

BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS

An increasingly complicated friendship



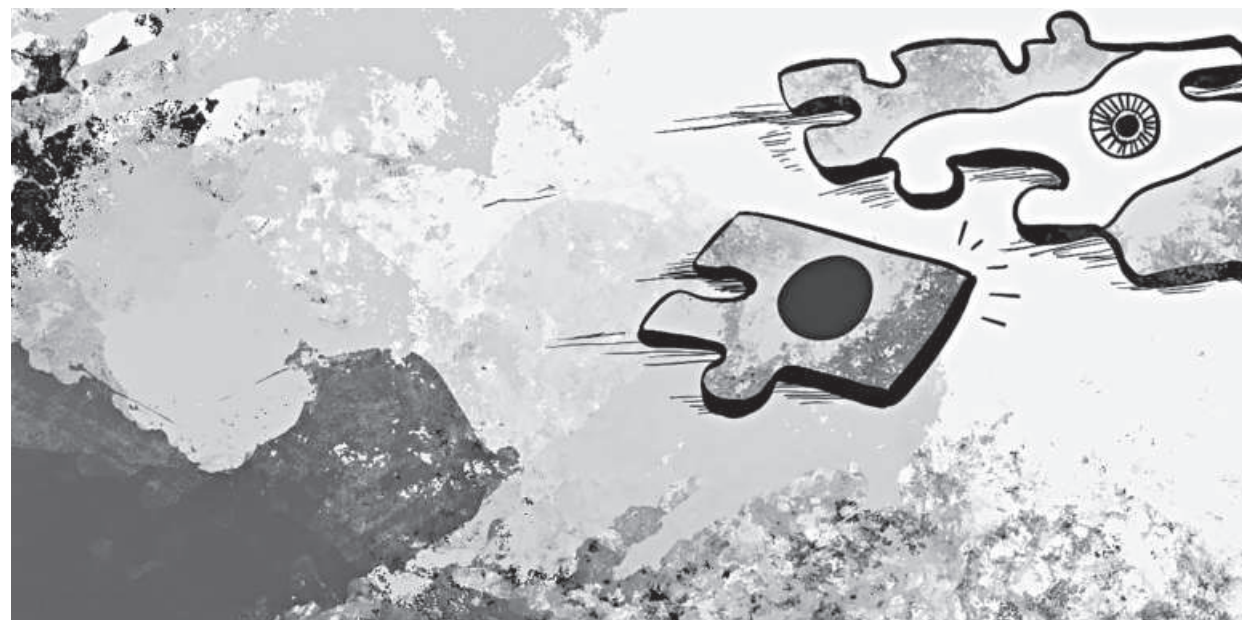
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Contemporary geopolitical relations between Bangladesh and India are based on a few age-old principles. When discussing India and Bangladesh, we must first acknowledge that India's backing of Bangladesh in 1971 was the most important external factor in Bangladesh's independence. We must also recognise that Bangladesh and India are entwined in an unusual geographic reality, in which Bangladesh is surrounded on all but one side by India and shares with it 54 rivers that flow from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. These are the primary principles that underpin any India-Bangladesh diplomatic cooperation and dialogue. However, a critical component to bolster India-Bangladesh relations would be significant strategy or initiative from either India or Bangladesh to strengthen people-to-people links

and his party from boycotting the election. After spending 22 hours in an undisclosed location, Ershad met with Singh and stated that the Jatiya Party, the third-biggest opposition, would join the election—a move which ultimately granted the 2013 election a semblance of legitimacy.

Similarly, former Indian president Pranab Mukherjee stated in his autobiography, *The Coalition Years*, that in February 2008, Bangladesh army's chief Moeen Uddin Ahmed had gone to India on a six-day visit. During the informal interaction, Pranab Mukherjee impressed upon Moeen Ahmed the importance of releasing political prisoners. Pranab Mukherjee mentioned in his book that all prominent political leaders, including Sheikh Hasina, were imprisoned during the period. According to Pranab, Moeen was apprehensive about being dismissed by Sheikh Hasina after her release, and the Indian president assured Moeen of his security. Not only that, but Pranab Mukherjee also admonished Awami League leaders for not standing by the side of their party leader. Even the current Bangladeshi PM herself used to repeatedly accuse the CIA and RAW of having an active role in the 2001 election, when BNP came to power. Unfortunately, the



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

between the two countries.

The cultural exchanges between India and Bangladesh are mostly confined within West Bengal and Northeast India. Perhaps it is assumed that the existing cultural ties between Bangladesh and India are sufficient to supplement a deliberate and robust people-to-people diplomacy model. However, according to a foreign relations perception poll on Bangladeshis by US non-profit The International Republican Institute (IRI), there was a significant increase in distrustful sentiments towards India from 2019 to 2023. When asked in the 2019 poll whether they believed India was having a positive or negative impact on Bangladesh, 52 percent Bangladeshis voted for "very positive" and "somewhat positive," 20 percent opted for "somewhat negative" and "very negative," and the remainder did not respond. When asked the same question in 2023, the positive distribution was 50 percent, while the negative increased to 37 percent.

There is still a lot of goodwill among the Bangladeshi people for what India did 52 years ago. However, it seems that India might be coasting along on that goodwill without any significant attempts to improve its image in the eyes of Bangladeshis. New Delhi appears unconcerned about the ramifications of the spillover of communally divisive discourse, from Indian internal politics to Indian international affairs. Relations have also been strained as a result of the failed agreement to share Teesta River's waters (which was ready to be signed in September 2011), fears over the transboundary effects of India's National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as all the highly publicised instances of border killings of Bangladeshi citizens. The lack of Indian media coverage and analysis of these factors results in regular Indian citizens being taken aback when faced with the antagonism harboured by a country they believe their country had helped liberate.

The reality of the matter is that there have been a lot of events after the Liberation War that enabled anti-India sentiments to take root in Bangladesh. One such example is the Farakka Barrage issue, which many believe was the first major cause behind grassroots-level anti-Indianism rising in the late 1980s. The ecological effect of the barrage

there is the scandalous 10-truck illegal arms and ammunition haul incident of 2004. On the other, there are the allegations of Indian sponsorship of separatists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The negative impressions go both ways. But if these are the only images chosen to depict a close neighbour, with little context given, there will surely be a long-lasting impact on the public psyche of both Indian and Bangladeshi nationals. Only after the incumbent administration took office in 2009 was there a noticeable shift in Bangladesh-India ties, mirrored in Indian media's increasingly nuanced and glowing analysis of Bangladesh.

However, even now, in any matter related to Bangladesh, be it the economy, military, politics, or cricket, the Indian media has often attempted

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to stain the sovereign entity of Bangladesh. Whether that be the various allusions of Bangladeshis as 'termites', or BJP's Subramanian Swamy's publicly stated desire to invade Bangladesh, there is certainly a visible trend of hostility among a certain part of India's media and political discourse.

The prevalent notion among the Bangladeshi people currently is an assumption of Indian interference in Bangladesh's politics. In 2013, when BNP and other opposition parties were preparing to boycott the election in order to seek an election-time caretaker administration, Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh visited Bangladesh. During her two-day visit, it is alleged that Singh successfully prevented HM Ershad

truth of those statements is no longer a matter of debate in Bangladesh. They are just taken for granted.

Despite the existing negative preconditions, it has to be understood that both Bangladesh and India need each other to thrive. The emerging market of a rapidly developing Bangladesh and its geostrategic importance as a land bridge between South and East Asia are all factors that India needs to take advantage of to fulfil its greater regional and global geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions. Currently, India is Bangladesh's second-largest import market after China but while 10 percent of Bangladesh's total trade is with India, India's trade with Bangladesh is only 1 percent. This means that Bangladesh has the potential to increase its trade with India. According to the World Bank, there is a potential for \$16.4 billion of bilateral trade, if the connectivity issues between India and Bangladesh are solved.

Of course, as India carries the title of being the largest democracy in the world, it must also be vocal against all anti-democratic activities in its neighbouring nations. However, diplomatic ties must flourish from both top-down and bottom-up. India has to explore people-to-people diplomatic tools for a more sustainable relationship.

Often, India has been accused of blacklisting and restricting visas of any foreign intellectuals who offer alternative or challenging viewpoints about its foreign policy. This is definitely not the way to resolve the issues at hand. India must invest in programmes initiated by non-state actors with political goals that are in line with (but independent of) state foreign policy objectives in places where official public diplomacy channels do not exist. This can be done through track 2 diplomacy, peace workshops, youth forums, etc. Crucially, India must also enable—or at least not actively hamper—people's initiatives that challenge governments' policies. Indian policymakers should be cognisant of foreign policy steps which are causing schisms. In this regard, both state-to-state and people-to-people approaches to diplomacy are needed to address and resolve these festering issues. The only way forward is to have open conversations between people to understand what people want—that is, an equal relationship.



A flag of one of the Myanmar rebel forces is installed next to an under-construction structure in Myanmar's Khawmawi village on the India-Myanmar border, as seen on November 14.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Unpacking the geopolitical playbook as the junta collapses in Myanmar



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It has been many weeks since the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched an unprecedented coordinated offensive against the military junta in Myanmar on October 27, named Operation 1027. The junta has lost control over a swath of lands in the east since the Karen forces now control 80 percent of the territory, and the battle for the capital Loikaw is on. While Chin forces established their control over 70 percent of the state along the Indian border, in the west, the Arakan Army has taken over key military bases in Rakhine as it breached the ceasefire in November. Part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), has begun an offensive to capture the capital of the Kokang region, Laukkaing. In Kayin State, Karen forces have taken partial control of the main highway to the Thai border, which is a huge blow to the junta as this will hinder border trade with Thailand. Such a military breakthrough in the "world's longest-running civil war" should not come as a surprise to observers who have been keeping a keen eye on Myanmar. Events following the 2021 coup d'état created a context for a "black swan" moment, where the disenfranchised civilian populace across their ethnic divides are turning against the Tatmadaw and the theory that the "military is holding the country together."

As the war nears urban centres, the call for a political solution from Myanmar's junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, seems like a desperate measure to save a burning house. He reiterated that the casualty of this ongoing war would be the civilian population. In his opinion, the military regime will not accept any action that threatens the "three main national causes," which entails Tatmadaw's three-part political ideology: non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of sovereignty. However, through this offensive, the taste of blood that the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and People's Defence Force (PDF) have gained have made any prospect for political negotiation with the retreating junta difficult. However, a few EAOs—such as the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)—might honour the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), while others may press for a federal system that will give autonomy to their respective ethnic groups vis-a-vis the 68 percent Bamar majority. Unlike the 1988 coup, the ruthless violence that ensued to suppress the resistance following the 2021 coup galvanised most of the EAOs and the civilian population.

Unless regional and extra-regional powers intervene

diplomatically at the cost of their already deteriorating image within the country, it will be difficult for the junta to gain any meaningful external support to quash the resistance. Many of these powers went on with their business-as-usual relations with the military junta while the civilian population suffered indiscriminate air raids, heavy artillery fires, arson, destruction of villages, and brutality from the Tatmadaw. Only last week, the junta foreign minister Than Swe met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on the eve of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Perhaps the main reason for this meeting was to bring in China as a mediator to hold political dialogue with the advancing Three Brotherhood Alliance. China's

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reaction was measured as Wang Yi said China would not meddle in Myanmar's domestic affairs and hoped it would "achieve national reconciliation" and "continue its political transformation process under the constitutional framework as soon as possible." The future of Chinese-sponsored infrastructure projects in Myanmar, such as the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in Rakhine state and the railroad linking Rakhine with Yunnan Province via Mandalay, were discussed. To keep Beijing on its side, the junta promised an accelerated pace for these projects which have strategic significance for China in the Bay of Bengal region. Given the current course of the war, it is unlikely that China will move away from its principle of non-interference by using its sway over the fighting EAOs. However, in the last week of November, three Chinese warships conducted joint live-fire drills by making a port of call in Myanmar, which signals Beijing's support for the regime vis-a-vis the external and internal audiences of the region.

In a similar pattern, in the first week of November, the Russian navy held the "first Russia-Myanmar Naval Exercise" in the Andaman Sea, which many observers perceive as Moscow's attempt to increase its strategic presence in the Eastern Indian Ocean region.

Despite India being a key partner of the US and Japan in the Indo-Pacific, Russia's growing interest serves the larger strategic goal for New Delhi to achieve a multipolar

world, which it thinks is only possible by ensuring a multipolar Asia. Last week, a foreign office consultation was held in New Delhi between India and Myanmar. In this significant exchange, India expressed its support for Myanmar's transition towards a federal democracy and opined that a peaceful resolution or a return to democracy is the way forward. This signals New Delhi's concerns and impatience regarding the junta's ability to handle the ongoing civil war, as the number of Myanmar refugees taking shelter in India's northeast is soaring by the day.

Over the last couple of years, the resistance movement not only showed great resolve in the face of brutal counter-insurgency operations, but has thrived with training and arms from insurgent groups such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Organisation. Despite such popular domestic support for the resistance, how the exiled National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar unites the fighting EAOs under its leadership remains to be seen. Any direct Western support for the resistance, either from the European Union or the United States, will

require some measure of legitimacy as most of these countries do not have any formal connections with the EAOs. Although the Burma Act provides the US with the legal basis to engage with the opposition forces, conflicts such as the Israel-Hamas war and Russia-Ukraine war will most likely keep the Western powers preoccupied. Should the military regime fall, without a common enemy, the EAOs might turn against one another. Consequently, the fate of the remaining Rohingya population in the Rakhine state might be at the mercy of an EAO such as the Arakan Army. This should be a great concern for Bangladesh, as it is already burdened with more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees.

Despite the coup of 2021, Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbours, such as Laos and Thailand, largely maintained warm relations with the junta. On the other hand, the divergence within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states has made this regional group largely defunct in compelling Myanmar to follow through with the Five-Point Consensus. In the coming days, regional and extra-regional countries might have to develop their own toolkit to counter a range of likely scenarios: from humanitarian disasters to insurgent factions fighting for territorial control due to a power vacuum. There is no doubt that neighbouring countries will have to bear the heaviest burden of such a crisis, and the playbook will not be the same for everyone.