its relations with its neighbours under its "Neighbourhood First" policy, but due to China's increasing influence in the region, India is losing its leverage. Bangladesh is an active participant in the Belt and Road Initiative. The interim government of Bangladesh does not have cordial relations with India due to India granting asylum to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It is essential for India to maintain cordial relations with its neighbours to counter Chinese influence in South Asia. Bangladesh is a crucial geopolitical neighbour for India, essential for the security of Northeast India, regional stability, and the 'Act East Policy'. With a shared border of 4,096 km, it provides security to the Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck) and serves as a vital trade route, offering access to the Bay of Bengal and connectivity to Southeast Asia (such as the Kaladan project). Bangladesh's role is crucial in curbing insurgency in Northeast India and controlling cross-border terrorism. A friendly and stable Bangladesh is of paramount importance to India. Bangladesh provides a crucial transit route connecting India's northeastern states (Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram) to the mainland, thereby reducing dependence on the Siliguri Corridor. Bangladesh is a key pillar of India's 'Act East Policy', which aims to promote economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asia. Strategically, by keeping Bangladesh on its side, India is able to mitigate China's growing influence (the "String of Pearls" strategy) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia. The two countries are actively cooperating in energy, power, and infrastructure development (such as the Maitree Super Thermal Power Project). Through cooperation within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and BIMSTEC, both countries pursue shared goals of regional development and stability. Although the two countries share historical ties, issues such as the Teesta River water-sharing dispute, illegal migration, and border killings occasionally cause tension. Following the political changes in Bangladesh in 2024, maintaining relations with a stable and friendly government there is a major challenge for India going forward.

Conclusion

The future of India-Bangladesh relations hinges on strategic rebalancing, economic integration, and connectivity (such as railway and energy cooperation). While new political dynamics after 2024 present challenges like a potential cooling of relations and increased Chinese influence, both countries will remain geographically and economically important to each other. The Teesta water dispute and border management will be key issues. The political changes in Bangladesh present the biggest regional challenge for India since 1971, testing the deep and enduring bilateral cooperation in trade, connectivity, energy, and defence. To revitalize relations, India needs to engage in dialogue with all stakeholders, manage sensitive issues transparently, and offer competitive partnerships to ensure strategic influence.

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