

## The Stockholm syndrome in South Asian politics



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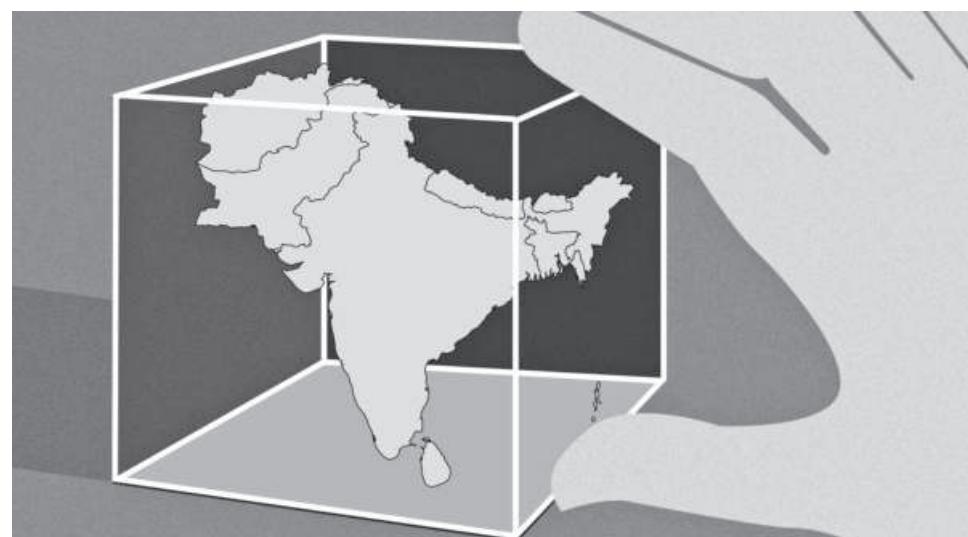
SHAHAB ENAM KHAN

The political landscape of South Asia has become increasingly disoriented, marked by the rise of populist political extremism influenced by various ideologies and religious sentiments. This troubling trend poses significant challenges to the region's aspirations for growth and development. Major power centres and strategic pivots, such as Dhaka, Delhi and Islamabad, seem to have lost their way in striking a balance between the short-sighted political objectives of the ruling elites and the collective goal of fostering equitable relations among neighbouring countries.

As Henry Kissinger once noted, "If you don't know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere." That's exactly where the region stands at the moment.

This cluelessness has become more apparent with the fascinating and transformative events we witnessed in 2024, which brought about remarkable changes, with Bangladesh in the global spotlight due to the student-led mass uprising in July-August that shook the country's political, economic and social foundations. Dhaka is poised to change its traditional foreign policy, which has much to do with the public aspirations and the uprising that will reconfigure the South Asian geopolitical ecosystem.

Dhaka is set to recalibrate its neighbourhood policy based on the July uprising, leading to more equal-handed relations with Delhi, improved ties with Islamabad, fostering energy and trade ties with Kathmandu and Thimphu, and strengthening maritime interests with Male and Colombo. In global terms, balancing between two superpowers—the US and China—would be a rational option, but the



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Trump administration will likely forge the government to tilt towards alliance politics in 2025 and beyond.

Hence, the challenge of sustaining a new foreign policy approach is astronomically high, coupled with the precarious political fluidity in Dhaka that may become more ebbing and flowing in 2025.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political and spiritual invincibility was challenged during the 2024 Indian general elections. His most trusted aide, former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, ingloriously left the country, which fundamentally changed Delhi's relations with Dhaka. The Bangladesh which Modi's BJP has known for the past 15 years is gone for now.

At the same time, the rapport between US President-elect Donald Trump and Modi is seen as a mellow transactional love. However, the Trump administration 2.0 is likely to be more conservative and transactional than to show mellow love in global politics. That will make the Chinese dragons breathe more fire.

Understandably, Delhi could go to Washington with its cheerleaders to claim its relevance as a regional power, showcasing

Pakistan-China triad are likely to further heighten Delhi's perceptions of insecurity in the near future. Still, the good part is that Delhi and Beijing reached a border rapprochement deal in October 2024 to resume patrols in Ladakh and disengage troops. My good friend Michael Kugelman thinks "these developments provide a chance to inch ties forward."

On the southern front, the Maldives expelled Indian troops from the country due to Delhi's overextended, undiplomatic comments on the Maldivian parliamentarians, enabling Beijing to gain more muscular, if not firmer, footholds in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka elected a left-leaning president—Anura Kumara Dissanayake—marking a historical shift from seven decades of traditional old guards of politics to a new generation of political ideologues.

The northern front comes with Thimphu-Beijing border relations that have remained complicated despite the border negotiations, highlighted by Beijing's strategic decision to permit settlements near the crucial Doklam plateau since 2020. Thimphu is gradually expanding its international presence beyond its traditional China-India orbit. A significant milestone will occur in January 2025 when Ed Sheeran becomes the first Western artiste to perform in Bhutan. In Nepal, KP Sharma Oli has reclaimed the prime ministerial throne for the fourth time. Yet, the tradition of political musical chairs may continue in Nepal's politics in 2025. Oli's pro-Beijing tilt will likely continue until he hands over power to Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba. Oli's cabinet approved a new 100 Nepali rupee note showing Nepal's unilaterally drawn new map—the map India has already termed "untenable" and "artificial enlargement."

And, of course, the eastern front, the key zone for the looming uncertainties, comes with a potent mosaic of insurrections and conflicts owing to Delhi's weakening position in the Indian northeast and Myanmar. Delhi and Beijing's ally, the genocidal military of Myanmar, may lose control over most of the Burmese sovereign territory to the ethnic armed groups. It won't be surprising

for Dhaka to see Bangladesh getting new neighbours, if not in 2025 but later. Indeed, Bangladesh, for the first time in its 53 years of history, has a non-state actor—the Arakan Army—as its border counterpart.

That means that in 2025, there will be more diplomatic and strategic paranoia in Dhaka, Delhi, and Beijing. I can't help but bring back Kissinger again: "Even a paranoid can have enemies." But the caveat is in the new variant of political Stockholm syndrome that Dhaka and Delhi suffer from. The variant lies in mental ensnarement through new technologies to promote misinformation and disinformation, which spread through tabloid media, online, and propaganda news for which South Asian media have earned quite a reputation.

While Delhi's economy significantly relies on Beijing's prejudice, the BJP spares no stone unturned in projecting Beijing as an existential threat, shifting its habitual focus from Islamabad's nukes or the Taliban in Afghanistan. Dhaka sees Delhi as a gross violator of diplomatic sensibility by attempting to destabilise its internal affairs. Still, Bangladeshi political elites can't unplug themselves from their perception of India as a power. The political tycoons—be they Hindutva or Islamist nationalists, revolutionary romantics, or perhaps traditional ones—would continue to expose their variants of Stockholm syndrome in 2025.

Dhaka's foreign policy community should remember that Bangladesh's current political landscape, if marked by a looming divide over national interests and ideologies, could invite more involvement from external actors in 2025. We are in for an eventful year ahead, filled with expected and unexpected political twists and sabotages, geopolitical shifts, economic shocks, and regional tensions. The sooner the country gets its national consensus on its international affairs, the better it will be at protecting its national interests and reducing the Stockholm syndrome.

Let's stay positive, though, and prepare for what could be a politically riveting and geopolitically perplexing journey through 2025 for Bangladesh and its neighbours!

## A message from one neighbour to another



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A.K. FLORA

The disinformation campaign and lies hurled by certain quarters in India after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's brutal fascist regime are deplorable, and seem to be nothing short of an attempt to destabilise the communal harmony in Bangladesh. Bangladesh believes in and respects the sovereignty of every nation, and we do not meddle in the internal affairs or try to destabilise the peace and harmony of our neighbours.

India has been on an interesting journey. The promises made by the BJP government regarding unemployment and price rises during the 2014 campaign have all but evaporated. India's unemployment rate is higher than the unemployment rate of both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Indian consumers, being crushed under steep price rises, have yet to see "Ache Din."

Amid this bleak economic scenario, Manipur is burning, millions of lives could be destroyed on the pretext of NRC in Assam, Dalits face violence and discrimination all over the country, and farmers die by suicide and their protests for a fair deal continues to go unheard. In addition, the extensive violence against women in India (the incident at R G Kar Medical College in Kolkata being a recent example) is an affront to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" campaign.

Muslims in India have been lynched for allegedly eating beef, rapists were garlanded after raping a pregnant Muslim woman, and plans to demolish at least 11 mosques were awaiting court verdicts in December, surprisingly close to the 2025 Rajya Sabha elections.

Meanwhile, as the killing of Bangladeshi citizens by India's Border Security Force (BSF) continues, blatant interference in our democratic process has taken place, clearly one-sided trade deals have been routine, and we still do not have our fair share of water in 53 years. It is, therefore, time to recalibrate how matters are handled between the two countries.

It's time for India to delve into introspection and self-examination. It cannot hide behind the false narrative of Hindu persecution in Bangladesh when crimes are being committed against its own minorities on Indian soil. No

amount of deflection will work anymore.

This overbearing theme is conspicuous in India's relationships with its other neighbours, where anti-India sentiments have been growing. And now attempts to demonise Bangladesh are in full view for the world to see.

A Hindutva mob attacked our Assistant High Commission in Agartala in an abhorrent violation of the Geneva Convention. Yet, lies about Bangladeshi minorities continue to be circulated in an effort to dehumanise Bangladeshi Muslims. Calling one's neighbours "termites" and "infiltrators" only reflects one's own true disposition.

We guard mandirs while mosques are demolished in our neighbouring country for

medical tourists. Over 25 lakh Bangladeshi tourists visit India annually, accounting for more than 22 percent of foreign tourist arrivals. And Bangladesh is India's fourth-largest remittance provider.

The Indian government has given shelter to an autocratic mass murderer who ordered her own citizens to be butchered to try and remain in power. There is credible evidence to show that India interfered in how our elections played out. But that reality has changed as of August 5, 2024, and India must reconcile with its neighbour on equal terms and with equal respect.

Hasina is no Dalai Lama. India is under no obligation to provide for her. Providing shelter to a mass murderer like her sends a negative message to Bangladesh.

We urge certain segments of the Indian media—commonly being referred to nowadays as the Godi media—to stop spewing the toxic venom of disinformation and lies. We are a sovereign nation, and it is well within our rights to treat our citizens how we deem fit, within our rules of law. The trial of Chinmoy Krishna Das is no exception. Our internal affairs are not the business of our neighbouring countries, and they must be

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mandirs to be built on top of them. Lawyer Saiful Islam's father appealed for peace and calm even after enduring the brutal death of his son. That is the magnanimity we embody in our hearts as Bangladeshis. We have lived in communal harmony for hundreds of years, and we will continue to do so. Our Hindu brothers and sisters must speak up against the twisted lies being spewed from across the border. It is incumbent on every Bangladeshi citizen to push back against this attack on our national character and identity.

I urge all sensible Indians to please pay attention to the statistics. Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade totalling \$15.9 billion in FY2022-23. India exported goods worth \$13.8 billion to Bangladesh during the same period. Our trade deficit with India is at \$9.2 billion. Bangladeshi medical tourists contribute heavily to India's healthcare sector, comprising 54.3 percent (in 2020) of foreign

mindful of that fact.

Our citizens must remain calm, strategic, and vigilant against any attempt to project us as extremists and communal people. We must demonstrate restraint against every provocation and stay on the course of peaceful solutions to any problems within our borders. No hate based on religion should ever permeate our society.

If such propaganda against Bangladesh continues, UN special rapporteurs should be invited to visit both countries to assess the plight of their minorities.

India is on the wrong course. The people of India must wake up and take note of that fact. They should not fall victim to any group that tries to use the old "divide and rule" tactic based on religion and harmful narratives. Indians must hold their media accountable, and they must treat their neighbours as they want to be treated themselves.

Respect must always be mutual.

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Ram's mate	8 Dome-shaped home
1 Lowly workers	33 Porch sight	9 Minute
6 Fortitude	34 Square	11 Massachusetts
10 Dance parties	36 Ring of light	15 Old hand
11 Ecru	37 Clean with effort	17 On paper
12 Put up	38 Talk at length	20 Quirk
13 Trig topic	39 Indian dish	21 Deli order
14 Brown songbird	40 Get up	24 Hungary neighbor
15 Big snake	41 Farm females	25 Bewildered
16 Do something	42 Pane material	27 Cobbling tool
17 Treasury Dept. div.		28 Go pieces
18 Gift from Santa	1 Would-be lawyer's major	29 Name on the Cardinals' stadium
19 Knickknack shelves	2 Otologist's case	30 Promptly
22 Way out	3 Strain	31 Squirrel's find
23 Mystique	4 Bottle part	35 For us
26 Some online helpers	5 Fast plane	36 Fling
29 Frilly wrap	6 Polite fellow	38 Scandal sheet
DOWN		
22	23	24
26	27	28
32	33	
35	36	
38		
40		
42		

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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