

51 Years of India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Because of their distinct histories, India and Bangladesh have unique neighbourly relations. India and Bangladesh have completed 51 years of bilateral ties in 2022, beginning in December 1971 with India's recognition of the newly independent People's Republic of Bangladesh. India played a significant role in the formation of Bangladesh during a liberation conflict with Pakistan. Many things tie the two nations together, such as a shared history and legacy, linguistic and social ties, and a love of art that reflects the diversity of human expression in music, literature, and other forms. Bangladesh is a geopolitically and strategically important country in India's neighbourhood policy. Bangladesh is especially important to India because of its connectivity with the country's seven landlocked northern sister states. Bangladesh's foreign policy discourse is dominated by the words "Indian factor" and "blocked by India." As a result, India is a top priority for Bangladeshi policymakers. The India-Bangladesh partnership affects millions of people in both countries, as well as in South Asia and beyond. The two nations are presently setting an example in South Asian politics in terms of security cooperation, connectivity, collaboration in the energy and power sectors, social and cultural integration, and bilateral trade. During the COVID-19 period, cooperation between the two nations was crucial. India made a humanitarian gesture at the time by assisting Bangladesh in developing its vaccine. For more than 51 years, India and Bangladesh have had a more or less friendly relationship. There have been a few tense moments in the relationship's half-century history, most notably during the military regime and the BNP's rule. The golden jubilee year of the bilateral relationship was completed in 2021. The

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current research aims to provide a beneficial road map for the future by evaluating the history of the bilateral relationship and commenting on the problems and barriers experienced. Contributes

Key Words

Bilateral relations, landlocked, India factor, neighbourhood, border

Introduction

In 2022, India and Bangladesh completed 51 years of bilateral relations, which began in December 1971 through India's recognition of the newly independent People's Republic of Bangladesh. Bangladesh's geographical location made it crucial for India and other extra-regional powers. India's longest border (about 4096 km) with Bangladesh runs across five states: West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. India-Bangladesh relations have become important from a political, economic, strategic, and socio-cultural perspective. The India-Bangladesh partnership affects millions of people in both countries, as well as in South Asia and beyond. Bangladesh is one of the most important countries in India's neighbourhood policy from a geopolitical and geostrategic perspective.

Bangladesh is an essential partner in India's Act East Policy. It is particularly crucial for India because of its connectivity with the seven sister states' landlocked northeastern region. Transit rights through Bangladesh to reduce the distance between the country's northeastern area have a special strategic significance. It also relieves strain on the Siliguri Corridor and provides an alternate route, which is especially important given China's presence in Doklam. Bangladesh is frequently referred to as "India-locked," referring to the fact that 90% of its international border is shared with India. It has maritime access to the Bay of Bengal, where India has a strong presence. India and Bangladesh have numerous similarities, including language, culture, food, music, sports, and literature, particularly in the border area, especially in West Bengal. Given these facts, a friendly relationship between the two countries is important for both. Friendly ties between the two neighbours influenced their economies, security, and development, leading to improved welfare and well-being for their people.

The former Union Minister and President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, said that "You can change your friends, but you cannot change your neighbours, so it is better to live in peace". In the foreign policy discourse of Bangladesh, the terms "India factor" or "India locked" are dominant keywords. As a result, India is a top priority for Bangladesh's foreign

policymakers. From the Indian side, Bangladesh is not just another neighbour. Bangladesh will always remain special for several reasons. During a visit to Bangladesh in 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that Bangladesh is “not merely a neighbour,” but rather “a nation with which India shares enduring links,” indicating the importance of Bangladesh to India and *vice versa*. Bangladesh is also India’s key South Asian strategic partner in promoting growth and combating terrorism. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate, had a dream of Bangladesh as “Sonar Bangla,” which is found in the composition of the Bangladesh National Anthem. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman also wanted to make Bangladesh “Sonar Bangla”. A friendly relationship is very important for both countries to make Bangladesh “Sonar Bangla” and India “a responsible and reliable international power”.

Nevertheless, India-Bangladesh ties have been more or less friendly throughout the last half-century. There have been a few tense periods in the relationship’s half-century history, mainly under the military regime and the rule of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Both countries worked to improve bilateral relations after the emergence of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. Nowadays, India regards Bangladesh as a close neighbour, and Bangladesh is a key partner in India’s neighbourhood first policy. Friendly relations between India and Bangladesh have become a sensitive issue in domestic politics in both countries. In 2021, the golden jubilee year of the bilateral relationship has been completed. In this article, I explain the journey of the bilateral relationship and introspect its struggles and the challenges faced by India and Bangladesh to ascertain a productive road map for the future.

There have been many studies on the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. These include a study by Majumdar (2014), for example, in his research paper entitled “Making Sense of India-Bangladesh Relations” which analyzes various aspects of India-Bangladesh relations from the geo-political context. Chaudhury (2020) in her research paper entitled “Re-Connecting Neighbours” focuses on how strong connectivity plays an important role in India-Bangladesh bilateral ties and how both countries are coming closer to improving their connectivity. Kashem and Islam (2016) in their article entitled “Narendra Modi’s Bangladesh Policy and India-Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses” investigate Narendra Modi’s Bangladesh policy and India-Bangladesh relations under his regime. Kumar (2020) in his research article entitled “India-Bangladesh Relations: Some Issues Need Deft Handling” talks about some of the issues that have adversely affected the relationship

between the two countries and the need for an immediate and permanent solution. Chowdhury (2013) in his research article entitled “Asymmetry in Indo-Bangladesh Relations” focuses on the recent issues that have created problems and the possible areas of cooperation and development in the relations between the two neighbours. Lastly, Ranjan (2018) in his famous book entitled *India-Bangladesh Border Disputes: History and Post-LBA Dynamics*” assesses whether the implementation of LBA will have impacts on border-related problems like mobility, migration, and tensions.

The majority of the relevant existing studies concentrate on a specific aspect of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. There is, however, no research article that covers every aspect of the India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. To fill this gap, this study attempts to discuss all aspects of India-Bangladesh relations and sheds light on the problems facing these two neighbouring countries. It aims to answer the following three basic questions: What are the major areas of India-Bangladesh bilateral cooperation? What are the major problems in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations? And what steps should be taken to improve the relationship between the two countries?

This study is based mainly on the content analysis method. It was conducted based on primary data in consonance with the secondary one. It is descriptive, deductive, and explanatory. The required data were collected from books, book chapters, journal articles, internet sources, newspapers, and other sources concerned with the topic of this study. There were thematic arrangements for the collection of data. Data collected from various sources were checked through triangulation. This study revolves around the concept of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. It takes different components of India-Bangladesh ties. These components are land boundary agreement, security cooperation, cooperation over connectivity, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation.

Major Areas of Cooperation

Land Border Agreement

The border between India and Bangladesh is one of the most complicated in the world. Historically, India and Bangladesh have a land boundary of roughly 4096 km, and the disputed area is around 6.1 km. On May 16, 1974, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman signed a Land Border Agreement for their respective countries that was aimed at setting things right. Even though Bangladesh’s parliament ratified the LBA treaty within a month, India did

not ratify it for some reasons. To ratify the LBA in India, a Constitutional Amendment was necessary, which remained a major challenge. Both countries continued to talk about how to solve this situation. In January 2010, during Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India, both countries expressed a willingness to look for a final solution to the long-standing matter and agreed to comprehensively resolve all outstanding border issues under the principles of the 1974 LBA. In September 2011, during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India and Bangladesh signed a protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement, though it was not ratified. The Indian Parliament (Rajya Sabha) declined to approve the Constitutional Amendment Bill to ratify the LBA because of strong opposition from Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee and Asom Gana Parishad leaders.

Mamata Banerjee opposed the LBA ratification bill because while West Bengal would get only 7000 acres, it would have to concede nearly 17,000 acres. Later, she agreed to exchange the enclaves. Finally, after 41 years of the Indira Gandhi-Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Pact, the historic ratification came in 2015 when the 100th Constitution Amendment Act was passed by the Indian Parliament. Due to the implementation of LBA, primarily three complex and sensitive issues were resolved in India-Bangladesh relations: (1) the exchange of 162 enclaves between the countries; (2) the exchange of adverse possessions of each other's territories; and (3) the demarcation of a 6.5 km boundary. The ratification and implementation of the LBA will take India-Bangladesh ties to new heights. As it was noted in one of the editorials of *The Indian Express*, "LBA is, above all, a primary instrument of consolidating India's ties with Bangladesh" (2015, 6th May). The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, said India's LBA ratification is "a new milestone" in the long-standing Bangladesh-India relations. After ratification of the LBA, India will be able to advance its trade and security ties with Bangladesh. It is also expected that the LBA implementation will have a favourable impact on border management, counter-terrorism, and other border-centric crimes. There might be a chance to improve connection, economic collaboration, and energy cooperation.

Security Cooperation

Woodrow Wilson viewed security cooperation at the international level as necessary to avert war. Global terrorism, marine piracy, cyber insecurity, and other non-traditional security threats have all become common in the twenty-first century, and no one state can address the problems of the twenty-first century alone. Security collaboration at the bilateral, regional,

and global levels is required for this. Security cooperation is now one of the most important aspects of bilateral cooperation. Both India and Bangladesh face numerous security issues, such as cross-border terrorism, maritime challenges, cyber insecurity, and other non-traditional security concerns, which may be addressed by strengthening security cooperation. It is also argued that strong India-Bangladesh security cooperation benefits not just these two nations but also others in this region. After Bangladesh's independence, the two nations have taken a variety of steps to improve security cooperation. During the visit of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in 2010, she ensured that "Bangladesh will not allow its territory to be used for terrorist activity against any country in the neighbourhood or around the world. I can assure you that Bangladesh is committed to eliminating all forms of terrorism within its borders".

To address cross-border terrorism, India and Bangladesh signed some agreements and MoUs. During Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January 2010, India and Bangladesh signed three anti-terrorism agreements as follows: A) Criminal Mutual Legal Assistance; B) Terrorism, Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking; and C) Sentenced Persons' Transfer. Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina expressed their firm commitment to extending anti-terror cooperation. In November 2016, Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar paid his first visit to Bangladesh as the country's defence minister. During his visit, Parrikar met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's President, the Prime Minister's Security Adviser, and the Chiefs of the Navy, Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard. During this visit, both countries emphasized the importance of their security ties. India's proposed defence agreement would cover "greater military-military cooperation, the sale and supply of military hardware from India to Bangladesh, and coordinated operations against mutually perceived threats". India offered a 500 million USD line of credit to Bangladesh for the purchase of military hardware from India. In 2019, during Sheikh Hasina's visit, India urged Bangladesh to expedite the implementation of the line of credit that was offered in the field of defence cooperation, which was strengthened by the Army-to-Army and Navy-to-Navy talks between India and Bangladesh.

Both India and Bangladesh heavily depend on the sea for international trade and energy supply from the Middle East. So, India and Bangladesh come closer and take the necessary steps to protect the sea jointly. In 2017, India and Bangladesh signed an MoU on cyber security. As far as the MoU is concerned, New Delhi and Dhaka will focus on establishing a framework for dialogue, information exchange, and mutual response related to cyber-

attacks, as well as cooperation on technology; and capacity building.

Cooperation in Connectivity

Connectivity matters and directly impacts the lives of people. Connectivity is becoming a global phenomenon. It is also crucial to the process of globalisation, which is frequently regarded as a prerequisite for progress, wealth, and development. The recent developments in India-Bangladesh connectivity have established an example for many in the region and beyond. As “the 3C Mantra”, i.e., commerce, culture, and connectivity, are the primary objectives of Narendra Modi’s foreign policy, the issue of connectivity remains a priority area in India-Bangladesh relations. After the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, both countries have taken various initiatives to improve connectivity. On July 12, 2001, an agreement was concluded to facilitate passenger rail service between India and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, it was delayed due to political tensions between India and Bangladesh. In July 2007, these countries initiated a trial run of passenger train service between Kolkata and Dhaka. On 14th April, the Kolkata-Dhaka passenger train service, the ‘Maitree’ Express, was started after 43 years of bilateral ties. This was one of the key milestones for India-Bangladesh people-to-people contacts. In February 2016, the Banglabandha-Phulbari immigration check post was inaugurated to facilitate the cross-border movement of people and goods. Transshipment of goods to the Northeastern states of India through the Ashuganj river port and Agartala-Akhaura by road commenced in June 2016 under the PIWTT. The ‘Bandhan’ Express between Khulna and Kolkata was inaugurated in November 2017. During the visit of the Bangladeshi Rail Minister in August 2019, both countries agreed to increase railway connectivity following the demand for passengers.

At the two countries’ virtual summit in December 2020, Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina launched the Haldibari-Chilahati rail link, which would improve railway connectivity between India and Bangladesh. Apart from railway connectivity, the operationalization of buses is also emphasised. The bus service between Kolkata and Khulna-Dhaka began in April 2017. Agartala is around 1600 kilometres from Kolkata via Assam and roughly 500 kilometres from Kolkata via Dhaka. India Bangladesh and Myanmar have a marine boundary of 1116 kilometres, hence maritime linkages have significant economic and socio-cultural development potential. Inland water transport (IWT) links prevailed only between India and Bangladesh. Inland water transport connectivity has great potential for development since it is the cheapest mode of transportation. The India-

Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, which was signed in 1972, has been a pioneering initiative in this context. Initially, the Protocol was renewable every two years.

In April 2015, India-Bangladesh decided to automatically renew the Protocol every five years. Under the Protocol, Bangladesh and India agreed to use designated inland waterways for the passage of goods between two places in the country through the territory of the other. The Protocol provides for 50:50 ratio sharing on a tonnage basis for inter-country and transit cargo by Indian and Bangladeshi vessels. According to the 1980 trade agreement, the two governments agreed to make mutually beneficial arrangements for the use of their waterways, railways, and roadways for commerce between the two countries. In 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Shipping Agreement to facilitate inland water connectivity. The signing of the Coastal Shipping Agreement was a landmark step. The shipping industry plays a key role in establishing and sustaining commerce and growth. On October 25, 2018, India and Bangladesh signed another agreement on the use of Chattogram and Mongla ports for the movement of goods to the North-Eastern states from mainland India. In May 2020, India and Bangladesh signed the second addendum to the Protocol on Inland Water Transit Trade to facilitate more trade. In the addendum, the number of India-Bangladesh Protocol routes has been increased from 8 to 10. In August 2020, the first export consignment from Daudkandi, Bangladesh, reached Tripura, India through a waterway. It was another milestone in connectivity between the two countries. Notably, the Bangladesh vessel MB Primer carried 50 metric tons of cement and arrived at Sonamura, Tripura, after a 93 km journey on the Gumit River. This initiative was vital in the case of India-Bangladesh connectivity. According to the National Waterway Act of India, 106 such waterways were declared National Waterways, of which 19 are in the Northeast. The main protocol routes between Bangladesh and India are Kolkata-Sundarban-Chalna-Khulna-Mongla and Kaukhali-Barisal-Narayanganj-Aricha-Dhubri-Pandu-Silghat.

Economic Cooperation

Trade is seen as a catalyst for peace and stability in bilateral and multilateral relations. Beginning their diplomatic relations, trade constitutes a crucial component in India-Bangladesh ties. A detailed discussion on economic cooperation was held in January 1972, during Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad's visit to New Delhi. On March 28, 1972, India and Bangladesh signed a Trade Agreement. According to the agreement, both sides expressed an interest in strengthening "economic

relations between the two countries based on equality and mutual benefits.” As far as possible, state-to-state trade was identified as the organizing trade between India and Bangladesh. On July 5, India and Bangladesh signed another trade agreement, which came into force on September 28, 1973, for three years. Again, on October 4, 1980, India and Bangladesh signed a Trade Agreement for three years, with the possibility of extension for a further period of three years. On June 6, 2015, India and Bangladesh signed a trade agreement for five years. The agreement was supposed to automatically be extended for successive terms of five years unless either government gave written notice of its intention to terminate the agreement to the other government at least six months before the end of such term. The India-Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (IBCCI) was formed in 2007 to promote bilateral trade, reduce the trade imbalance, resolve bilateral business-related issues, increase Bangladesh’s exports to India, and encourage India’s investors to invest in Bangladesh. During the 14th SAARC Summit in New Delhi, India announced duty-free access to exports from least developed countries in the SAARC region, including Bangladesh, from January 1, 2008, and reduced the sensitive lists. The introduction of Border Haats also introduces a new dimension in India-Bangladesh economic relations. Bangladeshi patients’ favourite destination is India, considering the proximity of the neighbouring Asian and European countries. On average, 1,000 Bangladeshis come to India daily to take treatment. According to the Indian Ministry of Tourism, the number of medical tourists coming from Bangladesh is increasing day by day. There is a strong political economy involved in this medical tourism.

In 1980, Bangladesh’s exports were worth US\$ 12.35 million, while imports amounted to US\$ 105 million. According to the Indian Department of Commerce, as per 2016-2017 data, Bangladesh was the largest trading partner of India in South Asia. Of the 83 per cent of total Indian exports in South Asia, Bangladesh alone accounts for 35 per cent. Due to several special advantages, Bangladesh has emerged as an investment bonanza for interested countries. Bangladesh has identified 13 possible investment areas, including agro-processing, ceramics, automobiles, gems and jewellery, chemicals, light engineering, ITC, hospitals, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, where the country is seeking India’s investment in a joint venture basis. In February 2009, India and Bangladesh signed an agreement for the promotion and protection of investment for ten years, and thereafter it shall be deemed to have been automatically extended unless there is any opposition. Economic, trade, and investment are the three main dimensions of India-Bangladesh relations.

During the Modi regime, Indian investment in Bangladesh's gas has increased a lot. Two Indian companies, namely Reliance Power Limited and Adani Power Limited, have signed an MoU with the Bangladesh government to invest US\$ 5 billion to generate 4,600 MW of electricity during Modi's visit to Bangladesh. According to the MoU, Reliance Power Limited will invest US\$ 3 billion to generate a 3,000 MW power plant based on imported liquefied natural gas, while Adani Power Limited will invest US\$ 2.5 billion to build a 1600 MW coal-fired power plant. Bangladesh has become India's leading South Asian trading partner and the world's fourth-largest market for Indian exports in the years 2021–2022. Exports to Bangladesh increased by more than 66% during FY 2020-21 and FY 2021-22, from \$9.69 billion to \$16.15 billion. India is Bangladesh's second-largest trading partner and Asia's top market destination for exports. Bilateral trade between both countries increased at an unprecedented rate of approximately 44% from \$10.78 billion in 2020-2021 to \$18.13 billion in 2021-2022, despite Covid-19-related difficulties. Raw cotton, non-retail pure cotton yarn, and electricity are India's key exports to Bangladesh, whereas pure vegetable oils, non-knit men's suits, and textile waste are its main imports from Bangladesh.

Energy and Power Cooperation

On January 4, 1973, India and Bangladesh signed an MoU regarding the Joint Power Coordination Board that aimed primarily to "maintain liaison between the participating countries to ensure the most effective joint efforts in maximizing the benefits from the power systems and energy resources to their mutual benefit." But it took almost four decades for electricity to be exchanged between India and Bangladesh. Regarding energy cooperation, the second meeting of the Joint Working Group on Cooperation in the Power Sector was held in Dhaka and Delhi in May and June 2010 respectively. The notable development was the signing of a 35-year power transmission agreement between the Power Grid Corporation of India (PGCIL) and the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB). In addition, in August of the same year, an MoU was signed between the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) and Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) for the setting up of two coal-fired power plants of 1320 megawatts each in Chattogram and Khulna under a joint venture. Three agreements were signed in April 2013 during the visit of India's power secretary, Uma Shankar, to Bangladesh for the joint venture 1320 MW power plant in Rampal, Khulna. In February 2014, India's ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) and Bangladesh's Petrobangla signed two production-sharing contracts for the

exploration and production of oil and gas in two shallow-water blocks in the Bay of Bengal. In 2017, Adani Power India inked a long-term pact with Bangladesh Power Development Board to supply electricity from its upcoming 1600 MW coal-based power plant at Godda in Jharkhand for 25 years. In September 2018, Narendra Modi and Sheik Hasina jointly inaugurated three major India-Bangladesh joint venture projects, including the supply of 500 MW of electricity from India to Bangladesh.

Socio-Cultural Relations

Since India has had strong cultural ties with Bangladesh for a long time, there is greater scope for enhanced collaboration in new avenues of cooperation. Socio-cultural similarities are always one of the key strengths of bilateral relations. During Modi's visit to Bangladesh, "cultural exchange programs" for the years 2015–2017" have been adopted. The promotion of socio-cultural relations is noticeable between India and Bangladesh during Modi's regime. Cultural exchange promotes people-to-people contact between neighbouring countries, which increases belief in each other and has a positive impact on bilateral relations. The opening of Border Haats on the India-Bangladesh border is a new initiative taken by both countries to deepen their bilateral relations through promoting people-to-people contacts. The first Border Haats were set up in 2012 at Kalaichar in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Now India and Bangladesh have five Border Haats. It is expected that these Border Haats will play a vital role in the future in improving people-to-people contact between India and Bangladesh.

Cooperation During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world with broader implications on a domestic, regional, and global scale in the domain of the economy, security, foreign policy, and diplomacy. The coronavirus crisis affects normal bilateral relations, whether through bilateral visits, trade, investment, or people-to-people contacts, severely. The COVID-19 global pandemic had some direct impact on India-Bangladesh bilateral relations; that is, bilateral trade decreased massively and regular Bangladeshi patients were not able to visit Indian doctors and hospitals, which hampered their medical treatment. India-Bangladesh cooperation is manifested at the regional level in addressing the COVID-19 global pandemic impacts. In August 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Bangladesh to discuss the progress and prospects

of India-Bangladesh relations, which demonstrate the importance that New Delhi attaches to Dhaka. On this visit, both sides discussed ways to address issues arising out of the COVID-19 situation. During his visit, Harsh Vardhan Shringla also assured that Bangladesh would get priority in getting the COVID-19 vaccine once it is produced in India. Consequently, an MoU was signed in November 2020 between the Serum Institute of India and Beximco Pharma in Bangladesh for the priority delivery of 30 million COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh. Bangladesh got the first supply on January 21, 2021. During the pandemic period, India also continued to work on developing connectivity projects. The first trial container ship from Kolkata to Agartala through the Chattogram port was flagged off during this period.

Visit of Sheikh Hasina to India, September 2022

On September 5-8, 2022, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation. During the visit, both countries took steps to improve their bilateral relations. During this visit, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced the "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Student Scholarship" for 200 descendants of Indian Armed Forces personnel martyred and critically injured during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. The two leaders also discussed a variety of bilateral issues, including political and security cooperation, defence, border management, trade and connectivity, water resources, power and energy, development cooperation, and cultural and people-to-people ties. Additionally, they decided to work together in three new areas of cooperation: those related to the environment, climate change, cyber security, ICT, space technology, green energy, and the blue economy. They also discussed the implementation of bilateral and sub-regional rail, road, and other connectivity initiatives, such as the conversion of the Tongi-Akhaura line to dual-gauge, the supply of railway rolling stock, capacity building for Bangladesh Railway staff, and the sharing of IT solutions for improved services at Bangladesh Railway. Both sides also welcomed the new initiative, namely, the Kaunia-Lalmonirhat-Mogulghat-New Gitaldah link; the construction of a link between Hili and Birampur; the upgrade of the track and signalling systems; and railway stations along the Benapole-Jessore line; and the restoration of the link between Burimari and Changrabandha were also welcomed by the parties. e.g., the construction of a container depot at Sirajganj, etc., and both sides have agreed to finance these projects through various financial instruments under bilateral development cooperation. Recognizing the peaceful management of the

Indo-Bangladesh border as a shared priority, the two leaders directed the officials to expedite work to complete all pending developmental works within 150 yards of the Zero Line. The two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to eradicating terrorism and strengthening their cooperation in combating and countering the spread of radicalization. They agreed to accelerate efforts to improve bilateral and sub-regional connectivity by launching the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). They also praised the recent completion of a joint feasibility study and the strengthening of bilateral defence ties. They emphasized the importance of strengthening people-to-people ties and the resumption of rail, road, air, and water communications. They also agreed to work towards other initiatives, such as the operationalization of “Shadhinota Shorok” and the production of a documentary on the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

The following memorandum of understanding and agreements were signed and exchanged during the Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India:

- 1) An MoU between the Ministry of Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh, and the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India, on the withdrawal of water by India and Bangladesh from the common border river Kushiara;
- 2) An MoU between the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, and the Ministry of Railways, Government of Bangladesh on the training of Bangladesh railway personnel in India;
- 3) An MoU between the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, and the Ministry of Railways, Government of Bangladesh on collaboration in IT systems such as FOIS and other IT applications for the Bangladesh Railway;
- 4) An MoU on Scientific and Technological Cooperation between the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), India, and the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), Bangladesh;
- 5) An MoU on Cooperation in the Areas of Space Technology between Newspace India Limited and Bangladesh Satellite Company Limited;
- 6) An MoU between Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Prasar Bharti on Cooperation in Broadcasting; and
- 7) An MoU between the National Judicial Academy, India, and the Supreme Court of Bangladesh on a training and capacity-building program for Bangladesh Judicial Officers in India.

During the visit, the following were unveiled, announced, or released:

- 1) the Unveiling of Unit-I of Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, Rampal, Bangladesh;
- 2) Inauguration of the Rupsha railway bridge;
- 3) Announcement of the signing of project management consultancy contracts for the Khulna–Darshana railway line and the Parbotipur–Kaunia railway line;
- 4) Presentation of the book containing the translation of the

historic “7th March Speech” of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 23 Indian languages and 5 languages of other South Asian countries by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Prime Minister Narendra Modi; 5) Announcement regarding the offer of 20 broad gauge locomotives to Bangladesh Railway on a grant basis; and 6) Announcement regarding the supply of road construction equipment and machinery to the Road and Highways Department, Government of Bangladesh.

Major Challenges

Nevertheless, there are some challenges in Indo-Bangladesh relations as will be described below.

Water Sharing of the Common Rivers

India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers. The sharing of the water of these common rivers forms a crucial part of the bilateral relationship. In June 1972, India and Bangladesh established the Joint River Commission (JRC) to resolve the waste-sharing issue peacefully. But this substantial progress is not manifested under the JRC. Only two water-sharing agreements have been signed between India and Bangladesh. These are the Ganga Water Agreement of 1996 and the Feni Water Agreement Treaty of 2019. The Ganga Water Agreement was signed for 30 years, so this is one of the important questions: what is going to happen in 2026 when the 30-year agreement ends? Since India is the upstream state, the flow of the river water into Bangladesh is susceptible to Indian activities, including the building of barrages and dams, linking and digging canals, or abandoned use of water. Bangladesh has situated on the lower side of these rivers and suspects that the absence of just river water-sharing agreements makes it vulnerable to Indian designs. River water sharing has become not only a means of communication between India and Bangladesh but also a sensitive issue in both countries’ domestic politics. The Teesta is the fourth largest transboundary river in Bangladesh. Around 21 million Bangladeshi people directly depend on the Teesta, which is crucial for the agricultural and irrigation needs of the northern parts of Bangladesh. In 2011, during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh, the Teesta water-sharing treaty was supposed to be signed. But West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the deal, which led to the failure of any agreement.

Challenges at the Border

The killing continues to be a major issue in border management and bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. It creates a climate of

fear and mutual mistrust. Notably, those who are at the border are primarily cattle, drugs, and arms smugglers. But it is a matter of concern that many civilians have been killed by the border force. Smuggling has been a common border crime on India's and Bangladesh's borders for a long time. The smuggling of cattle, drugs, and arms has been a common phenomenon over the decades.

Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking

The issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh is considered a major weakness in the bilateral relationship. Migration from Bangladesh is perceived to have caused a major demographic shift in the bordering states and has been a cause of ethnic and social tension in states like Assam. In India, Hindu migration has become a sensitive issue. Even after Bangladesh became independent and adopted a secular policy, Hindu people continued to migrate to India for many reasons. It is widely assumed that all religious people from Bangladesh are illegally migrating to India for reasons such as employment, education, and health. India has again and again urged Bangladesh to take steps to control cross-border migration, but Bangladesh has consistently declined India's claims of unchecked migration from that country. In a recent study, Nandy and Roy(2022) show that illegal Bangladeshi migrants have paid and manipulated touts and local politicians to manage their ration cards and voter cards. Also, India doesn't have any authentic data on the number of illegal migrants, and India cannot provide authentic data to Bangladesh. This is one of the ways that affect the illegal migration problem which is constantly hampering bilateral relations between the two countries.

China Factor

The policy community in Bangladesh defines an "all-weather friend". Similarly, China sees Bangladesh as a "good neighbour and a good partner". The growing China-Bangladesh partnership in the economic, security, strategic, and development realms has created concerns for India. In 1975, the China-Bangladesh bilateral trade volume was only US\$ 3.6 million, but it reached US\$ 18.33 billion in 2019. Approximately 200 large Chinese companies and 200 Chinese SMEs are operational in Bangladesh. In 2019, Bangladesh replaced the USA as the top source of foreign direct investment in Bangladesh, amounting to US\$ 1.6 billion. According to the Bangladesh government, there is the possibility that China might invest around US\$ 50 billion in the next 15 years in Bangladesh. In 2019, China-Bangladesh trade volume was US\$28 billion, while India-Bangladesh trade volume

amounted to US\$ 10 billion. Besides these, China-Bangladesh defence cooperation has also reached a new height. China is targeting all of India's friendly neighbours, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and now Bangladesh. The expansion of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations in the South Asian region has caused anxiety among Indians, which has harmed India-Bangladesh bilateral relations.

Domestic Politics

Domestic politics is a crucial factor in India-Bangladesh relations. Some argue that "foreign policy is the extension of domestic politics," which is reflected in Bangladesh and Indian foreign policy toward each other. The origin of religious radicalism is a threat to the South Asian region as well as bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Moreover, the ideological difference between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party about India also impacts bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. The Teesta Water Sharing Treaty was not signed because of Mamata Banerjee's opposition. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India also hampered bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This article has shown that both India and Bangladesh have recognised the importance of collaboration for their growth in the context of politico-security constructions and socioeconomic restraints. As a result, in the last two decades, both governments intended to work proactively under a cooperative framework. In 2021, India and Bangladesh completed 50 years of diplomatic relations. Now, Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in the South Asian region. They share a liberal democracy, secularism, and inclusive socio-cultural nationalism attitude. From important partners in the liberation war to periods of indifference, and eventually emerging as cooperative neighbours, the two countries have set out on a course previously uncharted in this region with their mosaic of connection projects and various other cooperation efforts. The spirit of bilateral interaction between India and Bangladesh is also propelling the eastern South Asian area into sub-regional alliances. The two friendly neighbours have often cooperated in addressing some common challenges and some genuine concerns about each other. This requires the two countries to emphasize their cooperation further and address whatever potential irritants are left.

Beyond the rhetoric of the golden period in bilateral relations, the crucial question for India today is: How far will Bangladesh align itself with China? Recent steps to normalise relations with Pakistan, as well as China's expanding ability to invest in infrastructure projects, may eventually put political pressure on Bangladesh to embrace policies that are compatible with China's anti-Indian strategic interests in South Asia. Yet, India has significant influence to offset Chinese activities in Bangladesh, and this balancing act will decide the future trajectory of bilateral relations.

Based on the above-concluding remarks, I propose policy recommendations that a sustainable and warm political relationship between India and Bangladesh has become necessary for the long-term interests of the two countries. For this, the political regimes in both countries need to play a crucial role. The role of civil society needs to be protective and constructive in deepening India-Bangladesh relations. There is an increased need for concrete academic and media cooperation between India and Bangladesh. There is also a greater need to promote students, teachers, researchers, and intellectuals exchange programs. All disputes between the two countries should be resolved through mutual discussion, especially the river water sharing dispute. To increase bilateral trade, both countries should work together. To stop informal trade, India and Bangladesh should take necessary measures. Increased and extensive cooperation in the health sector has become a priority in the wake of the COVID-19 period and post-COVID-19 period. To prevent coronavirus, India and Bangladesh should take the necessary steps to increase their cooperation in the health sector. Both countries should take the necessary measures to stop smuggling at the border. People-to-people contact is the most important aspect of bilateral relations. Both countries should take the necessary steps for this, like establishing Border Haats. Track-II diplomacy can be an effective alternative channel in India-Bangladesh relations.

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