

BANGLADESH-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

Reassessing the past, reimagining the future

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SK. TAWFIQUE M. HAQUE and MD. PARVEZ HASAN YOUSUF

On Saturday, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar arrived in Dhaka for a two-day bilateral mission. His visit overlaps with that of Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan, who arrived on a four-day trip on August 21. During these high-level engagements, Dhaka and Islamabad are expected to sign several agreements, including provisions for visa-free travel for diplomatic and official passport holders, cooperation between their respective Foreign Service Academies, and the establishment of a Joint Working Group under the two commerce ministries. Other possible instruments include the renewal of a cultural exchange memorandum of understanding (MoU) and a media cooperation agreement between the Bangladesh Press Institute and the Associated Press of Pakistan.

The countries' two foreign ministers are scheduled to meet on Sunday, August 24, followed by a formal signing ceremony. Later that afternoon, Ishaq Dar is expected to pay a courtesy call on Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. These meetings and agreements, blending trade diplomacy with cultural and institutional cooperation, represent more than ceremonial symbolism. They mark a deliberate attempt to reset bilateral relations on a broader foundation encompassing political, economic, and social dimensions. For two countries bound by a turbulent and intertwined history, this moment offers an opportunity to revisit the past, recalibrate the present, and reimagine the future.

The timing of the visits could not be more significant. Bangladesh is currently governed by an interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus, whose declared policy of "friendship to all" marks a sharp departure from Awami League's India-centric diplomacy. In less than a year, Dhaka and Islamabad have re-established high-level communication, revitalised economic ties, and even begun to explore nascent military cooperation.

Yet history cannot be set aside so easily. For Bangladesh, the legacy of the 1971 Liberation War remains etched into its national consciousness. For Pakistan, sensitivities surrounding a formal acknowledgement of its wartime atrocities persist, with Islamabad continuing to view the 1974 Tripartite Agreement (with India being the third party)

as a final settlement. This unresolved discord is both a visible obstacle and the defining backdrop to any future rapprochement.

During Sheikh Hasina's premiership, relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan remained deeply strained for much of her 15 years of rule. The establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal in 2009 to prosecute 1971 war crimes and the subsequent execution of several Jamaat-e-Islami leaders drew sharp condemnation from Pakistan,

trade surged by 20 percent in the 2024-25 fiscal year, rising from approximately USD 712 million to USD 865 million. Direct sea trade resumed in November 2024, marking the end of a hiatus of over half a century. An MoU on rice procurement was signed in January 2025, while Pakistan's budget airline, Fly Jinnah, received approval to operate flights to Dhaka. Military contacts also resumed, with discussions on joint exercises and training.

Even so, the warming of relations does not

participating in Pakistan-led naval exercises could concern India. On the economic front, diversification is strategically wise, but both countries have historically had low trade volumes and narrow complementarities, raising the possibility that political symbolism may outpace substance unless supported by targeted agreements and enhanced connectivity.

Nevertheless, genuine prospects for building a balanced and mutually beneficial

Even in the sensitive defence sphere, carefully calibrated cooperation in non-offensive areas such as UN peacekeeping, disaster relief, or counterterrorism intelligence sharing could deliver tangible benefits without alarming regional actors. The task, therefore, is not to erase history but to build a forward-looking partnership that is proportionate, transparent, and grounded in national interest.

India's perspective inevitably looms over these developments. For New Delhi, Bangladesh has long been a vital partner in ensuring stability along its north-eastern frontier, and the Awami League era witnessed unprecedented strategic alignment. The cooling of Dhaka-Delhi relations since 2024, coupled with Bangladesh's renewed engagement with Pakistan, has raised concerns of a possible China-Pakistan-Bangladesh axis for our giant neighbour. India's likely responses include the imposition of non-tariff barriers and import restrictions on Bangladeshi goods, a broader diplomatic recalibration to engage with a wider array of Bangladeshi actors, and security signalling to discourage deep military cooperation with Pakistan. For Dhaka, the challenge will be to demonstrate that engagement with Pakistan complements rather than undermines its relationship with India.

Reimagining the future of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations requires a change in mindset on both sides. For Bangladesh, this means acknowledging that while the past cannot be erased, the future can be shaped by pragmatic interests and mutual respect. For Pakistan, it requires recognising that symbolic and meaningful gestures can build trust and goodwill. Practical steps could include joint historical research initiatives, sector-specific trade agreements in areas such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, and textiles, annual foreign secretary-level dialogues to ensure continuity beyond political cycles, and expanded parliamentary exchanges to include opposition parties, thereby broadening the constituency for improved ties.

The visits of Ishaq Dar and Jam Kamal Khan offer both symbolic and strategic openings. Whether this becomes a milestone or a missed opportunity will depend on how both nations navigate the interplay of history, politics, and pragmatism. Bangladesh and Pakistan now stand at a diplomatic crossroads. The path forward will require patience, mutual sensitivity, and a focus on shared interests. A working relationship will be a gradual process, requiring sustained commitment from governments and societies alike. The ultimate goal should not be to erase the past, but to ensure that it does not imprison the future. That may be the most constructive way forward for two nations with intertwined destinies in an evolving South Asia.



'Enhanced ties with Pakistan need not be seen as antagonistic to India; instead, they can serve as a pragmatic balancing tool in a multipolar South Asia.'

PHOTO: COLLECTED

which dismissed the trials as politically motivated. Dhaka's consistent demand for a formal apology further fuelled tensions. Awami League also actively leveraged anti-Pakistan rhetoric as a tool of domestic legitimacy, in sharp contrast to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which historically maintained more cordial ties with Islamabad.

The August 2024 changeover brought an immediate shift in tone. Within months, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chief Adviser Yunus met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and the D-8 Summit, signalling a mutual intent to reset ties. Tangible progress soon followed. Bilateral

partnership lie within these constraints. Reopening direct maritime routes creates opportunities to reduce costs and improve competitiveness. The Joint Business Council, if expanded to include small enterprises, digital platforms, and textiles, could help push bilateral trade towards the ambitious target of \$3 billion. Pakistan's offer of 300 fully funded scholarships for Bangladeshi students and expanded cultural and academic exchanges can slowly erode mistrust at the societal level. Enhanced ties with Pakistan also need not be seen as antagonistic to India; instead, they can serve as a pragmatic balancing tool in a multipolar South Asia.

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Strategic education policy is key to a job-ready Bangladesh

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Bangladesh's higher education sector was once envisioned as a driver of socio-economic progress, but it now faces a troubling paradox: producing too many graduates in certain fields while leaving critical shortages in others. At the core of this dilemma is the absence of a centralised strategic policy, which is required to guide educational institutions on how many graduates to prepare across various specialised disciplines.

The consequences of this imbalance are increasingly evident. In 2022, nearly eight lakh university graduates in Bangladesh remained unemployed, resulting in an unemployment rate of about 12 percent (tertiary)—significantly higher than the national average of approximately 3.5 percent. This widening gap between graduate supply and actual market demand adversely affects individuals and subsequently constrains overall economic growth.

A prominent example of this problem lies in the field of computer science and engineering (CSE). Every year, universities produce approximately 12,000 CSE graduates, while only 5,000 jobs are available. Why do we keep producing more of what we cannot accommodate? More concerning, employers consistently highlight severe skill gaps, reporting that a significant rate of IT/CSE graduates fail basic competency assessments in crucial areas, such as coding, mathematics and English. This oversupply, coupled with skill mismatches, causes personal hardship for thousands of young graduates, while also diminishing national productivity and competitiveness.

Conversely, significant shortages persist in some other disciplines, particularly in healthcare. Despite graduating large numbers of medical professionals annually, the country still struggles with a pronounced deficit of qualified healthcare workers. We may have more doctors on paper, but rural clinics often go days without one. According to a BMC Human Resources for Health study, the density of doctors, nurses and midwives in Bangladesh was only 9.9 per 10,000 population, well below the indicative sustainable development goals

index threshold, underscoring an urgent need for targeted policy interventions.

Students and guardians naturally gravitate towards subjects and career paths perceived to offer the highest immediate market demand and financial security. This preference leads to mass production of graduates in specific disciplines, saturating the job market and significantly reducing employment opportunities for freshers. The University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced a unique student ID system for private universities to regulate student intake, significantly capping the number of students per semester. Yet, challenges remain as universities continue to

We stand at a pivotal moment where our education system must evolve—from prioritising quantity to ensuring quality, from chasing trends to embracing future-focused planning. The imbalance between oversupplied graduates and underserved sectors is not inevitable; it is a solvable challenge with coordinated, data-driven action. With the right strategies, Bangladesh can transform its vast human capital into a dynamic, future-ready workforce.

offer numerous, closely related programmes within the same domain.

Without accurate market forecasts, we would only build skills that lead nowhere. To bridge this gap, we must adopt a systematic, data-driven approach. Comprehensive labour-market analyses should be conducted regularly to forecast workforce requirements, clearly identifying existing skill gaps and areas of oversupply. This process would enable policymakers, educational institutions and industry stakeholders to adapt proactively to changing market dynamics, creating an agile

and responsive educational environment.

Strong collaboration among industries, academic institutions and policymakers is equally critical. Establishing advisory committees composed of these stakeholders would facilitate continuous dialogue and rapid decision-making. Additionally, dynamic educational programmes should be promoted, with institutions incentivised to consistently review and realign their curricula based on reliable employment data. This strategic collaboration would significantly enhance the responsiveness and relevance of educational offerings.

For example, the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), established in 2022, aligns education with the workforce. Replacing the former National Skills Commission, JSA systematically forecasts labour-market demands and identifies skill gaps to guide policymakers and educational institutions. Through its annual Occupation Shortage List (formerly the Skills Priority List), JSA ensures curricula remain agile and relevant. Apart from tracking job trends, it also tells universities exactly what to train for.

Singapore anticipated this challenge with SkillsFuture, its national initiative to track labour trends and build future-ready skills. Its annual Skills Demand for the Future Economy (SDFE) report identifies high-growth job roles and emerging skills across sectors such as digital services, green industries and the care economy. The 2025 edition introduced interactive dashboards, offering real-time, publicly accessible insights to help educators, students, and job seekers make informed decisions based on evolving industry demands.

Bangladesh is not without efforts in workforce planning. The establishment of the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) is a significant step. It coordinates skills development across ministries and sectors, following the National Action Plan (2022-2027) to align training with workforce needs in areas like ICT, healthcare, construction and RMG. To enhance its impact, NSDA must strengthen collaboration with universities and industries through sector-specific councils, shared labour data and co-developed curricula. This would better align education with market needs and produce a more job-ready workforce.

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গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার	
মহিলা ও শিশু বিষয়ক মন্ত্রণালয়	
জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশন	
জরিতা টাওয়ার, বাসা নং- ২০/এ (নতুন),	
রোড নং- ২৭ (পুরাতন), ধানমন্ডি, ঢাকা- ১২০৭।	
নং- ০২.০৪.০০০০.০০০.০০২.৬৩.০০০২.২৫ - ১১১	তারিখ: ২০/০৮/২০২৫ খ্রি.
অকেজো মালামাল নিলামে বিক্রয়ের দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি	
১. প্রতিষ্ঠানের নাম	জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশন
২. দরপত্র আদানকারী	ব্যবস্থাপনা পরিচালক, জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশন
৩. নিলাম প্রক্রিয়া	উন্মুক্ত দরপত্র আদান পদ্ধতি
৪. টিকাকারের শোষণ	আয়কর সার্টিফিকেট যে কোন ব্যক্তি বা ট্রেড লাইসেন্সধারী যে কোন প্রকৃষ্টান দরপত্রে অংশগ্রহণ করতে পারবেন।
৫. মালামালের বিবরণ	এয়ার কন্ডিশনার, আসবাবপত্র, ওভেন, সাইট, কম্পিউটার ও এক্সপেরিট ও অন্যান্য দায়িত্বিক মালামাল।
৬. মালামালের প্রাক্কলিত মূল্য	৩৯,৬৯,০৫০/- (উনচত্ব্বিশ লক্ষ উনসত্তর হাজার তিনশত পঞ্চাশ টাকা)
৭. দরপত্র সিডিটলের মূল্য	১০০০.০০ (এক হাজার) টাকা (অফেরতযোগ্য)
৮. দরপত্র আমানত	প্রাক্কলিত দর মূল্যের ১০% (ফেরতযোগ্য) ব্যবস্থাপনা পরিচালক, জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশন এর অনুমুখে যে কোন রাষ্ট্রায়ত্ত্বাধীন ব্যাংক হতে পে-অর্ডার/ব্যাংক ড্রাফট দরপত্রের সাথে জমা দিতে হবে। আমানত ব্যক্তি দরপত্র সরাসরি বাতিল বলে গণ্য হবে।
৯. নিলাম দরপত্র সিডিটল বিক্রয়ের তারিখ, সময় ও স্থান	২৬/০৮/২০২৫ তারিখ হতে ০৬/০৯/২০২৫ তারিখ পর্যন্ত অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে বিকাল ০৫.০০ ঘটিকা পর্যন্ত। জরিতা টাওয়ার, বাসা নং- ২০/এ (নতুন), রোড নং- ২৭ (পুরাতন), ধানমন্ডি, ঢাকা- ১২০৭।
১০. নিলাম দরপত্র বাতিলের সর্বশেষ তারিখ, সময় ও স্থান	আগামী ১৬/০৯/২০২৫ তারিখ বেলা ১২.০০ ঘটিকা পর্যন্ত অফিসে রক্ষিত দরপত্র বন্ধে জমা অথবা ডাকযোগে/কুরিয়ার সার্ভিস এর মাধ্যমে উক্ত নির্ধারিত সময়ের মধ্যে জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশনে শৌখিত হবে।
১১. দরপত্র খোলার তারিখ ও সময়	১৬/০৯/২০২৫ তারিখ বেলা ১২.০০ টায় উপস্থিত দরপত্রদাতাদের সম্মুখে (যদি কেই উপস্থিত থাকেন) খোলা হবে। অনিবার্য কারণে উক্ত তারিখে দরপত্র প্রত্যবেশিতা সম্ভব না হলে পরবর্তী কার্যবিধি দরপত্র প্রকল্প খোলা হবে।
১২. ব্যক্তি দরপত্রের ক্ষেত্রে TIN ও জাতীয় পরিচয় পত্র এবং প্রকৃষ্টানের ক্ষেত্রে হালসনের ট্রেডলাইসেন্স এবং VAT নিবন্ধন প্রত্যয়নপত্রের সত্যায়িত কপি দরপত্রের সাথে দাখিল করতে হবে।	
১৩. কৃৎকার্য দরপত্রদাতা প্রতি পূর্ণের মালামালের উচ্চ মোট মূল্যের উপর সরকারি নিম্ন অনুযায়ী আয়কর, ভ্যাট বা অন্য কোন কর প্রযোজ্য পরিবেশ করবেন।	
১৪. পরিচালক (প্রশাসন), জরিতা ফাউন্ডেশন এর পূর্ব অনুমতি সাপেক্ষে মালামালসমূহ ২৫/০৯/২০২৫ তারিখ পর্যন্ত অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে অত্র অফিসে দেখানে যে অবস্থায় আছে সে অবস্থায় সরেজমিনে প্রত্যক্ষ করতে পারবেন।	
১৫. ছাড়পত্র আবেদন প্রাপ্তির ০৭ (সাত) কার্যদিবসের মধ্যে সকল দরপত্রদাতাকে নিজ মালামাল পরিবেশিত হতে হবে অন্যথা এ বিষয়ে কর্তৃপক্ষ কোন দায় দায়িত্ব বহন করবে না।	
১৬. দরপত্রের আমানত নিলাম কার্যক্রম সম্পন্ন হবার তারিখ হতে ১৫ (পনেরো) কার্যদিবসের মধ্যে ফেরতযোগ্য।	
১৭. কর্তৃপক্ষ কোন কারণ দর্শালে ব্যক্তিকে যে কোন দরপত্র বা সকল দরপত্র গ্রহণ বা বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা সংরক্ষণ করেন।	