

Bangladesh-India ties: A tragicomedy when populists take centre stage



Professor Shahab Enam Khan is executive director of Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs at Jahangirnagar University, and teaches at the Bangladesh University of Professionals.

SHAHAB ENAM KHAN

There is a tragicomedy in watching two neighbouring countries bound by geography drift apart like two sailors jumping ship in different directions, each convinced the other is sinking faster. This applies to both Bangladesh and India that have apparently decided, one more than the other, that centuries of shared culture, cuisine, and history are insufficient grounds to maintain even basic norms of engagement. What we are witnessing today is not merely a diplomatic crisis. It is a masterclass in how not to conduct foreign policy politically.

At the heart of prevailing tensions lies the narrative of extremism, a trusted old poison that keeps on giving. As Shakespeare would say, "A plague o' both your houses!" Mercutio's dying curse feels uncomfortably apt for what we are witnessing. Two nations seem determined to forgo civility in their relations, while extremists on both sides profit from the carnage. It is a show in which mobs replace politicians, and media and WhatsApp gladiators substitute for statesmen.

In India, saffron extremists and propaganda machines have found Bangladesh to be a convenient punching bag—a replacement for the increasingly inconvenient Pakistan or China cards. The "termites" rhetoric, periodic stray comments on Bangladesh's sovereignty, BJP's Mamata factor, and prime time studio shouting champions have together achieved what decades of politics could not: they have united Bangladeshis across party lines in irritation with Delhi politics.

But let us not pretend that extremism flows only downstream from the Ganges. Bangladesh's interim government today presides over a landscape where the mob culture has become a lived reality, displaying a persistent inability to counter



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

violence effectively. Whether helpless or an accomplice in this episode, the government cannot escape responsibility for the rise of these violent forces. To be fair, post-uprising volatility is hardly unprecedented. But prolonged inaction only emboldens those who thrive on chaos.

India's predicament, on the other hand, is self-inflicted. Having bet heavily on Awami League for so long, Delhi now faces genuine anti-Indian sentiment—not propaganda, just consequences. Meanwhile, India's political and social hysteria since July 2024 continues to feed on narratives repeatedly debunked by objective media, yet the religious card keeps being played. Of course, we cannot deny that minorities face some threats, but so do the

general public.

Delhi's selective amnesia in this regard are almost amusing. It conveniently forgets that the demands of the July 2024 uprising were apolitical and met with state bullets before the eventual ouster of the Awami regime. Saffron politicians might do well to tally their own cards, assuming that they are still capable of moral self-reflection. The absurdity has peaked most recently when Siliguri hoteliers

nothing. And the fourth is a classic: Dhaka, once the BJP's favourite electoral dish, has left the table.

Is blaming Bangladesh fair, then? Let us not forget that Professor Muhammad Yunus had wanted to visit Delhi before Beijing, and has tried to engage politically on various occasions. Delhi's response? Continued disengagement, suggesting a preference for sulking over statesmanship until Bangladesh holds the elections. Diplomacy requires reading the room, but Delhi appears content to wait outside.

This inaction enabled mobs in Delhi's security heartland, Chanakyapuri, to stage an arrogant spectacle against the Bangladesh High Commission, following similar incidents in Agartala and Kolkata. High Commissioner Riaz Hamidullah's professional response to denial of mob activities by his counterparts deserves to be studied in diplomatic academies, as do the political failures that made such scenes possible in the first place. Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma, it should be acknowledged, also showed professionalism, refraining from publicly sensationalising diplomatic summons.

Yes, some protesters attempted to march towards Indian diplomatic missions in Bangladesh. There have been regrettable incidents of stone-pelting as well. But the Indian response came from the same crowd peddling Akhand Bharat, while periodically questioning Bangladesh's sovereignty. Sanity has, however, prevailed for now. Both governments have taken steps to prevent further escalation and to protect diplomatic premises. The question worth asking is this: what did those who mobilised mobs against diplomatic missions expect to achieve?

Indians must accept the reality that they will have to maintain even-handed relations with Bangladesh regardless of which party governs in Dhaka. Bangladeshis, for their part, must accept that India cannot, and will not, de-securitise its relationship with its eastern neighbour given its national security compulsions. But there lies a political lesson, too. Delhi, having lectured Bangladesh on extremism for years, now finds itself courting the Taliban. When your diplomatic dance card includes the very extremists that your own rhetoric previously vilified, your moral

high ground starts to look suspiciously like quicksand.

Meanwhile, Beijing and Washington watch from the balcony as two key partners in their respective Asian strategies squabble over the last samosa while the restaurant burns. Both know this antagonism serves neither their interests nor regional stability. They might have found it entertaining had geopolitics not chosen this precise moment to redraw the geopolitical map.

What, then, must be done?

Bangladesh must ensure its domestic security ahead of the 2026 elections, which will determine its future stability. The armed forces, bureaucracy, and political parties must forge an immediate consensus to maintain order and neutralise extremism, wherever it originates. Bangladesh should remain open to normalisation with Delhi. Reciprocity, naturally, is non-negotiable.

India, meanwhile, should seriously consider whether its current approach serves any purpose beyond feeding nationalist television. Minority persecution in India, documented year after year in international religious freedom reports, has not gone unnoticed, while restricting people-to-people contact has only proved counterproductive. Walls may make headlines, but bridges make progress. For Delhi, the homework is simple: It has to understand where Dhaka's red lines on sovereignty, autonomy, and foreign policy now stand.

Both nations face a more or less similar reality on the ground. Crises continue to pile up while populists promote their own versions of the Crime Master Gogo, the hilariously delusional villain from Bollywood's cult classic *Andaz Apna Apna*, convinced of his immense power while the world laughs. The time has come for veteran politicians to decide whether to continue this tragicomedy or accept that geography is destiny, and as such must be managed through restraint and reciprocity—not out of affection, but rather cold pragmatism.

I remain optimistic that politicians and diplomats will eventually stumble upon pragmatism at some point. Until then, someone should tell the spokespersons, partisan hype merchants, and assorted Crime Master Gogos that they are not helping. At all.

A newspaper, a nation, and the ashes of memory



Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is professor of English language and literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. He can be reached at mmhasan@iium.edu.my.

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

The Daily Star has been one of my favourite newspapers since the 1990s. It has become one of my staple sources of information about current events. I have followed how news stories and opinion pieces in *The Daily Star* in the later years of Hasina's misrule exposed her autocracy and chronicled the July 2024 movement.

In 2015, Sheikh Hasina sought to financially throttle the newspaper by making industries stop advertising in it. Ironically, the same English daily came under attack in the post-Hasina era. This happened while we were mourning the death of one of the most prominent leaders of the July uprising.

Therefore, those of us who farewelled Hadi with tears in our eyes experienced a double burden of sadness: we are saddened by the loss of Hadi and by the criminality of attackers of media houses, including *The Daily Star* building in Dhaka early on December 19, 2025.

The attacks were an affront on the very hallmark of Hadi's legacy and had the potential to shift attention from the tragedy of murder to atrocities against free media. Perpetrators offered Bangladesh's adversaries

an opportunity to paint a negative picture of the country and tarnish the image of Hadi and other July 2024 warriors.

Many foreign diplomats in Dhaka and beyond rely largely on *The Daily Star* for updates on events in Bangladesh. We should also bear in mind that the newspaper not only provides information about the country's socio-economic and political situation but also documents and promotes our literary and cultural artefacts. It not only informs us about national and international affairs but also, through its literature and culture pages, helps preserve our traditions.

Besides, it has developed a strong digital archive which will help communicate our cultural legacy to future generations. The arsonists destroyed its archive, which contains print copies since 1991 and will be difficult to retrieve. This is a loss not only for the newspaper but also for the whole nation. While *The Daily Star* may eventually restore its operations, the nation's cultural loss—specifically the destruction of our collective history—far outweighs the newspaper's financial damages.

With dogged determination, sharp insight



The Daily Star contributed to exposing Hasina's tyranny and corruption, and thus helped create global awareness of what was going on in Bangladesh. FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

and hard work for decades, *The Daily Star* has been established as a media outlet that commands an international reputation and readership. As Bangladesh's leading English daily, it also represents our country internationally. In that sense, it is our bridge and mouthpiece to a global audience, and the attack on it was an attempt to stifle our voice to the world.

The English daily contributed to exposing Hasina's tyranny and corruption, and thus

helped create global awareness of what was going on in Bangladesh. For instance, its report titled "S Alam's Aladdin's lamp," published in August 2023, considerably shook the foundation of the Hasina regime. The daily's coverage of the July 2024 uprising gave the movement intellectual support.

I am personally grateful that on August 4, 2024—the day before Hasina fell and fled—*The Daily Star* ran my essay "Violence against students: A tribute to our little

John Hampdens," where I denounced the "gruesome and unbearable shoot-to-kill" strategy of the Hasina government that resulted in the "mass slaughter of students." The essay also celebrated the bravery of our young July 2024 heroes and heroines.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the uprising, the English daily brought out *The Great Wave*, where authors regard the movement as an "explosion of a united democratic desire among people of all classes and professions" (p. 140). These and hundreds of other instances make the newspaper pro-Bangladeshi, not pro-any foreign country.

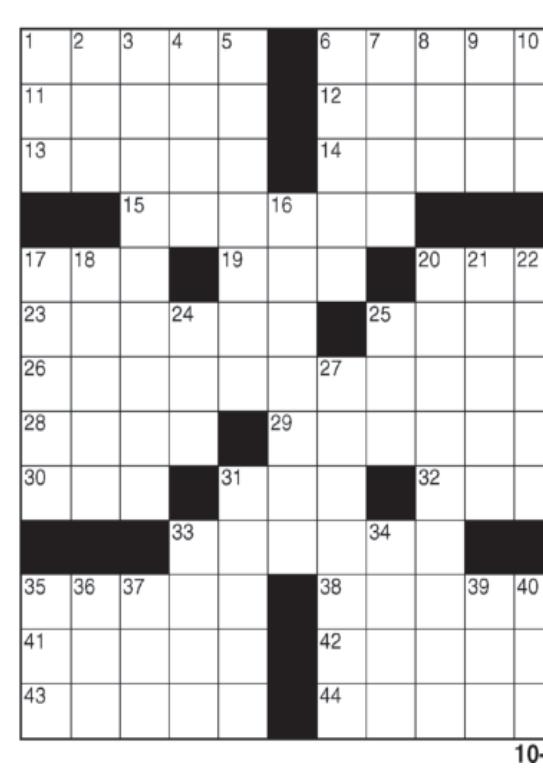
If some people believe that the English daily has not done enough or right, they can contest its journalism cerebrally, through constructing alternative narratives, not by attacking and vandalising its office and pillaging its property.

We all want a competitive media environment that will foster intellectual curiosity and scholarly conversations and ultimately benefit our country. However, that requires knowledge, expertise, professionalism, diligence, a sense of commitment, leadership and teamwork skills. The arsonists who attacked media houses and those who support them are obviously incapable of challenging free media intellectually. It is their dismal incompetence and intellectual bankruptcy that instigated them to resort to violence.

The Daily Star, *Prothom Alo* and other competitive media organisations are our national treasures. I challenge the detractors to establish a comparable daily in competition.

ACROSS
1 Wine barrels
6 Form
11 Little hooter
12 West Point student
13 Plow pioneer John
14 UV stopper
15 Make possible
17 Music booster
19 Fuming
20 Relaxing resort
23 Fresh face, say
25 Action star
Jackie
26 Tiring climb
28 Vaccine type
29 Fall back
30 Neither follower
31 Torment
32 Spot to jot

33 Like some arguments
35 Writer P.D.
38 Take as one's own
41 Up in the air
42 Chad neighbor
43 Prison problems
44 Irritable
DOWN
1 Atlantic catch
2 Stunned wonder
3 PJs, say
4 "Showboat" composer
5 Fill with mist
6 Bawl out
7 Visibility lessener
8 Fuss
9 Signing need
10 Hot time in Paris
16 Home to many



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	O	S	I	N	F	L	I	P
A	P	P	L	E	F	I	O	N
S	H	A	L	E	I	N	C	U
P	E	N	S	P	L	E	A	S
E	L	I	T	T	M	L	E	D
D	I	S	T	R	E	S	S	
A	H	O	Y		E	I	R	E
M	I	S	T	R	E	S	S	
D	A	D	N	U	S	A	C	E
O	R	A	N	G	E	P	L	A
R	O	M	E	O	K	A	P	P
I	M	E	A	N	E	G	R	E
C	A	S	T		G	O	O	S