Sister states. Our future is wrapped up with theirs. However, what do we do? We lump these states (rich in resources and culture, but woefully neglected by Delhi) as "India," so we refuse to open borders and trade with our historical partners.

We think Asian highways are a threat to our sovereignty, so we build roads in Myanmar to get to China. I am not unaware about Indian commercial interests but our obduracy speaks volumes about our timidity and inability to stand up and be counted.

We ignore the aspirations of our true neighbours (states, not India as a whole) and think it is enough to only offer them a puny bus route from Agartala or a few trains from Kolkata.

We talk big about Chittagong port but do everything to make travel difficult to Meghalaya or the North-East. Have you tried to cross the border at Tamabil? Try it sometime. You will understand how the decades long Pakistani inherited policy of shutting off our land boundaries is frustrating and economically ruinous (to us).

We cannot distinguish between the proud peoples of India's North-East and the policies of an indifferent centre in Delhi. It is about time we learned. Even today, if we call for better relations with West Bengal, that is classified as being anti-Bangladesh or pro-India. The small minded, parochial elite does not realise that Delhi (South Block) would prefer we did not improve relations with West Bengal. The last thing the elites in Islamabad and Delhi need is Eastern South Asia working for common regional development.

They want the great diversion to continue for a few decades more. I would vouch that the elites in Delhi and Islamabad get on far better than with their equivalent in Dhaka. They use the rivalry for their own ends, and we foolishly play our lapdog role.

Bangladesh does not have the luxury of engaging in diversions put ever so beautifully in place by an Imperial Britain in 1947. We must look at the atlas and re-calculate our bearings.

However, before I get a knee-jerk reaction, let me reiterate that I do not succumb to the notion that we need to forsake Pakistan for India. It does not have to be one or the other. Geo-politics does not have to be binary. We have to come out of our inferiority complex and start getting smarter in our relations.

This kind of thinking is alien to a lot of our civil society leadership. Their terms of reference is to get as close as they can get to Washington, and, by extension, the aid agencies, and maintain distance from India, primarily by cozying up to Islamabad, and, by extension, the rich Arab oil states.

Sounds like a failing state? Many here would be ringing up their long lost cousins in New York and arranging their visas, if things ever got even remotely so bad here in Bangladesh.

Nothing will change their deep-seated orientation. Unless, some of the foundations give way. The weak link is Pakistan. Pakistan depends on the army, period. As long as the military is united and financed, then it presents an insurmountable barrier to disintegration. As long as it remains united.

Is Pakistan in an end-game?

Since most of our elite are not taking this seriously, I will ask them to think about the situation in Pakistan as if it were occurring in Bangladesh.

What would you say if the entire Bangladeshi South-West had slipped out of the centre's control? Think of the equivalent of Jessore and Khulna being run by Pashtun mullahs and their own militia, defying regular army units. That is what is happening today in the Pashtun North West Frontier Province. Ditto Waziristan.

Now consider if the equivalent of North Bengal (Baluchistan) were in open rebellion with open warfare with the centre's troops. You would say the western half of the country is out of control.

Finally, you would look towards the equivalent of our port city of Chittagong, Karachi. Fortunately, we do not have anything comparable to Karachi's civil disorder.

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The Punjabi centre has put down rebellions in the past, most violently in Baluchistan in the seventies by Bhutto Senior. There is, however, a qualitative difference today. It can be summed up in two words: Afghanistan and Taliban. They have corroded the Pakistani state, much of it the fault of the ISI intelligence services, which decided it wanted play jihad and the Great Game. The Taliban are now the pre-eminent force in 54% of Afghanistan, sallying forward across the porous border at will. They may well take Kabul in the not too distant future, hence the invitation to talks to work out a messy compromise.

Whenever that happens, we will say that Pashtunistan (NWFP/ Waziristan) has been carved out of Pakistan, with all that entails.

This process is a potential slow