

DIRECTOR'S DESK

The arrival of 2026 as policy drivers predicts would be a year ushering towards-the Age of Anxiety: Dependence, Autonomy, and Strategic Ambiguity. Leading to power competition, conflicts worldwide, and a fragmented global order characterizing the structural geopolitical outlook.

Amid the complexities and warfare like worldwide circumstances ISCS looks towards its important eastern Neighbour Bangladesh as it is about to face its greatest test in 2026. Therefore the researchers and ISCS's Distinguished Fellow interprets how the most anticipated and supercharged election of Bangladesh in 2026 could reconfigure its ideological center of gravity in terms of its relations with India in details.

The Bulletin also highlights about the round of Pakistan-Afghanistan violence and negotiations reveals Pakistan's cyclical policy failures and Afghan Taliban's tolerance for terrorist tends to derail any prospects for durable peace in the region.

In betwixt of all the neighborhood convulsions, Prime Minister's visit to Ethiopia before rounding up of 2025. Where the Prime

Minister of Ethiopia, H. E. Dr. Abiy Ahmed conferred the highest award of Ethiopia the 'Great Honor Nishan of Ethiopia' upon Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for his exceptional contribution towards strengthening India-Ethiopia partnership and for his visionary leadership as a global statesman impacted in elevating the two country relations who have been sharing the Indian Ocean Lineage thus marking a new innings of developmental partnership.

ISCS that remained packed over months with events, activities and literary fest thus continues with its momentum of sharing and disseminating. The rearmost part of the Bulletin as usual concludes itself with its glances of its upcoming event, to know more keep scrolling through our Facebook and website.

Members, Associates and Partners of ISCS wishes all its readers a very happy 2026, may this year be a year of reflection, positivity, gratitude and renewed hope in all your lives and of all your loved ones.

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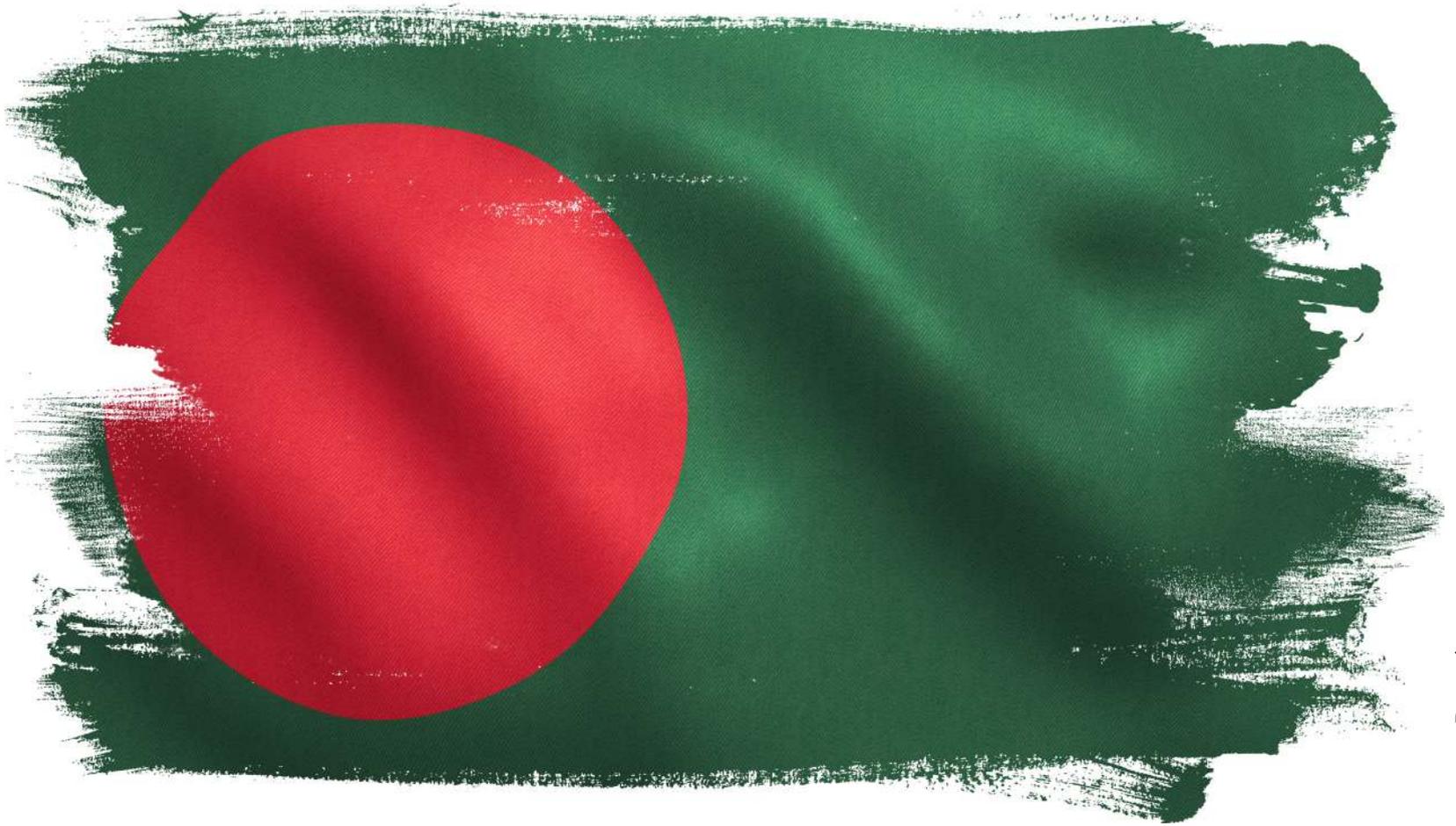
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BANGLADESH AT STRATEGIC CROSSROADS: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA

— Manoj Kumar Lall, IPS (Retired)*

Bangladesh's Political Upheaval and the Reconfiguration of India's Eastern Strategic Environment

The political upheaval in Bangladesh during 2024-25 represents one of the most consequential shifts in South Asia's strategic landscape in recent decades. It is a moment where global powers' efforts to "contain India" (notably by the US and China), China's policy of an "extended military theatre," and Pakistan's long-standing strategy of "bleeding India by a thousand cuts" converge and, at times, compete. Despite their differences, these approaches are essentially anti- and counter-India in orientation, carrying long-term geopolitical, strategic, and regional consequences for India, South Asia, and the world at large.

The abrupt dismantling of a long-standing political order through mass mobilisation and a contested transition has weakened institutional authority, intensified political polarisation, and strained governance mechanisms in Dhaka. These developments have unfolded amid growing contestation

in the information domain, pressures on civil liberties, and an erosion of communal harmony. In a region defined by porous borders and dense social interconnections, instability in Bangladesh inevitably radiates outward, with significant implications for India and the broader Indian subcontinent. Bangladesh has increasingly positioned itself as an actor willing to play into US and Chinese strategic calculations, while simultaneously displaying a sharper proclivity towards Pakistan, including efforts to revive a pre-1971 political orientation, reinforced by a resurgent Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIBD).

For India, this turbulence complicates the security calculus along its eastern frontier, disrupts sub-regional economic integration, and injects uncertainty into diplomatic engagements that depend on a stable and predictable neighbourhood.

Indian strategic circles remain cautious and unsettled by these developments. Senior observers have noted that "Bangladesh remains a puzzle for us... our strategy to engage with the next

generation is very crucial,” reflecting anxieties over a potential Gen-Z political surge in Bangladesh. The spillover effects of such mobilisation could resonate among youth populations in adjoining Indian states, where pro- and anti-Bangladesh, as well as pro- and anti-Muslim sentiments—when filtered through communal or ideological prisms—carry the risk of social polarisation and localised unrest.

The consequences are not confined to immediate border management but extend to questions of ideology, demography, maritime security, national security and great-power competition in the Bay of Bengal. The geopolitical stakes have risen substantially, calling for a well-calibrated strategy and considerable geopolitical wisdom on India’s part.

A Reversal of the Liberation Consensus

At a deeper historical level, the manner in which the Awami League government was displaced signals a retreat from the political ethos forged during the 1970-71 Bangladesh Liberation movement. That struggle sought to establish a state anchored in secular nationalism, popular sovereignty, and resistance to authoritarian and theocratic domination. The post-Hasina political reconfiguration has diluted this foundational consensus, reopening political space for Islamist and pro-Pakistan ideological currents, most visibly represented by JIBD.

This ideological shift has been accompanied by a recalibration of Bangladesh’s external alignments, particularly with the United States, China, and Pakistan. From India’s perspective, this is not merely an internal Bangladeshi realignment but a development with broader geopolitical and strategic consequences. A Bangladesh less anchored in its liberation ethos weakens a key normative and strategic buffer on India’s eastern flank and creates openings for external powers to leverage political uncertainty, economic dependence, and ideological influence in pursuit of their regional objectives. The result is an intensifying contest of geopolitical interests in which India’s priorities—regional stability, secular political order, and cooperative security—intersect, and potentially clash, with competing external ambitions.

The End of a Stable Eastern Frontier

The political transition between 2023 and 2025 marked by the exit of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024, and the emergence of Muhammad Yunus as the head of an interim administration, has fundamentally altered the security environment along India’s eastern and northeastern frontier. Hasina’s fifteen-year tenure since 2009 had enabled an unprecedented phase of peaceful Indo-Bangladesh cooperation. This cooperation was instrumental in dismantling Pakistan-supported insurgent networks operating against India’s Northeast, including groups linked to United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Socialist

Council of Nagaland (NSCN) factions, tens of Manipur valley and hill based Meitei and Kuki insurgent outfits, besides forging people-to-people contact, trade, international land and water transport, energy cooperation, and above all easy access to Indian medical facilities for Bangladeshis. Under both Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh functioned as a critical buffer against the China-Pakistan axis.

The restructuring undertaken by the Yunus-led interim administration, framed as a programme of institutional reform and depoliticisation, has in practice dismantled the Awami League’s organisational presence, weakened centrist democratic forces, and eroded the counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation capacities of the police and security institutions. These political and institutional vacuums have facilitated the resurgence of Islamist actors such as JIBD and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS). While Yunus has been projected internationally as a moderate reformist, the transition has coincided with the re-emergence of religious radical groups, coercive political practices, and a volatile ideological environment marked by pronounced anti-India and anti-Hindu narratives. This phase has also seen increasing engagement with Pakistan’s entrenched networks and a visible strategic courting of China, accompanied by rhetoric invoking destabilising ideas such as severing India’s Northeast – the “Seven Sisters”, and reviving the notion of a “Greater Bangladesh”, echoing earlier irredentist assertions most famously articulated by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, by taking Assam back.

Additionally, release of jailed radical preachers and extremists, including Al Qaeda affiliated Ansarullah Bangla Team’s (ABT) head Md Jasimuddin Rahmani, statements accusing India of harbouring Sheikh Hasina to destabilise Bangladesh have not helped the relations either. Amidst this, and developments around India’s western (Pakistan) and Northern (China) neighbours post Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor, and subsequent visits by Pakistani Generals to Bangladesh, recent statements emanating from Bangladesh calling for realisation of “Greater Bangladesh” – encompassing Assam, Bihar, Bengal and North East states of India have raised alarm bells for Indian security establishment.

External Powers and the New Contest for Influence

Bangladesh’s internal flux has been swiftly exploited by external powers. China has deepened its economic and infrastructural footprint through renewed Belt and Road Initiative engagements, renegotiating stalled megaprojects, expanding port access, and cultivating industrial elites. These moves position Beijing for potential dual-use maritime leverage in the Bay of Bengal, directly affecting India’s eastern seaboard.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has revived ideological and anti-India narratives through religious and political networks, echoing

patterns that previously fuelled insurgency in India's Northeast. Western support for the interim administration, framed as democratic correction, has inadvertently weakened India-friendly political constituencies in Dhaka, further complicating New Delhi's regional diplomacy.

US is perceived to have tightened their grip on Bangladesh army, and the current political and executive regime where Yunus is seen their stooge.

Security Spillovers into India

The consequences of Bangladesh's instability are most acutely felt along India's eastern borderlands. The 4,000-kilometre India-Bangladesh border influences demographic, political, and economic dynamics across West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur. Post-Hasina developments have generated growing security concerns, particularly in West Bengal and Assam, where linguistic and familial continuities facilitate cross-border movement.

There is increasing evidence of anti-India sentiment among sections of Bangladeshi youth, alongside expanded space for Islamist mobilisation. Indian security assessments indicate that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is attempting to exploit this environment through Bangladesh-based extremist networks, including elements of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Reports of regrouping following enforcement lapses after August 2024 have heightened concerns about sleeper cells and logistical networks in districts such as Malda, Murshidabad, and Uttar Dinajpur, as well as renewed attention to the strategically sensitive Siliguri Corridor. In Bangladesh, Jamiaat-e Ahle Hadees Bangladesh (JABD) is the dominant Ahle Hadees organisation, with Ahl-e Hadis Andolan Bangladesh (AHAB) functioning as a smaller and more radical subset, while Jamaate-Ahle Hadis Andolan (JAHA) in Sagardighi, Murshidabad district of West Bengal, represents the Indian, Salafi-oriented extension of AHAB within the broader Indian Ahle Hadees milieu.

Parallel challenges include cross-border financial crimes, Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN), hawala networks, and illicit trade, alongside attempts by politically displaced Bangladeshi actors to influence commercial activities in India's border districts. Deteriorating coordination between border forces, combined with heightened political polarisation within India, has further increased vulnerabilities to external influence operations.

Radicalisation, Institutions, and Ideological Infrastructure

There are credible reports of the revival of extremist organisations such as JMB and Neo-JMB, with training activity reportedly emerging in Bangladesh's riverine regions. ICS continues to function as a key feeder organisation,

drawing from Bangladesh's vast madrasa ecosystem. Public universities, including Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), have witnessed increased ideological penetration, with BUET radicalised students providing technical and logistical support to extremist groups.

More concerning are indications of ideological radicalisation within segments of Bangladesh's military and police. The release or rehabilitation of figures linked to extremist networks, coupled with declining institutional morale, suggests a weakening of the state's internal counter-radicalisation capacity.

West Bengal and Assam as the Primary Interfaces

From India's perspective, West Bengal and Assam, sharing 2216.7 km and 263 km border length with Bangladesh respectively, are considered primary transit and spillover zones for Bangladeshi terrorist and fundamentalist groups, owing to linguistic, ethnic, and familial continuities. JMB networks previously operated from West Bengal for extended periods before expanding into Assam, other northeastern states, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and reportedly Bihar. Pakistani operatives based in Bangladesh, Nepal, and eastern India are assessed to have become significant threats to Indian defence assets in West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and other strategically sensitive areas. Renewed threats have also been perceived against Indian naval and maritime assets in the Bay of Bengal. Communal riots in Dhuliyan (Murshidabad) have exposed rising Islamist and communal tensions, with spillover risks into Jharkhand and Bihar, where administrative responses have reportedly been strained.

Within Bangladesh, Jamiaat-e-Ahle-Hadith Bangladesh (JABD) is reported to be significantly larger than the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan of Bangladesh (AHAB), with AHAB identified as a more radical subset of JABD. In India, Jamaat-e-Ahle-Hadith Andolan (JAHA), active in Sagardighi, Murshidabad, represents the Indian chapter of AHAB and a Salafi faction within Indian Ahl-e-Hadith networks.

West Bengal and Assam also constitute the most sensitive interface for absorbing Bangladesh's political aftershocks, owing to long, porous borders, shared cultural ties, and high levels of legal and irregular mobility. Communal tensions in West Bengal districts such as Murshidabad (projected Muslim population 70 % in 2025) and Malda (54 %), alongside Lower Assam districts (Dhubri 80 %, Goalpara 57.5 %, Barpeta 70.7 %, Bongaigaon 50 %, Kokrajhar 30 %, South Salmara 95 %), Middle Assam (Kamrup 40 %, Guwahati 12 %, Nallibari 36 %, Morigaon 52 %, Nagaon 55 %, Darrang 64 %), and Southeast Assam (Cachar 43 %, Hailakandi 66 %, Karimganj 66 %), reflect both local dynamics and cross-border influences amplified via social media and religious networks. By 2025, Assam is projected to have 36–37 % Muslim population,

concentrated mainly in Lower Assam, while West Bengal's Muslim population, projected at 30–31 %, translates into roughly 13–14 million people, with districts like Murshidabad (~66 %, ~2.5 million), Malda (~51 %, ~2 million), and Uttar Dinajpur (~51 %, ~1.7 million) demonstrating both demographic dominance and significant absolute numbers. While Assam shows higher percentages in specific districts, West Bengal's larger absolute population gives its Muslim communities greater numerical weight, shaping electoral outcomes, local governance, cross-border linkages, and communal balance, necessitating calibrated policy and security measures.

Security assessments indicate increasing anti-India sentiment among segments of Bangladeshi youth and a widening political and social space for Islamist actors such as JIBD in West Bengal and Assam. Pakistan's ISI is reportedly exploiting this environment through Bangladesh-based extremist networks, including JMB, some cadres of which regrouped following jailbreaks and enforcement lapses after August 2024. Ongoing attempts to reactivate sleeper cells and logistical networks in West Bengal are concentrated in Malda, Murshidabad, and Uttar Dinajpur, with renewed focus on the strategically sensitive Siliguri Corridor, or "Chicken's Neck."

The ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government has coincided with a visible expansion of anti-India activities linked to Pakistan's institutional presence in Bangladesh. The Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka is reported to have intensified engagement with Islamist and anti-India networks. Simultaneously, the movement of alims (religious clerics) along the Indo-Bangladesh border has increased, particularly in Rajshahi, Kushtia, and Khulna districts adjoining South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, and Nadia in West Bengal—patterns largely absent during Hasina's tenure.

ICS continues to expand as a primary feeder organisation, supplying cadres to JMB, Neo-JMB, ABT, and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent–Bangladesh (AQBD). Bangladesh's extensive madrasa ecosystem—over two lakh institutions affiliated with Hefazat-e-Islami and another two lakh linked to JIBD—supports ideological indoctrination and anti-India narratives. Major universities such as Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, and BUET are reportedly dominated by JIBD and ICS, while Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) affiliates have been active in recent protests.

The ideological reach of these networks extends into West Bengal, with JAHA in Sagardighi (Murshidabad) representing the Indian chapter of AHAB and reinforcing radical Salafi influence along the border. Pakistani business delegations in Bangladesh indicate expanding economic and military footprints, with pro-Pakistan and pro-Jamaat tendencies reportedly increasing within the Bangladesh Army and police. Political and civil society elites in Bangladesh have shifted

towards pro-BNP and pro-Jamaat positions, leaving pro-Awami League factions weakened, filling the vacuum with anti-India forces that present a multifaceted threat to West Bengal.

Assam, with its unique geography, history, and demographics, occupies a critical position in the threat matrix vis-à-vis Bangladesh. It shares a 263 km border with Bangladesh, with unfenced sections in Karimganj and riverine stretches of the Brahmaputra in Dhubri and South Salmara exploited for illegal crossings and settlement. ISIS India head Haris Farooqui and associate Anurag Singh were apprehended in Dhubri in March 2024, while ABT operatives were arrested in Dhubri, Goalpara, and Barpeta in December 2024–January 2025, having settled as sleeper cells in districts with large Muslim populations. Dhubri (80%), South Salmara (95%), Barpeta (70%), Goalpara (57%), Nagaon (55%), Morigaon (51%), Darrang (60%), Karimganj (54%), Hailakandi (60%), and Hojai have emerged as key districts with sleeper cell presence.

These districts, predominantly in lower and middle Assam, are mainly populated by Bengali Muslims, with indigenous communities—Goria-Moria, Desi, Syed, Jolha—forming a smaller share. Indigenous Muslims identify with Assamese linguistic and cultural affinities, while Bengali Muslims align primarily along religious identity, complicating detection of illegal settlers. Historically, the Muslim League's advocacy for Assam's inclusion in East Pakistan was thwarted by Gopinath Bordoloi. Post-Hasina, fringe voices in Bangladesh promote a "Greater Bangladesh" vision, potentially exploitable by the ISI and the China-Pakistan nexus to foment instability. Pakistani military warnings of attacks from India's eastern flank further indicate strategic designs.

Assam has witnessed increased communal polarisation over the past decade. Memories of the Assam Agitation, issues like CAA-NRC, doubtful voters, and intensified eviction drives since 2021 have generated anti-establishment sentiment among Bengali Muslims, perceived as targeted actions despite citing legal mandates. Post-Hasina developments such as Article 370 abrogation, the Waqf Amendment Act, and abolition of Triple Talaq have fostered a perceived sense of persecution, affecting



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even indigenous Assamese Muslims, reducing moderate voices. Cultural and religious practices, including wearing of hijab in Upper Assam, and the expansion of Tablighi Jamaat and Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JIH) activities, indicate growing radical influence. Social media radicalisation is evident among Bengali Muslim youth supporting incidents such as the Pahalgam massacre, Red Fort blast, or deriding Operation Sindoor.

External factors exacerbate internal vulnerabilities. Northeast insurgent groups, particularly ULFA (Independent) led by Paresh Baruah, may now find backing from ISI, Chinese actors, and jihadist networks to establish a foothold in Bangladesh and target India. ULFA (Independent) has engaged in extortion and disruptive activities, including 19 IEDs placed across Assam on 15 August, 2024 and increasing demand notes.

Heightened security measures, while necessary, have disrupted border economies, affecting agriculture, fisheries, and informal trade, while migration inflows strain healthcare, housing, and labour markets. These cumulative stresses risk deepening social fragmentation and creating fertile ground for criminal and extremist recruitment, underscoring the need for sustained, calibrated policy, intelligence, and security interventions.

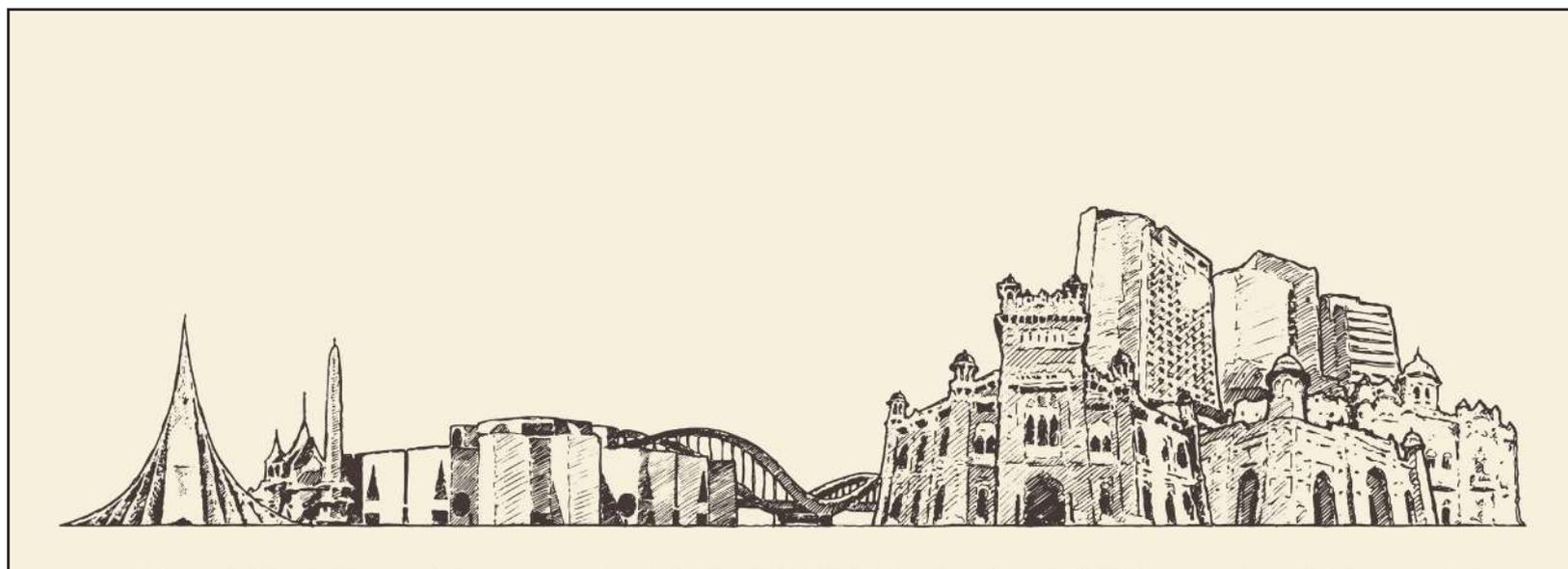
The Long View: Strategic Risks Ahead

Bangladesh's post-2024 trajectory presents India with long-range strategic challenges. A Dhaka more closely aligned with

China could alter the security equilibrium of the Bay of Bengal. By weaponising Dhaka, China could extend its military theatre to India's eastern flank, effectively squeezing India from three sides: Pakistan in the west, China's military build-up in the north across Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, and Bangladesh in the east—thereby deepening Beijing's strategic depth. Renewed Pakistani ideological influence risks entrenching anti-India narratives and reviving hinterland terrorism through the reactivation of bases in Bangladesh. Demographic shifts across the border states carry multi-decadal political consequences, while insurgent networks in the Northeast remain acutely sensitive to regional instability.

For New Delhi, the challenge is not merely to manage borders but to prevent external turbulence from being internalised. This requires an integrated approach combining vigilant border management, intelligence-led policing, economic stabilisation of border regions, diplomatic engagement with Dhaka's evolving power centres, and sustained investment in social resilience.

The political transition in Bangladesh is far from settled. Its eventual trajectory will shape not only India's immediate neighbourhood but also the broader balance of power in the eastern Indian Ocean. How India navigates this uncertainty will be a defining test of its regional strategy in the years ahead.



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BETWEEN RESET AND RECALIBRATION: BANGLADESH'S 2026 ELECTION AFTER HASINA

— Mohit Musaddi*

As Bangladesh goes to the polls next month on February 12, the stakes for Dhaka have seldom been higher. The 'Monsoon revolution' of August 2024, which culminated in the ouster of Sheikh Hasina after more than 15 years in power, marks an exceptional rupture in the country's political trajectory. While the upcoming election carries the promise of procedural correction and renewed participation, it is better understood as a controlled recalibration of power rather than a wholesale democratic reset. The installation of an interim government headed by Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus has widened the political space, but without decisively transforming the structures that previously hollowed out electoral competition. The central question facing Bangladesh today is not simply whether elections will be held on time, but what kind of political order they are meant to restore.

The Yunus-led interim government has functioned as a political actor for almost 18 months, shaping both the tempo and terms of Bangladesh's return to electoral politics. Its legitimacy rests less on constitutional precedent and more on popular exhaustion with the previous regime's governance and internationally visible electoral deficits. Yunus has consistently framed his role as that of a stabilizing technocrat tasked with restoring trust in institutions rather than remaking them. This self-

positioning has allowed the interim government to command broad acceptance across civil society and among international partners, even as it has avoided committing to radical structural reforms that could provoke entrenched interests. However, in practice, the interim government has pursued selective institutional recalibration rather than deep transformation. Administrative neutrality has been emphasized, particularly within the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies, and overt partisan repression has noticeably declined. As such, Yunus has faced protests over delayed reforms. The election date, which was initially announced for June 2026, was pushed forward to April, and finally to before Ramadan, on February 12, 2026, due to political pressure.

Relations with political parties further underscore the government's constrained reformism. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) have been brought back into open political engagement, reversing years of exclusion, while the registration of Hasina's Awami League has been cancelled, thus rendering it unable to participate in the elections. The interim government, therefore, derives its authority from its ability to manage transition without collapse, not from a mandate to reconstruct the political system. This balancing act limits how far the logic

of power can be altered.

The February election will test whether the interim period has meaningfully expanded political contestation or merely looked to curb the Awami League's activities. A central feature of this moment is the July Charter, signed in October 2025 by 25 political parties, including the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami following negotiations with the National Consensus Commission headed by Yunus. With over 80 reform proposals spanning constitutional amendments and institutional safeguards, the Charter represents the most ambitious cross-party reform agenda in years. Its submission to a referendum on the same day as the general election adds a layer of participatory legitimacy, although there were calls that the referendum be held before the elections. Notably, the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP), a key ally of Yunus during the 2024 upheaval, refused to sign the Charter, citing its lack of 'legal basis', and also held protests against the Charter.

Public trust continues to remain fragile. While voter enthusiasm appears higher than in 2018 or 2024 and the election is likely to be seen as competitive in form and fairer in process, yet its legitimacy will hinge on whether post-election conduct reinforces or erodes these gains. The interim period has reopened the arena, but it has not yet guaranteed that competition will endure beyond the transition. The most probable outcome of the February election is a return to power for the BNP, led by acting chairman Tarique Rahaman, who returned to the country after nearly 17 years of self-imposed exile. Such an outcome would mark a cyclical rather than transformative shift, restoring alternation without fundamentally redefining executive authority. For many voters, the BNP represents not an ideological alternative but a vehicle for ending Awami League's political monopoly. Whether it can govern without reverting to the same centralizing impulses remains an open question. Mr. Rahaman is likely to seek to mobilize public support for the BNP, particularly in the wake of the death of his mother, Khaleda Zia, who passed away on December 30, 2025, after a prolonged battle with multiple health complications. On the other hand, the students-led NCP has forged an alliance with the Jamaat, in what is largely seen as a pragmatic step in a fragmented political landscape. This has however, created internal rifts within the NCP as they had initially positioned themselves as a centrist party with a reformative alternative to Bangladesh's two-party political structure. It remains highly unlikely that the NCP-Jamaat alliance will make significant dents to the BNP's voter base in the upcoming elections.

Externally, the election carries layered signals. For India, stability and continuity in Dhaka remain paramount, particularly

on issues of border management, security cooperation, and connectivity. India-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated sharply under the interim government and Delhi is wary that continued instability in Bangladesh could be destabilizing to the border regions, especially in Northeast India. On December 17, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned the Bangladesh High Commissioner and conveyed "strong concerns at the deteriorating security environment in Bangladesh", as well as on plans by extremist elements to create a security situation around the Indian mission in Dhaka. EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar was in Dhaka to attend Khaleda Zia's funeral and carried a letter of condolence from PM Modi for BNP's Chairman Tarique Rahaman. This was Jaishankar's first visit since the interim government took charge in August 2024 and he met the Foreign Affairs Adviser, the National Security Adviser and the Law Adviser of the interim government. India will remain deeply concerned about Bangladesh's internal security situation, particularly the recent spate of seemingly religiously motivated attacks against Hindus. Against this backdrop, restoring law and order must be Bangladesh's foremost priority in the run-up to the elections. Meanwhile Dhaka's relationships with China continues to flourish. Beijing has largely sidestepped normative concerns, engaging the interim government and opposition alike to ensure continuity in infrastructure and investment projects. The Western democracies, especially the United States and the European Union, are likely to treat electoral credibility as a benchmark, but not a deal-breaker. A reasonably competitive election may suffice to normalize relations, even if deeper democratic reforms stall.

Ultimately, the February 2026 election functions less as a democratic culmination than as a stress test for Bangladesh's post-Hasina political order. Rather than closing a turbulent chapter, the election risks amplifying Bangladesh's underlying instability. The deterioration of law and order in recent months has exposed the fragility of the interim arrangement, raising concerns that a competitive but weakly anchored election could become a catalyst for further violence. The interim government's decision to effectively ban the Awami League has removed a major political actor from the electoral arena, while the opening of political space to hardline groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami has altered the balance of mobilization on the streets. Together, these shifts have intensified polarization and strained already weakened policing and judicial capacities. In this context, the election appears less a democratic reset than a high-risk transition, where procedural openness coexists with growing coercion. Bangladesh's longer democratic trajectory will hinge not only on electoral credibility, but on whether political competition can be re-embedded within a durable framework of order and restraint.

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AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP FROM A SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

— Shri Kulbir Krishan, IPS (Retd)*

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have generally been tense due to a variety of reasons, primarily the disputed border between the two countries. In fact, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against the admission of Pakistan into the UN when it obtained independence in 1947. Afghanistan feels that the 2640 km long “Durand Line” set up in 1893, merely demarcated spheres of influence and cannot be accepted as an international border because it cuts through Pashtun tribal lands. Afghanistan claims almost the whole of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and parts of Baluchistan as part of its own territory.

Pakistan had created the Taliban in the 1990s so that it could rule Afghanistan by proxy, and the Taliban was successful in capturing power in Afghanistan in 1996 and ruled till 2001. At that time, Pakistan joined “The Global war on Terror” and supported US forces to defeat the Taliban. However, it secretly kept nurturing training, arming and equipping the Taliban, which carried out attacks on the US supported Afghanistan government and NATO forces. In August 2021, the Taliban recaptured Kabul and became the defacto rulers of Afghanistan. Pakistan considered this a great triumph and General Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff and General Faiz Hameed, the ISI Chief were present to ensure smooth taking over of power by the Taliban.

However, the Taliban Pakistan relationship came under strain when the Taliban resisted Pakistani attempts to fence the Durand line. Armed clashes broke out between the Pakistani Army and Afghanistan forces in which there were heavy casualties on both sides.

The issue of deportation of Afghan migrants is another thorny question between the two sides. There were an estimated 3.5 million Afghan migrants living in Pakistan, since decades and some even born there. Since October 2023, Pakistan has started deporting Afghan immigrants claiming that they do not have enough documents. This deportation drive, which has intensified since November 2025 has led to an estimated one million Afghans being forced to go back to Afghanistan. This has exacerbated the bitterness between the Afghanistan government and Pakistan as the Taliban feel that this is a pressure tactic by Pakistan to make them toe Pakistan’s policies which they are unwilling to do. As per UNHRC about 1.5 million Afghan refugees have left Pakistan, voluntarily or by force between October 2023 and October 2025. About 2 million still remain in that country mostly in NWFP.

Ever since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, they have followed an orthodox version of Islam in which women are discriminated against and have virtually no human rights.

Earlier, the main source of income for the Afghan government were grants from abroad and income from opium cultivation. Denial of human rights to women and other barbaric policies have led to Western powers cutting off financial assistance to the Taliban government. The US has also disbanded USAID and other contributions to Afghanistan. As a result, the Taliban are facing a very serious resource crunch. Further, the Taliban in April 2022 implemented a strict, religiously motivated ban on the cultivation of opium poppy, leading to a dramatic 95% drop in its cultivation by late 2023. This has crippled the drug economy. So Afghanistan is in a precarious financial condition, with both sources of income i.e., poppy cultivation and international aid reducing considerably.

Pakistan has accused the Afghan government of supporting the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) and allowing it to use Afghan soil as a safe haven to plan and launch attacks across the border into Pakistan.

However, it is the official visit of Afghan foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to India from October 10-15, 2025, that has sparked consternation in Pakistan. Pakistan sees it as a betrayal or “namak haram” and reacted violently by carrying out airstrikes on Kabul, Khosht, Jalalabad and Paktika on 9th October. The clashes continued till 19 October, in which over a hundred personal from both sides were killed and another about 50 injured. Two leaders of the TTP were killed, but the main target of Pakistan, Noor Wali Masood, Chief of the TTP was not hurt as he was in Pakistan at that time. Since then, there has been a spate of attacks on the Pakistan army and para military Frontier Force units in NWFP and Baluchistan, leading to massive casualties on the Pakistani side. The Taliban have not backed down and sent their Commerce Minister Al Haji Nooruddin Azizi to India from 19th to 25th November 2025 to boost trade and International relations. India has also upgraded its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged Embassy on 21 October 2025.

Prognosis

The Pakistan Afghanistan relationship has plummeted sharply, as Pakistan feels that the Taliban which it nurtured for decades have turned against it and are becoming friendly to India, its arch-enemy. Pakistan feels bitter and is probably planning for a regime change in Afghanistan. The Taliban however reject these Pakistani claims. They assert that the Pakistan Army in fact is a “Naa Pak” that is impure army, bad Muslims if not Godless. They can (a) never accept that the Durand Line as a border (b) repeated incursions by Pakistani Army into North Waziristan like “Zerb-e-Azab” campaign of 2014 showed that the Pakistani Army carried out orders of American president, Barack Obama. Such incursions by Pakistani Army into Pashtun heartlands continue till today. (c) The Taliban have never forgotten that many of its members, including its founder Mullah Zaeff had been handed over to the Americans by the Pakistan Army, where they were tortured and humiliated at Guantanamo Bay. (d) Pakistan has broken a fundamental rule which violates both Shariyat and Pashtunwali code, which is that one does not handover a guest to the enemy.

Mullah Omar respected leader of the Taliban government during 1996–2001 preferred to fight the USA then handover Osama bin Laden. The Islamic State of Afghanistan would support the TTP, which would demand that Pakistan become an Islamic state implementing its version of Shariyat law. So although the Taliban ate Pakistani salt, they hold deep grudges against Pakistan and were never their “younger brothers” as claimed by Pakistan. The TTP, in fact is their ace to be used against Pakistan should the need arise.

In view of this, Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship is not likely to improve unless there is a regime change in Afghanistan. India has considerable goodwill in Afghanistan as it provides humanitarian assistance without any strings attached. Afghanistan suffers from severe water and electricity shortages but has neither the capacity not the capability to pay for hydroelectric projects. As a result water from the Kunar and Kabul rivers flows unhindered into Pakistan. It is estimated that as much as 20% of Pakistan’s water comes from Afghanistan. India has already built a few dams in Afghanistan like the India Friendship Dam across the Hariruid river and the Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmund. It should now propose to build a Kama Barrage on the Kunar river by an Indian company like NHPC or SJVN. It can also build bigger dams if Afghanistan agrees to give or lease out Bagram airbase, Kandahar airbase or Torinkot airbase on a 50 year lease to an Indian entity. Further, Afghanistan possesses large untapped resources of rare earth minerals estimated to be approximately 1.4 million metric tonnes worth trillions of dollars. The leases for these are given by the Taliban controlled Ministry of Mines and Petroleum. If some of these leases are given to Indian companies, then a kind of barter trade can be done by which India supplies hydroelectric power and other assistance while Afghanistan provides airbases and minerals to be extracted by Indian companies on a profit-sharing basis.

Further, the Afghan armed forces are at a handicap because they do not have much of an Air Force or air defence equipment. India can provide training to Afghanistan police and military officers and provide ADS equipment to the Afghan armed forces. Indian companies must be advised to strictly adhere to timelines if they are awarded projects in Afghanistan. Deft diplomacy is required if any such plans are to see fruition.



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★ Former Member, NSAB, New Delhi



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THE ADDIS ABABA-NEW DELHI CONVERGENCE: ENHANCING THE INDIA-ETHIOPIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

— Harsh Kothari*

The mid-December 2025 visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Addis Ababa to meet with Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed represents more than a routine diplomatic engagement; it marks a structural pivot in the geopolitical architecture of the Global South. For two millennia, the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean have carried trade and ideas between the Aksumite Empire and the Indian subcontinent. Today, those ancient currents are being replaced by high-speed digital information, modern trade and investment. The elevation of bilateral ties to a "Strategic Partnership" during this historic visit signals that both nations have recognized each other as pillars in a potential multipolar world.

Geopolitical Gravitas: Ethiopia as the African Hub

The geopolitical importance of Ethiopia cannot be overstated. Often referred to as the "Water Tower of Africa" and the cradle of human civilisation and African independence, Ethiopia sits at the strategic heart of the Horn of Africa, overlooking the vital maritime corridors of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has reasserted its role as a regional hegemon and a diplomatic anchor for the continent.

By hosting the headquarters of the African Union (AU), Addis

Ababa serves as the diplomatic capital of Africa. For India, a deep partnership with Ethiopia is a gateway to the broader African diplomatic corridor. This relationship allows New Delhi to project its influence and development models across the continent while respecting the principle of "African solutions to African problems." Although this visit was mostly bilateral, the optics have a multilateral impact.

A Multilateral Symphony: BRICS and the AU

The 2025 visit occurred in a unique multilateral context. Ethiopia's recent induction into the expanded BRICS+ framework has transformed the nature of its cooperation with India. No longer just a bilateral partner, Ethiopia is now a fellow traveler in the mission to reform global governance.

In the halls of the BRICS summits and the AU, India and Ethiopia provide a potential for a synchronized voice for the Global South. Ethiopia's ability to support India in multilateral diplomacy—particularly in advocating for a permanent seat for India at the UN Security Council—is bolstered by its own rising stature. Conversely, India's support for the AU's inclusion in the G20 also sends the positive signals of global inclusivity to Africa as a continent, Addis Ababa hosting the headquarters of AU may receive these signals with more nuance. Together, they act

as a bridge between the formidable economies of Asia and the emergence of Africa in the global economic scene, ensuring that the global financial and political systems are not skewed in favor of traditional powers.

The Strategic Shift: Beyond Traditional Diplomacy

The transition from a "long-standing friendship" to a "Strategic Partnership" is a legal and political upgrade of immense significance. In diplomatic parlance, a strategic partnership implies a commitment to regular, high-level institutional mechanisms and a long-term alignment of core national interests.

This elevation impacts diplomacy by moving beyond transactional trade. It encompasses various alignments in defence cooperation, and coordinated stances on climate justice. The December 2025 meeting established a Data Center at Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and formalized customs cooperation, proving that the partnership continues to be filled with potential through these symbolic engagements. This institutionalisation ensures that even as individual leaders change, the machinery of cooperation between Addis Ababa and New Delhi will continue to operate with high efficiency.

Partners in Modernity: Defense, IT, and Education

India's potential role as a partner in Ethiopia's modernization is perhaps most visible in the "three pillars" of cooperation: defense, education, and information technology.

* Defense: Following the inaugural Joint Defence Cooperation meeting in late 2025, the two countries are moving toward deeper military engagement and medical cooperation. India's expertise in manufacturing cost-effective, high-quality defense equipment offers Ethiopia a reliable alternative for its national security needs.

* Education: For decades, Indian teachers have been the backbone of Ethiopia's rural and urban schools. Today, this is being digitized. India's "Pan-African e-Network" and the doubling of scholarships for Ethiopian PhD students ensure that the next generation of Ethiopian scientists and leaders will have deep intellectual ties to India.

* IT and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI): Ethiopia is looking to cooperate with India; as Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed mentioned in his speech at the State Banquet hosted for Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi, entrepreneurs from Addis Ababa to Bengaluru can build globally competitive companies where young people are ready to innovate and lead the future. This statement speaks a lot about the capacity the two countries have to cooperate in the world of technology. This capacity is both at government as well as people-to-people levels.

A Civilizational Tapestry

The current diplomatic success rests on a foundation of civilizational affinity. The historical ties between the two are among the oldest in the world, dating back to the 1st Century AD when Aksumite merchants traded gold and ivory for Indian silk. The "Teacher Legacy" of the 1960s, where thousands of Indians helped build Ethiopia's modern education system, created a reservoir of cultural goodwill that few other nations can match.

This shared history is not just a footnote; it is the reason why an Indian Prime Minister is received with such warmth in Ethiopia. It is a relationship of equals, rooted in the shared experience of anti-colonial struggle and a mutual desire for self-reliance.

The Silent Engine: Private Indian Investment

While government-to-government (G2G) ties are currently at an all-time high, the true "silent engine" of the relationship has been the private Indian investor and the old Indian business community that has been residing in Ethiopia since generations. Although these are just 40-odd families, they symbolise the true people-to-people diplomacy between the two countries. With over 600 Indian companies operating in Ethiopia as per the Ethiopian Investment Commission and an investment portfolio in the billions of dollars, India is consistently one of the top three foreign investors in the country.

What is remarkable is that much of this investment occurred before the formal strategic elevation. Indian entrepreneurs in the manufacturing, agriculture, services, trade, and mining (mining also has a lot of future prospects of cooperation that needs to be worked on) have integrated into the Ethiopian economy, creating over 75,000 local jobs. These investors have shown a unique resilience, staying in the country through various political and economic cycles without the state backing of India, which is seen in the investments of other global powers. Their success is a testament to the organic compatibility of the two economies and the welcoming environment provided by the Ethiopian people and government.

Conclusion: A Vision for 2026 and Beyond

The Abiy-Modi meeting has reminded us the capability of the trajectory of India-Ethiopia relations. By acknowledging Ethiopia's current global political and diplomatic stature—as a strategic partner and a BRICS power—India has signaled a new era of respectful, South-South cooperation.

As Ethiopia continues its journey toward becoming an African economic and diplomatic power, and India aims to enhance its global position by forming key strategic partnerships, their paths are now officially entwined. The strategic partnership of 2025 is not the end of a process, but the beginning of a coordinated effort to rewrite the rules of the 21st century in favor of the developing world. In the heart of the Horn of Africa and the soul of the Indian subcontinent, a new axis of stability and growth is quietly writing a new history.



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* CEO, Mohan Group of Companies



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India-Bangladesh Trade Defies Political Strains Amid Calls to Halt Rice Exports

More than 13,000 tonnes of rice were exported from India to Bangladesh over a four-month period between August and November 2025. Despite the anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh following Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, trade between the two countries have continued their upward momentum. During FY 2024-25, Bangladesh exported USD 1.76 billion worth of goods to India, which is a 12.4 per cent increase compared to the previous fiscal year. This includes an increase in the export of footwear by 43 per cent, fish exports by 42 per cent and that of ready-made garments (RMGs) by 17.38 per cent. Nevertheless, a section of exporters wants the Indian government to ban rice exports to Bangladesh following attacks on Indians, particularly the Assistant High Commissioner's Office in Chattogram in December 2025.



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India and Bangladesh Mark Victory Day with Shared Remembrance of 1971

India extended greetings to Bangladesh on the occasion of Victory Day, commemorating the end of the 1971 Liberation War. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar conveyed his wishes to Bangladesh's interim government and people. As part of annual commemorations, both countries exchanged war veterans and serving military officers to participate in celebrations in Dhaka and Kolkata. Eight Indian war veterans and two officers travelled to Bangladesh, while an equal Bangladeshi delegation visited India. These exchanges symbolise the enduring India–Bangladesh friendship and honour the shared sacrifices made during the Liberation War, reinforcing historical bonds rooted in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence.



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Myanmar–India Dialogue Reaffirms Commitment to Deepening Strategic Partnership

The 3rd Myanmar–India Bilateral Dialogue was held in Yangon on November 06, 2025, jointly organised by the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) and the India Foundation under the theme of “Myanmar-India: Strengthening Bilateral Partnership for Sustained Prosperity”. The Dialogue featured four thematic discussions reflecting the key pillars of Myanmar-India relations and brought together officials, diplomats, scholars, and policy experts to review cooperation across economic connectivity, security, sustainable development, and people-to-people ties. Keynote addresses were delivered by Ambassador Preeti Saran and Ambassador Abhay Thakur, Ambassador of India to Myanmar. A Letter of Cooperation was signed to institutionalise the dialogue as an annual forum, underscoring a shared commitment to sustained engagement and strategic collaboration.



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India and Myanmar Explore Deeper Educational Cooperation under ITEC

India and Myanmar held discussions in Yangon on November 17 to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the education sector under the India Technical and Economic Cooperation programme. The talks took place between Indian Ambassador Abhay Thakur and Myanmar's Union Education Minister Chaw Chaw Sein. Discussions focused on expanding technical assistance, English-language training, educational exchanges, and potential collaboration with India's Central Board of Secondary Education. The engagement reflects India's broader capacity-building outreach to Myanmar and aligns with New Delhi's Act East approach, with education seen as a key pillar for long-term people-to-people ties and institutional cooperation between the two countries.



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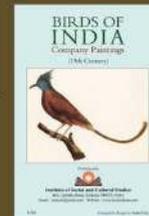
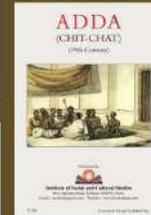
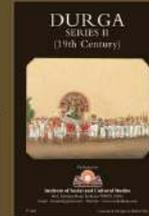
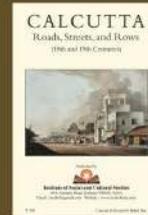
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