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Bangladesh's Political Transition and India's Test of Regional Leadership

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Bangladesh's Political Transition and India's Test of Regional Leadership

Introduction

The India-Bangladesh relations are one of the more consequential bilateral relationships between India and south Asia. These influence the stability in the region, trade and connectivity, counter-terrorism, water security and most importantly, the access of India to her North Eastern states. Bangladesh has had successive periods of political instabilities, military interventions, mass unrests and changes of leadership since the independence of the nation in 1971. Although India has long dealt with these fluctuations pragmatically, the 2024 onwards political turmoil with its all its magnitude, social nature, and the risk of a regional spillover is a qualitatively different challenge (Tazreena Sajjad, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2025).

The most recent spark to the prevailing crisis was the resurrection of an old, contentious quota system in governmental work that skewed in favour of the educated youth and their high rates of unemployment. It started as a student-driven reform movement but, following the violent state reaction, it grew out of proportions with loss of lives, internet disconnection, and politicisation of the identity and history. The assassination of protestors, among them Abu Sayeed, turned into the symbolic events, which transformed a rule controversy to a national crisis of validity (Wikipedia, 2025). Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's ultimate resignation and subsequent exit in August 2024 as the Prime Minister changed this and thereafter a decade long continuity in politics that India had been strongly banking on to stay stable and cooperate with, has come to its end.

After this transition, Bangladesh was in a period of uncertainty that lasted a long time with an interim political system, and the elections are scheduled to be held in February 2026 (Al Jazeera, 2025). Violence against minorities, a revival of border tensions, and polarised media discourses resurfaced during this time and attracted international attention and United Nations pleads to calm down (Vibhu Mishra, 2025). Meanwhile, the parts of Bengali political culture began to discuss India as being too close to one politician instead of the entire Bangladeshi society causing people to feel frustrated even though there are strong cultural, linguistic, and historical connections (Rishi Gupta, 2024).

In the case of India, these developments have a strategic implication that is not all about bilateral diplomacy. The largest trading partner of India in South Asia, Bangladesh's bilateral trade is closer to USD 14 billion, and will be the key to halving logistics costs to the North East through transit and connectivity agreements (The Hindu, 2024; NextIAS, 2025). Any

instability in the long term will be counter-insurgent cooperation undermined and the vulnerabilities along the Siliguri Corridor- the chicken-neck connecting mainland India and the North East being revealed. Bangladesh is also unstable in a wider Indo-Pacific sense, which allows more outside influence, especially of China, at a time when regional affiliations are getting progressively more pronounced.

The paper will hold that the policy issue facing India is not only to have a short-term fix to the relationship problem with Dhaka, but to have a reengineered attitude towards guaranteeing long-term resilience irrespective of the turnover of leadership. It proceeds in three parts. It evaluates the situation in Bangladesh that has emerged, the dynamics of the protest, the response by the state, and its implications on the region. Then, it compounds the key items of the India-Bangladesh relationship such as security, connectivity, water, trade, and popular opinion and attempts to counter-arguments by evidence-based refutation. Further, suggests the future forward policy framework that is based on restraint, reciprocity, and regionalism to achieve the favourable results to both countries and protect the strategic interests of India in South Asia and the North Eastern region.

The recent emerging situation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has entered a phase of deep political uncertainty after the mass protests of mid-2024, the protests which are not new in Bangladesh but this uncertainty and protests continued till date. For India, understanding how and why this instability is essential, because Bangladesh's internal politics have always had direct spillover effects on India's security, economy, and regional position. This section analyses the situation in four layers, how the protests started and escalated, how the political transition took place, societal violence and the Bangladesh's external relations.

Start of protests and escalation

The 2024 unrest began with a policy trigger deeply rooted in inter-generational inequality, the reinstatement of a civil service quota that reserves a 30 percent of positions for descendants' of 1971 freedom fighters who were part of *Mukti Bahini* movement even when the youth unemployment at the same time is estimated to be around 40 percent (Wikipedia, 2025). This reservation quota had long been controversial and its reinstatement again raise grievances among the students and those who are unemployed as they started looking at this as something unfair and exclusion to the talent or merit.

The ruling Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, played a key role in the escalation. Between 15-18 July 2024, the confrontation between protestors and this group began which is backed by the state security forces which made the protest more violent. Police and Rapid Action Battalion units reportedly engaged protestors with live rounds, killing hundreds. The death of a student protester, Abu Sayeed, which was circulated over media with his hands raised, became a rallying symbol of the protest, making the protest which began with a policy trigger to a nationwide uprising seeking the democratic accountability.

The state's response included an internet shutdown, mass arrests of important student leaders of the protest. While protests are catching up quickly nationwide, they got fuelled up when the former prime minister Sheik Hasina made statements saying why should we spare *Razakars*, a historical term for collaborators with Pakistan's army during the 1971 liberation war.

On August 5, 2024, the prolonged protests and a nationwide non-cooperation movement forced Hasina to resign and flee the country and obtains political asylum in India where she already has been in the past after her father, Mujibur Rehman's assassination. But this, shelter to Hasina, fed anti-India sentiment despite shared culture and language in Bangladesh.

Political transition from then PM Sheik Hasina

The protests were on democracy, protests were to seek clarifications and resignation from Sheik Hasina who has now fled the country, but even post this we get to see both political and societal unrest in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has entered a protracted interim period with an administration guided by the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus who is given in-charge duty of maintaining order and steering the country towards elections that are now scheduled for February 2026 (Al Jazeera, 2025).

When there are transitional or interim governments, they don't make a commitment for long term reforms or foreign policy agreements, especially like sensitive issue like river treaties or security cooperation which are needed for India right now, which are now on hold due to the political unrest and transitional government.

Societal imbalance and Violence Continuity

The protests and unrest started on political decisions, have now become communal and religious, the attacks on Hindu minorities escalated drastically, framing perpetrators as revenge against the Awami League or Sheik Hasina supporters. These incidents drew the wide international attention and triggered protests outside the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi.

In December 2025, the assassination of pro-democracy leader Sharif Osman Hadi triggered renewed mob violence. This violence targeted media offices, and cultural institutions, further raising alarms of press freedom and civil space. The interim government's duty was to maintain law and order and move towards elections, but its inaction is witnessed here. The societal imbalance is to the extent where few portray India as supportive to the former regime and few see it as a necessary partner for stability.

The deterioration of people-to-people confidence was further aggravated by high-profile incidents such as the lynching of Deepu Charan Das in 2025. The case circulated widely on Bangladeshi social media and Indian news platforms, becoming a symbol of minority vulnerability during political uncertainty. While the interim leadership issued assurances of protection, the slow pace of accountability reinforced perceptions of institutional weakness (Vibhu Mishra, 2025). Such incidents matter diplomatically because they quickly cross borders emotionally, hardening public opinion in India and narrowing the space for quiet diplomacy with Dhaka.

Bangladesh's external relations since unrest

Bangladesh's unrest and instability have created openings for external powers like China Pakistan and USA.

China expanded its infrastructure financing, investments on port development projects amidst the economic vulnerability. (Shounak Sanyal, 2025).

Pakistan, to which Bangladesh fought for independence and liberation now sees the renewed trade dealings and visits by leaders, indicating us to a diplomatic turn.

USA engaged with Bangladesh where interim government leader Muhammad Yunus seeks to USA on revival of SAARC and broader cooperation which are the reflections to attempts of diversifying partnerships.

SAARC Revival request from Bangladesh

The interim leadership has actively stated for the revival of SAARC, emphasising multilateral approaches to regional issues. India's response has been very much cautious, focusing on BIMSTEC initiatives instead as to promote the sub-regional cooperation while avoiding Pakistan related tensions.

Implications of this emerging situation of Bangladesh for India

Bangladesh's unrest, and instability is not merely its internal turbulence for India but is strategic moment of implications. The narratives of anti-India in can be assessed based on how India engages diplomatically, economically, and culturally.

Political leaderships in both India and Bangladesh increasingly view the bilateral relationship through lenses shaped by domestic legitimacy rather than long-term strategy. In Bangladesh, opposition leaders and protest-linked voices frame India as overly aligned with the previous Awami League leadership, using unresolved issues such as Teesta to mobilise nationalist sentiment (Rishi Gupta, 2024). Even leaders who favour stable ties, including interim figures, emphasise "mutual respect" to signal distance from past asymmetries (Shounak Sanyal, 2025).

In India, political leadership largely continues to prioritise security stability and regional connectivity, sometimes underestimating how closely public opinion in Bangladesh associates India with past governance choices. This perceptual gap explains why state-level cooperation can remain functional while societal attitudes become strained. Managing this divergence is now as important as managing policy substance.

Understanding these dynamics sets the stage for analysing critical aspects of Indo-Bangladesh relations and crafting policy choices for a sustained and friendly relation between both the countries.

Critical Aspects of Indo-Bangladesh Relations

Indo-Bangladesh relations are on various dimensions that expand from security, geography, economy, and people to people ties. These dimensions have actually proved to be strong enough during the stability of the country and its political leadership of Bangladesh, but these recent times of unrest and instability have exposed all these dimensions to fragile nature,

indicating an important assessment to be done from Indian side on the policies towards Bangladesh in these vulnerable times.

Security Cooperation and Border Stability

The security cooperation between two nations has been one of the strongest pillars of India-Bangladesh relations, during 2009-2023, Dhaka's cooperation in dis-integrating the insurgent groups in India's Northeast contributed vividly for the peace in Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. Now, due to this instability in the country since 2024, has produced uncertainty to this institutionalized security cooperation (NextIAS, 2025).

This depends on the political trust that India can have with Bangladesh now, but with the current analysis of anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh that the people of Bangladesh also should be in par with India in eradicating such insurgent groups, not just the political leadership.

Siliguri Corridor and Strategic Geography

The Siliguri corridor, also known as to be the Chicken's neck, is the narrow land of 22km length that connects the Northern Central part of India to its North Eastern part over Bangladesh's tip. This simple, small corridor is very much strategically important to carry road, rail connections and pipeline and energy links essential to economic integration and defense logistics to North Eastern Part of India (The seven sisters) (The Hindu, 2024). Any serious disruption, whether from geopolitical competition, or regional conflict would isolate the North East and weaken the India's Act East Policy.

Bangladesh plays a stabilizing role in nullifying this vulnerability. Transit agreements that India has with Bangladesh does not only reduce dependence on the Siliguri corridor but also distribute logistical flows, reducing strategic risk.

China's Strategic Narratives and the "Six Wars" Framework

In these times of unrest in Bangladesh, India should look beyond its bilateral issues, India's strategic context is shaped by broader regional competition, particularly with China. An article carried by a major Chinese news agency outlined an idea of "Six Wars China Must Fight in the Coming 50 Years." In this narrative, the third proposed war (2035-2040) is described as the reconquest of southern Tibet, which is a state governed by India called Arunachal Pradesh, but claimed by China.

While such lists are not official policies, and may represent hyper nationalist narratives, their publication by state linked outlets signals that irredentist themes resonate within influential segments of Chinese strategic culture. This is important to India because China frequently refers to this Indian state as “South Tibet” and has renamed locations to assert this claim, which India consistently rejects.

Bangladesh’s this internal instability can weaken India’s Siliguri corridor and providing an option to China to work out with Bangladesh in breaking this corridor as the Bangladesh protest leaders are now claiming to make Bangladesh a Greater Bangladesh with capturing this corridor and conquering North Eastern Part of India. If China deepens economic, digital or defense ties with Bangladesh during political volatility, it can create a more favourable strategic environment for itself near India’s eastern frontier (Shafi Md Mostofa, 2024; NextIAS, 2025).

Thus, while the “Six wars” article does not represent official Chinese policy, it highlights a strategic imagination that links territorial revisionism, regional influence, and long-term competition, all of which influence how India assesses its neighbourhood strategy.

Trade interdependency

Economic ties between India and Bangladesh are significant. India exports approximately USD 14 billion annually to Bangladesh, supplying critical inputs to key sectors of the Bangladesh economy (The Hindu, 2024). However, instability since 2024 led to trade slowdowns of around 15-20 percent, especially in border regions.

Connectivity North Eastern part and Act East Policy

The connectivity projects that integrated India’s Northeast with mainland markets often rely on routes through Bangladesh. This includes road, rail and energy infrastructure that decrease distance and cost compared to the Siliguri Corridor alone (The Hindu, 2024). Having this no connectivity would hamper economic growth but also constrains India’s ability to project influence into Southeast Asia.

Policy Recommendations

The Indian policy towards Bangladesh needs to change and shift its objectives towards system-based resilience construction instead of it being leader-centric in nature in stability management. The uncertainty that follows post 2024 indicates that bilateral relations may not be reliant on the sustainability of a political leadership. Rather it should look at the policies that

are still intact during the periods of political changes, changes in the opinion of the people and the competition within the regions.

This section puts forward a Resilience-Based Policy Framework that is anchored on three mutually supportive principles, namely Restraint, Reciprocity, and Regionalism (3R Framework). Combined, these are meant to ensure the core interests of India of border security, Northeast Connectivity, Economic integration and regional leadership, to minimize backlash and strategic over exposure. The 3R Framework is an original analytical construct developed in this paper, synthesising established insights from strategic restraint, reciprocal diplomacy, and South Asian regionalism literature."

Restraint: De-Personalising India Bangladesh Policy

India should not strategically appear as a political agent within Bangladesh. Experience demonstrates the fact that India's relation with leadership made a feeling of no contact to people of Bangladesh or perceived intervention enhances the nationalistic opposition and diminishes the scope of diplomacy.

Various policy actions include, international indifference concerning the internal politics of Bangladesh, Symbolic gestures should be avoided to support certain leaders or parties, Transform the involvement of personalities to institutions, election commission, civil service, judiciary, business chambers, local governments, Enhance back-channel diplomacy, not the use of public messages in crises.

These policy actions would lead outcomes which, lowers anti-India mobilisation in political transitions, maintains good working relations irrespective of the outcome of elections, Secures India from domestic unrest.

Reciprocity: Cooperation and Its Visibility

The involvement of India should yield actual, collective gains that are perceived by not only the elites but also the citizens of Bangladesh. Political hostility is expensive at home when it is spread widely in terms of economic gains.

Various policy actions include, restoring and increasing bilateral trade by 2026 than what it was in pre-2024, initiating a USD 2 billion India-Bangladesh-Northeast Bankable inland waterways, border haats, constructing logistics parks in Tripura, Assam and Rangpur

divisions. Even without a final treaty, seek to have an interim river (data sharing, flood control, joint irrigation pilots) administration of Teesta River.

These policy actions can lead outcomes which forms economic stakeholders within Bangladesh who prefer the stability with India, minimises the politicisation of outstanding concerns such as Teesta, makes the Northeast of India a strength both economically and strategically.

Regionalism: Integrating Bangladesh into the Multilateral Structures

Political transitions are characterized by weak bilateral relations. Multilateral schemes water down pressure, normalise co-operation and curtail zero-sum perceptions.

Various policy actions include, strengthening the process of placing Bangladesh in the framework of BIMSTEC, particularly Connectivity corridors Disaster management and adaptation projects to climate.

India must also re-examine SAARC not as a political deadlock mechanism, but as a mechanism of strategic connectivity insurance. The strategic nature of the Bengali route to the Northeast of India and Bangladesh, combined with the vulnerability of this Siliguri Corridor, makes the transit routes in the region through Bangladesh and further on a matter of national security concern. An effective SAARC transport, inland waterways and disaster logistics framework would make India not lose access to its northeastern states even in coercive situations. This has deterrent value. According to the strategic literature, strategic Chinese long-term planning assumes the situation with pressure on the Arunachal Pradesh, which would be escalated in case the accessibility of the Northeast Indian region is restricted. By frustrating the idea of Bangladesh and Bay of Bengal area being a part of the SAARC-based connectivity, India indicates that it is not possible and even not decisive to isolate the Northeast and influences enemies to reconsider the idea of chicken necks.

These policy actions can lead outcomes which, weakens the capacity of China to monopolise the regional infrastructure discourses, thinks of the India-Bangladesh cooperation as regional public goods and not bilateral dependency, gives Bangladesh the same interests as the Act East strategy of India.

Conclusion

The three simultaneous forces of India-Bangladesh relations are structural crossroads due to the recurrent political instability in Bangladesh, the increased competition between great powers in South Asia, and the increment of the salience of the foreign policy in the publicity. The Bangladesh recent chaos is not new, but it is a manifestation of past trends of contentious legitimacy, the division of the state and society, and politicisation of identity. Nevertheless, the way the state reacted to demonstrations, and how foreign forces were viewed at this point of time, changed a national crisis into a diplomatic one on a regional level.

In the case of India, the lesson is more strategic than diplomatic. The dependence on the leadership-based engagement was too strong, which resulted in the stability at the state level and instability at the societal level. Since anti-India discourses gained momentum in both media and street politics in Bangladesh, the strategic vulnerabilities, most importantly the Siliguri Corridor, gained a new meaning. Considered together with the long-term strategic planning in the Indian case of Arunachal Pradesh and the growing presence in Bangladesh, the India-Bangladesh relations may no longer be viewed as a purely bilateral one, but rather as a part of a broader Indo-Pacific security calculus.

The argument presented in the paper is that crisis management will not bring about stability. India needs to tune its strategy with a layered approach which integrates political non-partisanship, people-oriented interaction as well as regional institutional capacity. It is not nostalgic but strategic insurance to revitalise SAARC and other sub-regional complementary mechanisms so that connection, deterrence and resilience can be guaranteed even in a coercive situation. On the same note, there is the need to consider human security issues, minority interests, cross-border citizenry to recover trust and ensure episodic violence does not become a permanent loss of estrangement.

However, in the long run, the future of the Indian-Bangladesh relations will rely on the ability of these two states to transcend transactional stability and seek inclusive legitimacy. A relationship which is founded on governments is fallible, a relationship which is founded on societies, institutions, and common regional interests is ensconced. Such durability in an Asian order, during a shift dance among various countries, is not a choice, but a necessity.

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