

# IPP

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## **The Indo-Bangladesh Relationship: “Saath Saath” (Together) or Too Close for Comfort?**

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between Bangladesh and India, since the founding of the former in 1971, has been complex. However, in the past decade, a very close relationship has developed between the two governments and the ruling parties. Significant numbers of treaties involving economic and defense cooperation have been implemented. Although several contentious issues have been resolved, some pressing issues remain. Cognizant of the existence of two perspectives about this relationship, commonly described as pro-Indian and anti-Indian, this paper explores the emergence of these perspectives, discusses the core arguments of the critical perspective, and locates them within the history of the relationship and India's neighborhood policy.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, India, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Bangladesh Awami League, Congress, BJP, Ganges, Teesta, Water Sharing, Land Border Agreement (LBA), Security

## **La relación entre India y Bangladesh: ¿“Saath Saath” (Juntos) o demasiado cerca para la comodidad?**

### RESUMEN

La relación entre Bangladesh e India, desde la fundación de esta última en 1971, ha sido muy compleja. Sin embargo, en la década pasada, una relación muy cercana se ha desarrollado entre los dos gobiernos y las clases que gobiernan. Se ha implementado un número significativo de tratados que tienen que ver con la cooperación

de economía y defensa. Aunque se han resuelto varios problemas polémicos, quedan algunos problemas urgentes. Consciente de la existencia de dos perspectivas acerca de esta relación—comúnmente descrita como pro y anti india—este documento explora la aparición de estas perspectivas, discute los argumentos principales de las perspectivas críticas y las ubica dentro de la historia de la relación y la política de India con sus vecinos.

**Palabras clave:** Bangladesh, India, Partido Nacionalista de Bangladesh, Liga Awami de Bangladesh, congreso, BJP, Ganges, Teesta, repartición de agua, Land Border Agreement (LBA), seguridad

## 印孟关系：友好合作还是邻国相争？

### 摘要

孟加拉和印度的关系自1971年孟加拉建国以来便一直处于十分复杂的状态。然而过去十年里，两国政府和执政党之间建立了十分紧密的关系。大量包括经济合作和国防合作的条约得以实行。尽管两国解决了几个争议，但一些紧迫问题依然存在。关于印孟关系存在两种视角，通常被描述为支持印度和反对印度的视角。本文探索了这两种视角的出现，探讨了关键视角的核心论点，同时在印孟关系的历史和印度领国政策中找出相应证据。

**关键词：**孟加拉，印度，孟加拉民族党，孟加拉人民联盟，国会，印度人民党，恒河，提斯塔河，共享水源，《土地边境协议》，安全

### Introduction

In the past decade, the relationship between Bangladesh and India has undergone a remarkable change, as the two governments have inked dozens of deals and closely cooperated on various issues. This dramatic closeness

of these two countries, especially at the government levels, is described by the leaders of both countries and diplomats as “the golden age” and closest ever since 2008.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is another perspective on the growing close relation-

ship which views India as domineering, and the relationship as uneven. The perspective is often not highlighted in the extant discussions on this bilateral relationship. This paper intends to bring forth this perspective and examine its arguments. Through a chronological narrative of the past 47 years, this paper intends to show that the ebb and flow of this relationship has been influenced by domestic political considerations and India's neighborhood policies.

The two contending perspectives that dominate the public psyche in Bangladesh are broadly described as pro-Indian and anti-Indian. The former perspective highlights the role of India in the birth of Bangladesh, underscores the historical and cultural ties between these two countries, and until the rise of the BJP to power in 2014, pointed to the secularist traditions of these two countries. The latter perspective, while acknowledging India's help in the war of independence, insists on focusing on the unresolved issues between these two countries, views India as a hegemonic power, and expresses suspicions about India due to its role in other neighboring countries. There is no dearth of literature on the first perspective, while the critical perspective, particularly its core arguments, has seldom received its due attention. This paper intends to examine its core arguments.

These perspectives are the results of perceptions about each other. As "perceptions are not simple phenomena to divine; they are deeply embedded in the historical consciousness of each country,"<sup>2</sup> they have emerged out of the

history of Bangladesh-India relations in the past 47 years. Indeed, history is open to interpretations. There are several narratives which contribute to the construction of various perceptions. It is equally important to note that "an interplay of a complex set of social, political, economic and psychological factors"<sup>3</sup> play into the construction of perception of the "other." Therefore, history is not the only determinant of the perceptions of the Bangladeshis; geographical proximity and asymmetry in power play significant roles. However, this paper is not an exploration of the perceptions per se, and how perceptions influenced the policies. Instead, the paper intends to explore the historical pathway of these contending perspectives.

## **Background**

**T**he 2008 election in Bangladesh, which was held after a two-year hiatus of democracy, brought the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) to power. It was the second term of the BAL with Sheikh Hasina at the helm since the new democratic era began in 1991. Since then, at least 111 agreements have been signed between the two countries in various sectors; a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for defense cooperation has been inked by both Prime Ministers; India has provided three lines of credit worth \$8 billion including \$500 million for defense procurement; the Land Border Agreement (LBA) has been implemented after more than 40 years of delay; disputes on the maritime boundary have been

settled through an international arbitration process; total trade has reached \$7.5 billion, and India has begun supplying electricity to Bangladesh. Bangladesh, in turn, has eliminated all hideouts of Indian militant groups in Bangladesh, provided land transit facilities to India for reaching the north-eastern states, and given right to India to access its ports for trading purposes. However, in recent years, the unease expressed about the nature and future trajectory of the relationship has worried some Bangladeshi analysts, sympathetic to India: "Is India losing a trusted friend?"<sup>4</sup> In India, the opposition Indian National Congress commented, "our relationship with Bangladesh, a country that India shares a historically rich and prosperous relationship with, is [ ... ] seeing signs of stress."<sup>5</sup> In some measures, this twin-track, of optimism and anxiety, is not new, and as I will show later, it has been the defining characteristic of the relationship between two neighbors for the past 47 years. What makes the relationship important and worth exploring is that since 2008 it was expected to take a new turn but, in reality, it has tread the old path.

### **The Relationship, 1972–2006: More Ebb Than Flow?**

**R**elationships between Bangladesh and India have been "complicated, challenging, tense and crisis-ridden and overwhelmed by accusation and counter-accusation."<sup>6</sup> Geography and history serve as the point of departure of relationships between these two countries. Bangladesh is sur-

rounded by India except an opening through the Bay of Bengal and a small border with Myanmar, and as a lower riparian country, it shares 54 rivers with India. Some analysts have described this as the "tyranny of geography."<sup>7</sup> Aside from the long historical and cultural ties between these countries, India played a pivotal role in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971. Thanks to these unalterable factors, Bangladesh–India relations remain an issue of immense importance and a matter of contention in Bangladeshi domestic politics. Domestic politics, particularly which party is in power, have influenced the policies of both India and Bangladesh and consequently the trajectory of the relationship.

India's role as the midwife in the independence of Bangladesh put the former in the driver's seat in determining the course of the relationship in the early days of Bangladesh; "in the immediate post-liberation period, Indian influence in major policymaking was a notable feature of Bangladesh foreign policy"<sup>8</sup> and "India [had] more often than not loomed large on Bangladesh's strategic horizon."<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding "the signs of stress and strain" in the relationship during the early years of Bangladesh's independence,<sup>10</sup> the two countries remained close while some criticisms were featured in public discourses. These criticisms largely came from two distinctly different sources: the anti-liberation forces and radical left. The anti-liberation forces were mainly supporters of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and the Muslim League. The radical left forces, which participated

in the liberation with their bases inside Bangladesh, viewed India as a regional hegemon. The "honeymoon period"<sup>11</sup> lasted until the brutal coup d'état in August 1975 which killed President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and removed the BAL from power. In addition to the state policy of a close bond between the countries, the relationship between ruling parties was an important element. Ideological affinity between the Indian Congress led by Indira Gandhi and the BAL led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the personal rapport between these two leaders shaped the friendship. However, "Indian training of Jatiyo Rakhi Bahini (JRB—national defense forces), the 10-mile long free trade zone, the non-requirements of visas just after the liberation of Bangladesh and the signing of the 1972 Treaty of Friendship, all added to the suspicion regarding India's intention."<sup>12</sup>

The military regime of Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) brought a significant shift in the foreign policy orientation of the country; closer relationships with China, the United States, and the Muslim countries of the Middle East marked the shift. Domestic political changes, particularly the nationalist posture of the Zia regime, adoption of territoriality-based national identity, encouragement of religion in the public sphere, elimination of secularism as a state principle, and allowing Islamist political parties to operate engendered seeds of mistrust on the Indian side. These changes were not viewed charitably by India. The relationship became uptight. The sharing of Ganges water issue, thrust into international forums

by Bangladesh, further exacerbated the relationship.<sup>13</sup>

Evidently, threat perception became the dominant characteristic of relations between these two countries. "Threat perception is a state of mind defined by fear of other or others who are believed to be, at the minimum, predisposed to undermining one's core values such as physical survival and quality of life."<sup>14</sup> In the case of Bangladesh, the perception was "India can foment disorder and subversion within Bangladesh";<sup>15</sup> India, on the other hand, was "troubled by the thought of a hostile Bangladesh in proximity to its volatile northeastern quadrant. It had no reason to trust Bangladesh's military establishment and it [was] wary of Zia's overtures to Pakistan and China."<sup>16</sup>

The sense of fear among the Bangladeshi political elite can be ascribed to the asymmetrical power setting—both economic and political—and the domineering role of India in South Asia since its acquisition of nuclear power in 1974. The foreign minister of the Zia government, Muhammad Shamsul Huq, described the overarching orientation of the Zia regime's policy as "the dilemmas of a weak state."<sup>17</sup> Ramped up anti-Indian rhetoric in Bangladesh, especially by the ruling elites including the cabinet ministers, demonstrated the sense of fear.

With the defeat of the Indian Congress in the 1977 election and a non-Congress government led by Morarji Desai in power, the relations improved. "Disproving the concept that Congress was the only friend of Bangla-



desh, Desai made a visit to Bangladesh ostensibly to show India's friendliness. One of the major outcomes of this visit was discussion on the thorny Farakka Barrage, leading to formation of a Joint River Commission by the two countries.<sup>18</sup>

While there were several issues of contention between these two countries, water sharing, demarcation of a land border (an agreement was signed between the two countries in 1974 and ratified by Bangladesh, but the Indian parliament was unable to ratify it because of domestic political opposition), ownership of New Moore Island/South Talpatty, and India's support for the rebels of Chittagong Hill Tracts became the principal irritants. Of these, Bangladesh's attempt to internationalize the water sharing issue exasperated India the most. The issue was tentatively resolved through the Ganges Water Treaty signed in September 1977 and consequently signs of a closer relationship became visible. However, this phase lasted only until Congress returned to power in 1980. Additionally, Ziaur Rahman's proposal in 1979 to create a regional forum of South Asian countries (later emerged as the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation—SAARC), which gained momentum in early 1980, was viewed in New Delhi as an effort to create a bloc against India to regionalize bilateral issues; this increased the trust-deficit.

The assassination of Ziaur Rahman (May 1981) and the assumption of power by General H.M. Ershad (March 1982) changed the tone and tenor of the

relationship. India, in effect, welcomed the change.<sup>19</sup> The subsequent eight years of relations between the military and pseudo-civilian regime of Ershad (March 1982–December 1990) and Indian governments led by the Congress was intriguing. The Ershad government adopted policies of Islamization including making Islam the state religion, strengthened the relationship with Islamic countries, and occasionally used rhetoric against India in domestic politics to rally support, and yet cooperation with India grew. There were several extensions of the Ganges Treaty, signing of an agreement to cooperate in checking cross-border insurgency, extension of bilateral trade agreements, signing of an inland trade and transit protocol allowing Indian vessels to pass through Bangladesh, to name a few. Yet, there was little pressure from India for democratization or expression of any discomfort with Islamization; conversely, the Bangladesh government didn't make any serious objections to the barbed-wire fencing along the Indo-Bangladesh border which began in 1986.

After Ershad was deposed in a popular urban uprising in December 1990, a free and fair election held in 1991, first in the nation's history, brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power under the leadership of Khaleda Zia. With a non-Congress party in power in New Delhi and a non-AL party in power in Dhaka, an almost repeat of the 1977 situation occurred. The 1992 visit of Khaleda Zia to New Delhi was hailed as "the harbinger of more active and dynamic bilateral

relations"<sup>20</sup> but sheer inaction on both sides "pushed the relationship towards stagnation." The former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Muchkund Dubey, in an interview in 2002, commented, "in this larger share of the blame must be attributed to the bigger neighbor who is endowed with greater capacity."<sup>21</sup> Excluding a few positive developments, for example, signing a 999-year lease agreement regarding a corridor to an enclave,<sup>22</sup> conclusion of agreements regarding repatriation of Chakma refugees and Indian investment in Bangladesh's railway sector, the relationship began to descend into routine and then became strained, particularly when Bangladesh ditched the bilateral path to push the water sharing issue to the Commonwealth in 1993 and to the UN General Assembly in 1995.

When the BAL returned to power in 1996 after being in the political wilderness for 21 years, the relationship began to warm up. Despite India's domestic political instability and the cautious move of the BAL government about the relationship with India, due to the fragile coalition, the 30-year Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was signed (December 12, 1996), and thanks to the blessings of the Indian government, the treaty between the Chittagong Hill Tracts rebels and the government was also made possible (December 2, 1997). The arrest of ULFA leader Anup Chetia in 1997 sent a clear signal that the BAL will not continue the policy of turning a blind eye to the presence of the Indian insurgent groups inside Bangladesh. The relationship took a downturn after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was

elected to office in March 1998. This is largely due to the controversial stance of the BJP regarding the alleged illegal migration from Bangladesh, and the accusation of the presence of ISI-supported militant groups in Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> The BJP turned the "illegal migration" issue into a communal problem.<sup>24</sup> In a surprising development, in April 2001, clashes between border security forces along the Bangladeshi border with the Indian state of Meghalaya led to the deaths of 16 Indian border troops and three members of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). Indian sentiments were outraged by the alleged maltreatment of Indian soldiers by Bangladeshi troops, both disbelief and praise for the BDR became palpable in Bangladesh.

In October 2001, when the BNP returned to power with the Islamist parties, particularly the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI), as coalition members, Indian policymakers (especially the ruling BJP) made no effort to hide their discomfort. The uneasiness was augmented by Khaleda Zia's visit to Beijing and signing of an umbrella defense cooperation agreement. Indian media suggested that the intimate relationship was intended to bring China into South Asia politics,<sup>25</sup> and "the Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf, may have played the role of a 'midwife' in the whole process."<sup>26</sup> An Indian analyst cautioned, "the policy and decision-makers in Bangladesh need to ponder long and hard whether China can provide the strategic insurance it seeks against India."<sup>27</sup>

The installation of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance



(UPA) in 2004 brought few changes in policies. However, the leaders of the two countries were demonstrating impatience in private and in public. Indian perception and policies were dictated by the developments within Bangladesh. Islamist militant groups proliferated and were engaged in a number of attacks causing serious concerns among the international community.<sup>28</sup> Indian allegations of illegal migration, presence of insurgents' camps in Bangladesh irked the Bangladeshi government, while Bangladesh's insistence on ratification of the LBA, demarcation of the maritime boundary, the treaty for water sharing of common rivers such as Teesta, reducing barriers on Bangladeshi goods to the Indian market to reduce the trade deficit was not well received in New Delhi. India's decision to not attend the February 2005 SAARC summit at Dhaka on security grounds—leading to the cancellation of the summit—brought the strained relationship to the public realm.

Indian policymakers were convinced that during the period of Khaleda Zia's government "separatists and terrorists in India received covert Pakistani support as the Bangladeshi authorities looked the other way."<sup>29</sup> There were valid reasons for India's suspicions and fear as there were clear indications that the insurgents in northeastern India were receiving moral and material support of the people connected to the BNP-led government—accidental seizure of 10 trucks of weapons at a port in Chittagong in 2004 destined to an Indian insurgent group proved the point. Overall, "India-Bangladesh ties

had reached their lowest ebb during the 2001–2006 tenure of the BNP Government."<sup>30</sup> In the midst of serious political violence and uncertainty regarding the forthcoming election, a military-backed caretaker government (CTG) assumed power and ruled the country between 2007 and 2008. The CTG enjoyed a cordial relationship and unqualified support of the Indian government, as narrated in the autobiography of Pranab Mukherjee. Yet, India remained suspicious of any future developments that may pose a challenge to its security.

### **India's Neighborhood Policy: Living in "A Perilous Neighborhood"?**

Understanding India's neighborhood policy, particularly in recent years, requires an examination of India's self-perception. In the past decades, the Indian economy has substantially grown and in addition to the possession of nuclear weapons, its military capability has been expanded and modernized with higher defense expenditures.<sup>31</sup> India has become a significant player on the global stage. Considering various dimensions of power projections, it is still considered a middle power or a regional power.<sup>32</sup> There are three ways to become a regional power, according to Sridharan, "by consent," "by virtue of having the power of compulsion over its neighbours (sic)," and "by virtue of relative size, without necessarily being able to impose its will or get its way."<sup>33</sup> India is often described as a middle power, by the third criterion, but I argue, in contrast to Sridha-

ran, India attempts to project the power compulsion as it considers itself a middle power with the aspiration of becoming a global power. Both its status and aspiration determine its behavior.

India's aspiration has been articulated in clear terms for some time. For example, in the context of India's maritime ambition, Pranab Mukherjee, in 2007, long before assuming the Presidency, said, "after nearly a millennia of inward and landward focus, we are once again turning our gaze outwards and seawards, which is the natural direction of view for a nation seeking to reestablish itself, not simply as a continental power, but even more so as a maritime power, and consequently as one that is of significance on the world stage."<sup>34</sup> India's heightened effort to expand its naval capabilities in recent decades, expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean area by reaching out to littoral states, and its growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean are indications that it is now more confident in regard to its capabilities to counter any land-based threat to its national security.

Although India projects confidence and perception that it is capable of dealing with the challenges emanating from its land-based neighbors, it also suffers from a threat perception. The perception of its capability is a result of foreign and strategic policies it has pursued for a long time. The policy approach is best described as a "concentric circles" approach. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated in 2002, "just as Kautilya talked of the circles of states, a useful conceptual

framework for the consideration of India's foreign policy would be to view it as concentrations of three concentric circles around a central axis—the first of our immediate region, the second of the larger world and third of overarching global issues."<sup>35</sup> This was echoed in the 2007 statement of the Congress Party-led administration, "from a broader perspective, we regard our security as lying in a neighborhood of widening of concentric circles."<sup>36</sup> While this approach reveals Indian policymakers' strategic thinking, it can be argued that it is not unique to India. But, we must also take into consideration Kautilya's suggestion that immediate neighbors should be suspected at all times (that is neighboring states are to be looked at as potential enemies, even if friendly relations prevail in the immediate present). Whether India expresses this view or not, India's neighbors tend to think that this is how India views its neighbors.

Although Indian foreign policy has been articulated in the three concentric circles frame only recently, its regional security policy has long reflected this mindset. The essence of India's regional policy has been akin to the Monroe Doctrine, which is occasionally referred to as the "Indira Doctrine." Indian regional security doctrine has been, according to Hagerty, "that India strongly opposes outside intervention in the domestic affairs of other South Asian nations, especially by external powers whose goals are perceived to be inimical to Indian interests."<sup>37</sup> India's involvement in Sri Lanka's civil war between 1983 and 1990, including a military presence in the country; military

intervention in the Maldives in 1988 to foil the coup; and blockade of Nepal in 1989–1990 during the Monarchy's flirtation with China are reflective of this doctrine. The 1990 Nepal episode would have been a distant memory if the country had not faced the unofficial blockade once again in 2015 after Nepal adopted a new constitution, and had Bhutan not faced almost similar threats in 2013 when India denied fuel subsidies. The Bhutan situation was viewed as tacit interjection into domestic politics, because of the upcoming elections. Allegations that the Indian intelligence agency was involved in Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's defeat in 2014 are often added to this list by analysts in Bangladesh. They argue, echoing Talukdar Maniruzzaman, that these neatly fit into India's earlier behaviors: occupation of Kashmir, Junagadh, and Hyderabad during 1947; India's liberation of Goa in 1961–1962 and the annexation of Sikkim in 1975. In view of Maniruzzaman, these serve as sources of threats to Bangladesh's security.<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that India has been successful in implementing the Doctrine, as C. Raja Mohan commented, "This Indian variation of the Monroe Doctrine, involving spheres of influence, has not been entirely successful in the past, but it has been an article of faith for many in the Indian strategic community."<sup>39</sup>

There were two instances when India had diverted from the Indira Doctrine, in 1977 and in 1991. During the Janata Dal government, in 1977, an idea of "beneficial bilateralism" was advanced by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the

then foreign minister. The central elements of the policy, according to Vajpayee, were clearing "the cobwebs of suspicion," removing "misunderstanding," and banishing "the fear of interference." "In seeking cooperation from and offering it to [the] neighbours ... an open policy of friendship, mutually advantageous cooperation and equal and beneficial bilateralism" were underscored.<sup>40</sup>

This approach ensured a warmer relationship with Bangladesh and resulted in a water sharing treaty. As mentioned previously, with the return of Congress to power, the policy was not only abandoned but also a rigid attitude was taken toward Bangladesh.<sup>41</sup>

The second instance is the introduction of the short-lived "Gujral Doctrine." The doctrine was about reaching out asymmetrically to neighbors. The first of the five points of the doctrine was with neighbors like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, India would not ask for reciprocity but would give and accommodate what it could in good faith and trust. Another stated that no country should interfere in the internal affairs of another. But the doctrine did not go very far. The Sri Lanka experience, particularly the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the Tamil militants in 1991, was instrumental in the emergence of the Gujral Doctrine. "A true security doctrine outlasts its originators, thrives under different leadership, and survives shifting political tides," Hagerty reminded us; we now know however that the Gujral Doctrine did not survive shifting political tides.

India's Monroe Doctrine returned, especially after 9/11.

Misplaced U.S. foreign policy initiatives and a growing security threat from within after 9/11 bolstered India's perception that it is located in a perilous neighborhood; in the words of an Indian analyst, the Indian perception was—and still is—that it is "being surrounded on all sides by unstable democracies, conflict-ridden countries, militant activity, authoritarian leaders or weak government."<sup>42</sup> This assessment was furthered by the Bush administration's active support for the Indian aspiration to become a global power, especially a maritime power as a counterweight to the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Comments made by the State Department's spokesperson on March 26, 2005, are worth recalling here: "[We would] help India become a major world power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ... We understand fully the implications, including the military implications of that statement."<sup>43</sup>

Coupled with its long-standing strategic doctrine, these developments led to securitization of India's relationship with all other South Asian countries. It was within this frame that India began to locate its assessment of Bangladesh. Political and security situations within Bangladesh after 2001, particularly between 2005 and 2006, shaped its policy toward its neighbor. The initial reluctance of Khaleda Zia's government to address the militancy issue; the presence of some regional militant groups; and the use of Bangladesh as a sanctuary by Indian insurgents were all viewed

through a security-centric prism. Indian policymakers were convinced that the worst-case scenario—Bangladesh as a hotbed of terrorism—was in the making. The Khaleda regime's failure to engage India in a constructive manner and the defense agreement with China didn't auger well with India.

### **The New Era of Relationship (2009–2018): "New Path," "Sath Sath," or "A Client State?"**

**A**gainst the backdrop of the long history of a cordial relationship between the BAL and the Indian Congress, the election of the BAL in 2009 offered an excellent opportunity to break new ground and build a durable relationship between the two states. Such an expectation was not unrealistic also because India played an instrumental role in bringing the BAL to power, as the autobiography of the then President Pranab Mukherjee alluded to. According to Mukherjee, he personally interjected during the military-backed CTG (2007–2008) for Sheikh Hasina's release and political survival. In his autobiography, *Coalition Years*, Mukherjee writes that in February 2008, he "impressed upon" the then Bangladesh Army Chief Moin U. Ahmed during his visit to New Delhi the importance of releasing all political prisoners. Additionally,

He [Moin Ahmed] was apprehensive about his dismissal by Sheikh Hasina after her release. But I took personal responsibility and assured the general of his



survival after Hasina's return to power.

In fact, when some Awami League leaders deserted her when she was in jail, I rebuked them for their stand and told them that to leave someone when they are down is unethical.<sup>44</sup>

Mukherjee's candid description augmented the perception that India meddles "in the internal affairs of Bangladesh" with a "big brotherly attitude."<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, such allegation also came from Sheikh Hasina when she publicly alleged that the Indian intelligence agency RAW (and the U.S. embassy in Dhaka) was instrumental in her defeat in the 2001 election.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, there was quite a propitious beginning in 2009 as Bangladesh prioritized addressing security concerns of India and dismantled insurgent hideouts, handed over members of rebel groups and members of regional terrorist groups.<sup>47</sup> In January 2010, when Sheikh Hasina made her official visit to New Delhi to sign a series of agreements, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised to build a new future with Bangladesh. He said, "The time has come to chart a new path. We are ready to pursue a bold vision for our relations, based on mutual respect and benefit."<sup>48</sup> Unprecedented cooperative relations emerged between these two countries as several agreements were signed regarding infrastructure development, connectivity, and the use of the ports of Chittagong and Mongla by India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The \$1

billion credit facility to Bangladesh in 2010, easing of tariff barriers for some Bangladeshi products to the Indian market indicated an extraordinary bon-homie which was often described by members of Indian and Bangladeshi governments as an irreversible friendship.

At that point, public expectations were that India will break way from its past of preference for one political party, address unresolved bilateral issues (instead of adding more), engage with Bangladesh objectively, and the country won't be viewed as a source of threat to India. Steps taken by the Bangladesh government to build a cordial relationship received widespread support—from various political parties, research organizations, think tanks, business leaders, and members of civil society.<sup>49</sup> What used to be the "India Card," that is portraying India as the mortal enemy and using it as a mobilization tool in elections and politics, lost its appeal to the larger population as the election result demonstrated. But "the initial burst of optimism soon lost momentum,"<sup>50</sup> thanks to India's decision to move forward with the construction of the Tipaimukh dam on the Barak river in the Indian state of Manipur, source of the Meghna river in Bangladesh, and the proposed Indian Rivers Inter-link project. The loss of momentum was also due to India's reluctance to address issues such as the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), sharing of waters of common rivers including the Teesta River, and unabated killings on the border by Indian border guards,<sup>51</sup> to name a few.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011 prompted a "tsunami of expectations."<sup>52</sup> Signing of two treaties, an accord on sharing the waters of the Teesta river and a deal granting India overland access across Bangladesh to its land-locked northeastern states, were expected to make this visit historic. But the last-minute decision of the Indian Government, under pressure from the West Bengal Chief Minister not to sign the water sharing deal, forced Bangladesh to defer signing the transit treaty. Although several MOUs on economic cooperation and a protocol regarding the enclaves along the disputed borders were signed, the visit failed to live up to expectations. What added to the perception that India is unwilling to consider Bangladesh as an equal was the failure of the UPA government to implement the land swap protocol signed by Prime Minister Singh, because of opposition from the BJP in the parliament. In Bangladesh, it was viewed as a repeat of 1974 and the LBA. The much promised "new path" remained untraveled.

Yet, it was not lost in public perception that cooperation between Bangladesh and India is a necessity not only for interests of both countries, but also for the region, and that enormous economic gains can be achieved in both countries through respectful cooperation. Khaleda Zia, then the leader of the opposition, was assured during her visit to New Delhi in November 2012 of an open mind, and of efforts to overcome "past wounds" and "past bitterness." She insisted that "sustained and open dia-

logue and discussions for [ ... ] mutual interest and benefit should form part of the very core of [the] relationship. At the same time, respect for each other's independence and sovereignty must be all-pervasive."<sup>53</sup> If her itinerary was of any indication, New Delhi responded well to her gesture. But her decision to cancel a scheduled meeting with President Pranab Mukherjee in March 2013 while he was visiting Dhaka, citing security concerns, was surprising and a clear snub to the Indian establishment.

As the Bangladesh election approached in 2014 and the international community began to call for an inclusive election, India viewed it as international meddling in its backyard. It provided unqualified support to the BAL in its bid to conduct the polling without the participation of the opposition. India's Foreign Secretary, Sujatha Singh, visited Bangladesh in early December 2013, and during a meeting with General H.M. Ershad, the leader of the JP, advised him to participate in the election.<sup>54</sup> Although some Indian media tried to explain the decision of supporting BAL as a result of frustration with the BNP's intransigent attitude toward India,<sup>55</sup> the perceived security threat emanating from the possible victory of the opposition determined the actions of India. At that point, Indian policy discourses on Bangladesh were no longer about a friend with historical ties but a country situated within the larger regional and global frame, which may become a serious threat to its security. India's action, which helped BAL to secure a hollow victory in the most violent election of the history of Bangladesh, is

viewed by many as an open partisan position about Bangladesh's internal politics. This decision might have benefited India in the short term but engendered more skepticism about Indian intent and fomented more anti-Indian feeling among Bangladeshi citizens in the long run. This kind of anti-Indian sentiment becomes visible in mundane issues. For example, in January 2018, a few pictures posted in the Indian High Commission website during the visit of the former President Pranab Mukherjee created uproar in social media. The pictures in question depicted Mr. Mukherjee sitting on a chair while dignitaries from Bangladesh, including the former Bangladeshi President General Ershad, were standing; similar photos with other Bangladeshi ministers, intellectuals, and political leaders were also posted. These pictures went viral and were identified as symbols of the unequal relationship between these two countries; many described this as an insult to Bangladeshi dignitaries. These pictures went viral and the High Commission decided to take them down.<sup>56</sup>

The election of the BJP in 2014 produced conflicting reactions in Bangladesh based on differing perceptions and expectations. The BJP's long-standing anti-Muslim rhetoric and pre-election promise of deporting illegal Bangladeshi immigrants caused anxiety across the board. In the political arena, the BNP was hoping that, like previous occasions, a non-Congress government will make a course correction in India's Bangladesh policy. As the INC and the BAL enjoyed a close relationship for decades, the latter was initially unsure of

the future trajectory and immediately showed some overtures to China as a possible ally, but soon expressed satisfaction. Narendra Modi's pronouncement of the "Neighbourhood First" policy raised hopes for both the BAL and the BNP. Evidently, the policy was prompted by three factors: search for stability in the Northeastern states, addressing contentious relationships with its neighbors, and countering the growing influence of China in South Asia.<sup>57</sup> Bangladesh was bound to feature prominently in the new policy. As such, the 2015 visit of Modi to Bangladesh was received with enthusiasm. The BNP's claim ahead of the visit that it "never pursued anti-Indian politics in the past" might not be true, but its promise that it "won't do in future"<sup>58</sup> was a positive development. "This was arguably the first time in the history of bilateral relations that both major parties in Bangladesh expressed unprecedented eagerness to be in New Delhi's good books."<sup>59</sup>

In addition to signing 22 agreements including the LBA, establishment of a Special Economic Zone inside Bangladesh for Indian companies, Indian investments in the energy sector, and offering a credit line of \$2 billion, Modi declared, "While people thought we were just near (paas-paas) to each other, now the world would have to acknowledge that we are not just paas-paas but also saath-saath (together)."<sup>60</sup> The long-standing issue of providing transit to northeastern states of India, which was opposed by the BNP for decades,<sup>61</sup> was formalized, although in effect transit facilities began in 2012 when Bangladesh allowed India's Oil

and Natural Gas Corporation to ferry heavy machinery, turbines, and cargo through Ashuganj for the Palatana Power project in southern Tripura. The central concern of Bangladesh—a water sharing agreement of Teesta—remained unaddressed, so were the issues of trade deficit and killings of Bangladeshis on the border. While steps toward cooperation received applause from business sectors and allies of the government, there were criticisms among some Bangladeshis and an impression that India had not reciprocated. There was a mismatch between the promise and the delivery, as an Indian analyst acknowledged.<sup>62</sup>

The high-profile visit of Modi serves as an example of contending perceptions and their arguments. "If the purpose was to try and win the hearts and minds of a people and government, with whom India's relationship has been fraught with bitter-sweet complexities, it has worked," said a former diplomat.<sup>63</sup> The sentiment is echoed by many, particularly in the pro-government media. Even those who praised both the Prime Ministers for their visions of "a new pathway of progress and prosperity to eliminate poverty" tacitly expressed a sense of frustration: "It is hoped that border killings will come to a complete halt, the trade deficit for Bangladesh is drastically reduced and that sharing of waters of all common rivers becomes a reality."<sup>64</sup> Referring to the agreements and MOUs, especially ensuring the usage of two Bangladeshi ports by India, another analyst raised the question, "India has achieved its strategic aim—have we?"<sup>65</sup>

While underscoring the importance of connectivity, "a euphemism for transit and transshipment," analysts have reminded that "if Bangladesh is India-locked it cannot be lost upon India that the Indian northeast is Bangladesh-locked," and therefore, it is India's security interest which is driving the deal more than the benefit to Bangladesh.<sup>66</sup> It is also not lost to Bangladeshis that the "Bangladesh corridor is vital to India's 'Act East' policy,"<sup>67</sup> and therefore, India needs Bangladesh no less than the latter needs India.

The perception that Bangladesh is increasingly becoming deeply integrated into the ambit of Indian economic interests at the expense of its own economic well-being, geostrategic interests and security have featured prominently in public discourses and expert opinions. For example, the current arrangements of importing power from India, providing a power corridor to India and allowing large-scale investment in the Bangladeshi energy sector by Indian companies, have raised the question "could an overt dependence on Indian electricity spell danger for Bangladesh's strategic interests?"<sup>68</sup> This perception is further strengthened because of the construction of the 1,320 MW Rampal coal-based power plant by an Indian energy company, despite objections from experts of both countries<sup>69</sup> and UNESCO, due to potential adverse impacts on the world's largest mangrove forest Sunderban—a world heritage site. The growing trade between these two countries, plugged as a success, also has become a source of apprehension. Of the \$6.5 billion for-

mal trade between these two countries, Bangladesh's export has remained about \$600 million, making India the country with which Bangladesh has the highest trade deficit. The trend between 2010–2011 and 2015–2016 shows an increase in deficit rather than a decline: in 2010–2011, Bangladesh's export was \$512 million as opposed to an import of \$4.56 billion; in 2015–2016, Bangladesh exported goods worth \$689 million, while its imports reached \$5.45 billion.<sup>70</sup> Despite the removal of 46 textile items from the sensitive list and providing zero-duty access by India in 2011, nontariff barriers remain principal obstacles to trade. Imposition of 12.5% countervailing duty on export of Bangladeshi readymade garments in 2012 has adversely affected the growth.

Bangladesh's alignment with India in foreign policy measures has not met with enthusiasm among Bangladeshis. For example, in 2016, when Bangladesh decided not to attend the SAARC Summit at Islamabad, citing Pakistan's interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs, at a time when India also decided to boycott, the decision was viewed as Bangladesh aligning its foreign policy position with India. One analyst suggested that it reflects a far more dependent relationship:

Under the current Bangladeshi government, the relationship between Dhaka and Delhi has steadily evolved from being that of two theoretically sovereign and equal nations to one of client and vassal in the image of the former communist countries

of the Eastern Bloc and the erstwhile USSR.<sup>71</sup>

This statement suggests an underlying perception of an unequal relationship. The discussions on the defense pact between the two countries, signed during Sheikh Hasina's New Delhi visit in 2017, bear that unease. There were suggestions that Hasina's visit was delayed several times as she faced opposition to signing the deal. "Bangladesh does not need a defense pact with India, or for that matter with any other country, because it does not face any threat of external aggression from any of its neighbors," argued a former Bangladeshi diplomat,<sup>72</sup> while another analyst opined, "a military alliance with India, in particular, in the context of the current geopolitical alignment would be a disaster and will carry the potential of Bangladesh becoming a victim of 'crossfire' in the current big-power rivalries."<sup>73</sup> There were suggestions that the defense deal is being signed in the interests of India.<sup>74</sup> Others cautioned that it will increase anti-Indian sentiment.<sup>75</sup>

The eagerness of India signing a defense deal, however limited in scope, is a testimony to its security mindset. The push came as a response to the growing warmth between Bangladesh and China, which already is the principal supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh. With a goal to increase its sphere of influence in South Asia in general, particularly in Bangladesh, China has signed 27 agreements worth \$25 billion during a high-profile visit of Chinese President Xi Peng Hua in Oc-



tober 2016. Bangladesh procured two Chinese submarines in 2016 and signed up for the One Belt One Road project. These appear to have caused some concerns which led to Sheikh Hasina's comment that "India need not worry about Bangladesh-China ties."<sup>76</sup> The threat perception of India and consequent rhetoric has occasionally appeared disturbing to Bangladeshis. Comments of the Chief of the Indian Army, General Bipin Rawat, that "influx from Bangladesh is proxy war by Pakistan with the help of China"<sup>77</sup> is a case in point. Bangladesh government's decision not to provide any official reaction only helped to strengthen a sentiment that it is unable to criticize India's establishment.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond these complex and nuanced issues which produce anxiety and dissatisfaction among informed citizens, there are issues which offer a simple perspective to the relations between these two countries for ordinary citizens. The Rohingya crisis is a case in point. As Bangladesh faced the daunting task of sheltering 700,000 new refugees beginning August 2017 due to the ethnic cleansing in Arakan by the Myanmar Army, it was alleged that "India has washed its hands of the affair and taken the side of the Myanmar government."<sup>79</sup> Although the ruling party leaders labored to prove that there is no rift between these two countries and that India is supportive of Bangladesh, public reaction was anger and frustration.<sup>80</sup> It has contributed to the extant perception that Bangladesh has conceded more than what it received from India.<sup>81</sup>

## **Conclusions: Where to Go from Here?**

**T**he paper intended to offer a historical narrative of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship and to show the core arguments of the critical perspective regarding the relationship between these two countries. Overall, Bangladeshis are in favor of a good neighborly relationship with India and recognize the need for greater economic cooperation between these two countries for shared prosperity. The Pew Survey of 2014 showed that 70% of Bangladeshis have a favorable opinion of India and that only 27% perceived India as a threat.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the decline of the appeal of anti-Indian sentiment in domestic politics after 2008 reveals that despite the fractious nature of Bangladeshi politics and historical and religious differences, this is not an ingrained feature but is influenced by, among other things, Indian policies and actions.

Analysts have argued that "India ... is often seen as overbearing in the region."<sup>83</sup> This is essentially because of its security-centric approach, which results from an "under siege from neighbors' mentality."<sup>84</sup> Bangladeshis' perceptions of India are no exception. India needs to take a closer look at its neighborhood policy, particularly in the context of recent developments which indicate that China has made serious inroads and deep schisms have developed between India and its neighbors. Some have suggested that India's neighborhood-first diplomacy is coming apart at the seams, and the Congress is proclaiming that



“The ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy has degenerated into a ‘Neighbourhood Lost’ policy wherein India has become the isolated and distrusted next door neighbor.”

The regional picture notwithstanding, we can identify some particular sources of the negative perceptions among Bangladeshis. They are: India’s lack of sensitivity toward the legitimate claims over shared resources such as transborder waters, portrayal of Bangladesh as a threat to India’s security, perceived interjections in domestic politics, particularly adopting an openly partisan position, and unwillingness to act as an equal partner with great

responsibilities. Perceptions of India are also tied to the behavior of the government of Bangladesh, particularly in recent years. As the ruling party, which has enjoyed unreserved support of India, has increasingly become authoritarian, India’s support of it has impacted the perception about India and cast it in a negative light. It is now well known that “the ruling AL government has assiduously subverted democratic norms and institutions”<sup>85</sup> and it has taken India’s support for granted, which is not in the best interests of India,<sup>86</sup> and this final point further contributes to the negative aspects of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

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