

India’s push-ins are not a border problem



Trivedi’s appointment at Cabinet rank is India’s attempt to reconstruct the Level II relationship without conceding anything at Level I. The visa resumption signals normalcy. The Cabinet rank signals strategic priority. But neither comes with any offer to halt the push-ins

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On June 25, 2026, India’s new High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Dinesh Trivedi, presented his credentials at Bangabhaban. Within hours, he announced the resumption of tourist visas for Bangladeshi nationals after a two-year suspension. The same day, he was accorded the rank of Union Cabinet Minister in India’s Table of Precedence, a designation with no precedent for a diplomatic posting to Dhaka. The optics were carefully managed: reset, goodwill, and a senior political figure with Bengali roots dispatched to steady a wobbly relationship.

All this comes after weeks of heightened tension surrounding what is popularly called the “push-in” from India. Between May 2025 and January 2026, the Border Security Force pushed 2,479 people across into Bangladesh, of whom at least 120 were later confirmed to be Indian nationals. Since Suwendu Adhikari’s BJP government took office in West Bengal in May 2026, running on an explicit “detect, delete, and deport” campaign, approximately 5,000 people have been expelled without judicial review. Human Rights Watch documented BSF personnel escorting groups through cuts in the border fence at night.

Border Guard Bangladesh has resisted at least 21 such attempts since June 1 alone. The 57th BGB-BSF Director General-level conference, held in New

Delhi on June 9, produced no binding commitment. India maintained that its deportations were lawful under domestic law. Bangladesh maintained that they violated international norms. Both sides returned home.

And yet, visas were resumed. A Cabinet-rank envoy was installed. The message from New Delhi was: the relationship matters, and we are investing in it.

In my book, *India’s Bangladesh Problem*, I have argued that seemingly contradictory actions were, in fact, part of a larger, congruous plan. These two things—the push-ins and the diplomatic gestures—similarly appear contradictory, but are, in fact, part of the same policy, operating at two levels simultaneously.

Robert Putnam’s two-level game remains one of the more useful frameworks for understanding how states behave when domestic and international pressures pull in opposite directions. At the domestic level (Level I), leaders respond to constituency pressures, electoral mandates, and factional competition. At the international level (Level II), they manage interstate relations, negotiate agreements, and project a face appropriate for diplomacy. The skill lies in the overlap: what Putnam called the “win-set,” the range of agreements at the international level that can also survive domestic ratification.

India’s current Bangladesh policy makes no sense if analysed only at Level II. At that level, New Delhi’s behaviour is incoherent: it sends a high-profile envoy to stabilise relations while its border forces dump families into no-man’s land at gunpoint. But when analysed across both levels simultaneously, the logic becomes clear.

At Level I, the BJP has built its decade-long political economy in part on the Bangladeshi Muslim as a threat. The rhetoric has moved through stages: from the “infiltrator” language of the early 1990s, to Amit Shah’s description of migrants as “termites” in 2019, to the institutional codification of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which for the first time imposed a religious test on asylum seekers by creating a path for non-Muslim minorities while excluding Muslims. By 2025, the BJP had won a landslide victory in West Bengal, where Adhikari had campaigned on driving out Bangladeshi Muslims while exempting Hindus under the CAA. The “detect, delete, deport” directive was not a policy deviation. It was a campaign promise. It was the win-set.

At Level II, India needs Bangladesh. Bangladesh is India’s largest trading partner in South Asia. The Teesta water treaty remains unresolved. Transit access through Bangladesh matters for India’s North-east. The Hasina years provided India with a government in Dhaka that subordinated Bangladesh’s interests to India’s strategic preferences, sometimes at considerable domestic political cost to Hasina herself. That arrangement collapsed in August 2024. What followed, under the Yunus interim government, was the most volatile period in bilateral relations since 1975.

Trivedi’s appointment at Cabinet rank is India’s attempt to reconstruct the Level II relationship without conceding anything at Level I. The visa resumption signals normalcy. The Cabinet rank signals strategic priority. But neither comes with any offer to halt the push-ins, verify nationality before expulsion, or accept the return of the 120 confirmed Indian nationals Bangladesh has already documented.

It would be a mistake to analyse the push in crisis purely through the lens of bilateral relations or Hindu nationalist ideology. Both matter, but neither fully explains the structural mechanism by which poor, working-class Bangladeshi migrants, alongside Indian Muslims

mistaken for them, have become the primary target of a state security apparatus.

In *India’s Bangladesh Problem*, I argued that the marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in India does not follow the logic of simple exclusion. It follows the logic of differential neoliberalism: a formation in which the liberalisation of markets, labour, and capital proceeds alongside the selective securitisation of specific populations. The Bengali Muslim migrant occupies a particular position in this formation. As labour, they are absorbed into India’s informal economy—construction, domestic work, and the garment supply chain. As a political figure, they are constructed as the perfect outsider: the infiltrator whose presence justifies the NRC, the CAA, the holding centre, and the border fence.

During Narendra Modi’s election campaign in 2014–15, the BJP discovered that the Bengali Muslim “infiltrator” could perform double ideological work: consolidating the Hindu vote in West Bengal by activating demographic fear, while providing the national security narrative that justified expanding state surveillance infrastructure. The NRC in Assam found approximately two million people stateless, the majority of them poor, Muslim, and Dalit.

The 2025 Immigration and Foreigners Act accelerated this logic by removing the Foreigners Tribunal from the deportation chain. Previously, suspected foreigners in Assam were supposed to appear before a tribunal before expulsion. The administrative bypass enabled by the new law—which West Bengal has adopted for its holding centre operations—means the determination of foreignness is now a police function. This is not simply an efficiency measure. It is the conversion of citizenship into a security category, one determined by phenotype, language, religion, and suspicion rather than by documentation.

The result is that a pregnant woman from Birbhum with an Aadhaar card and a voter ID can be deported to Bangladesh within forty-eight hours. A Calcutta High Court later called this deportation illegal and carried out in “hot haste.” The Supreme Court ordered her return on humanitarian grounds after she had already given birth. These are not edge cases produced by

administrative error. They are what happens when the state’s deportation mechanism is deliberately designed to operate faster than judicial oversight can follow.

Dinesh Trivedi is a former Railways Minister, a BJP member with roots in the Trinamool Congress, and a politician with a constituency base in Barrackpore, West Bengal. He is not a career diplomat. He has never served in any foreign posting. India has never before sent a political appointee as High Commissioner to Dhaka.

This is worth sitting with. At a moment of acute bilateral tension over deportations that Bangladesh has described as illegal, inhumane, and in violation of international law, the Indian government has decided that its diplomatic needs in Dhaka are best served not by a seasoned IFS officer with technical expertise in bilateral mechanisms, but by a Bengali politician with deep familiarity with the domestic politics of West Bengal.

The most credible reading is not that India is trying to reset the relationship in Bangladesh’s favour. Rather, it is trying to manage the relationship while its domestic political compulsions remain unchanged. Trivedi’s Bengali identity and political experience make him better equipped than a career diplomat to navigate the cultural register of the relationship and to translate Indian domestic politics to a Bangladeshi audience in ways that minimise blowback. His Cabinet rank ensures that when he meets Tarique Rahman or Bangladesh’s foreign ministry, he carries sufficient protocol weight to signal that India is serious about the relationship, while insulating the push-in operations from formal diplomatic accountability.

It is thus no anomaly that, at Level I, the BJP continues to run holding centres in all districts of West Bengal, continues to process deportees without court hearings, and continues to describe Muslims expelled across the border as “infiltrators”, while, at Level II, it sends a Cabinet-rank envoy, resumes visas, and offers cultural goodwill through a politician who understands Bangladesh.

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Why Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ policy matters more than ever

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Begum Khaleda Zia is widely regarded as the pioneer who actively shaped and adopted Bangladesh’s formal ‘Look East’ policy during her tenures as Prime Minister of Bangladesh. On 18 May 2005, calling the ‘Look East’ policy a “cornerstone” of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, Begum Zia asserted that its adoption was “significant” as it would assist Bangladesh in advancing its national interests realistically. However, she clarified that this did not suggest Bangladesh attached lesser significance to the world’s other regions. As Begum Zia put it: “the doors are open to us for West, East, North and South” (2005).

During her tenures (1991–1996 and 2001–2006), Begum Zia pursued a foreign policy that placed increasing emphasis on expanding Bangladesh’s engagement with the emerging economies of East and Southeast Asia. Her government sought to diversify Bangladesh’s diplomatic and economic partnerships by strengthening ties with countries including China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and other ASEAN members. This engagement was driven by the objectives of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), expanding export markets, enhancing development cooperation, promoting labour migration, and increasing technology transfer. Her administration also recognised the growing economic dynamism of East Asia and the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal, encouraging Bangladesh’s deeper integration into regional economic and connectivity initiatives. These efforts laid the groundwork for what later came to be described as Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ orientation—a pragmatic foreign policy approach. The subsequent Asia-Pacific Outlook (APO) can be viewed as a natural evolution of Bangladesh’s earlier ‘Look East’ policy.

The recent visit of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman to China and Malaysia represents practical expressions of Bangladesh’s evolving ‘Look East’ policy. These visits can also be interpreted as reflecting Bangladesh’s pursuit of strategic autonomy—a foreign policy approach that seeks to maximise national interests by engaging with multiple partners while avoiding dependence on, or alignment

with, any single major power. In the contemporary geopolitical environment, Bangladesh’s strategic autonomy is expressed through balanced diplomacy, economic diversification, and issue-based cooperation with a range of regional and global actors.

However, Bangladesh’s interest in eastward engagement dates back to the reign of Sultan Giasuddin Azam Shah, who ruled Bengal from 1393 to 1409. Royal delegations were exchanged between China and Bengal during that period. Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ policy can be traced to these historical foundations as well as to the interplay of the country’s domestic and external foreign policy determinants. In essence, it is predicated on Bangladesh’s economic and strategic interests in the region. It encompasses multiple dimensions, including political, economic, and cultural engagement. The ‘East’ includes the countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia, as well as those located geographically to the east of Bangladesh.

The then Foreign Minister in Begum Zia’s Cabinet, Morshed Khan (2003), stated in a lecture at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore that Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ policy represented an approach towards the “diversification of horizons” and an effort to extend its “neighbourhood”. The policy was not conceived at the expense of Bangladesh’s immediate region or other parts of the world. Rather, it was entirely consistent with the fundamental principles of Bangladesh’s foreign policy.

The main objectives of the ‘Look East’ policy are to strengthen cooperation and coordination with the East on issues of international peace and security; to broaden economic cooperation with the East, particularly in the areas of trade, investment, technology, and employment; and to enhance interaction between the peoples of Bangladesh and the East at various levels through exchanges in education and social and inter-religious activities, thereby fostering greater mutual understanding.

Several ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors appear to have motivated Bangladesh to pursue its ‘Look East’ policy. The ‘pull’ factors relate to the Eastern countries’ rapid economic growth, political stability, and cohesive multilateral cooperation frameworks.



Chinese President Hu Jintao (right) meets Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (left) during her visit to Beijing on 18 August 2005.

The ‘push’ factors, meanwhile, relate to Bangladesh’s economic needs, strategic compulsions, and aspirations. ‘Asian regionalism’ is another ‘pull’ factor. If the prediction of the ‘Asian Century’ holds any real meaning and Asian regionalism becomes a reality in the coming years, then it provides a strong basis for Bangladesh to pursue its ‘Look East’ policy.

Yet another ‘push’ factor that may have motivated Bangladesh to adopt its ‘Look East’ policy is its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, which connects the entire ASEAN and Pacific regions. Viewed in this way, geographical proximity gives rise to strategic and economic compulsions for the countries concerned, requiring them to sustain close cooperation and collaboration to maximise their foreign policy goals. Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ policy is likely to serve as a means of strengthening its ties with South Asian and APT countries.

Bangladesh stands to benefit significantly from deeper economic engagement with East Asian and ASEAN countries, as well as regional economic blocs. Bangladesh has expressed interest in exploring membership of RCEP following its graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status. Bangladesh’s evolving ‘Look East’ orientation provides an important strategic framework for

expanding trade, investment, connectivity, and economic diplomacy with ASEAN and other East Asian partners. At the same time, intensifying geopolitical competition, supply-chain diversification, and the search for resilient economic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific have further reinforced the importance of East and Southeast Asia in Bangladesh’s foreign and economic policy.

The overall success of Bangladesh’s ‘Look East’ policy can be discerned from the following areas: faster bilateral cooperation, active participation in regional and sub-regional groupings to the East, enhanced political and strategic significance, wider people-to-people contact, and so on. Bangladesh’s trade with the ten major East and Southeast Asian economies is estimated to have reached approximately US\$55–58 billion in 2026, representing an increase of around US\$3–5 billion (6–10%) compared with 2025.

Currently, China-Bangladesh relations have been described as “eclectic in outlook, nation-building in content, peaceful in purpose”. Japan remains Bangladesh’s largest bilateral development partner and one of its most trusted strategic partners. Japan continues to be Bangladesh’s leading source of Official Development Assistance (ODA), supporting transformative projects such as the Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit (MRT),

the Matarbari Deep Sea Port, the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Third Terminal, the Bay Terminal at Chattogram Port, and the Dhaka-Chattogram transport corridor.

The eastern countries are a potential market for Bangladeshi manpower. Many Bangladeshi skilled and semi-skilled workers have been employed in Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea, contributing to Bangladesh’s economy. After a long interval, the Malaysian government has reopened its market to Bangladeshi skilled and semi-skilled workers. The Singapore government has also become more receptive to recruiting Bangladeshi skilled workers. Thus, great potential exists for Bangladesh and the countries of these regions to prosper if they remain constructively engaged. For Bangladesh, adjusting to these emerging realities, a ‘Look East’ policy appears to be the need of the hour, and it should therefore continue to pursue it.

A key strategic component of Bangladesh’s foreign policy is its economic diplomacy. Its ‘Look East’ policy has evolved as an extension of its economic diplomacy. The forces of globalisation have both pushed and pulled Bangladesh to diversify the direction of its foreign policy. Bangladesh’s policy orientation towards the East is consistent with the changing environment, both domestically and internationally.

Although some economic and strategic gains are evident following the adoption of the ‘Look East’ policy, several key issues require careful consideration to make the policy more effective and pragmatic. To achieve these goals, the Bangladesh government may make greater efforts in the following areas: (i) bringing about an early and concerted solution to its lopsided external trade; (ii) pursuing its ‘Look East’ policy simultaneously at the governmental and non-governmental levels, thereby creating equal opportunities for both Track I and Track II engagement; and (iii) including more countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, thereby further diversifying the overall direction of the ‘Look East’ foreign policy.

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