

Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations: A Post-2024 Assessment

Faiza Abid*

Abstract

The Pakistan-Bangladesh bilateral relationship has long been overshadowed by historical legacies, particularly the event of 1971, shaping mutual perceptions and foreign policy orientations. However, the political transformation in Bangladesh following the ousting of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 has opened new avenues for recalibrating ties. This paper centres on three core research questions: i. How emerging economic, political, and security interests are redefining Pakistan-Bangladesh engagement?; ii. How Bangladesh's evolving relationship with India is influencing Dhaka's recalibration toward Islamabad?; and iii. What structural and political impediments continue to constrain the institutionalisation of a durable partnership between Dhaka and Islamabad? Employing a qualitative research methodology, including document analysis, case studies, and expert interviews, the paper underscores the necessity of institutionalising economic partnerships, minilateral frameworks, and strategic security coordination between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations, Geopolitical Realignment, Economic and Security Cooperation, Diplomatic Engagement, Regional Stability.

Introduction

For long, the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh has been defined by tumultuous history, with the spectre of the 1971 war looming large over subsequent diplomatic interactions. The events, marked by communal strife, massive displacement and diplomatic

* The author is Research Assistant, Centre for Aerospace and Security and Studies (CASS), Lahore. Email:faizaabid43@gmail.com

confrontations, created enduring collective memories that continued to influence the political mindset as well as foreign policy decision-making of both the countries.¹ Seminal work by scholars, such as Sisson and Rose have examined how events of those times, despite the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in the aftermath of the war, have created a divide so profound that it has repeatedly thwarted reconciliation efforts and substantive bilateral cooperation.²

The South Asian political landscape underwent a drastic shift in August 2024, when an uprising spearheaded by students led to the ousting of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a regime spread over 15 years,³ had positioned Bangladesh towards an India-centric foreign policy.⁴ Hasina's administration was marked by widespread engagement with New Delhi in the form of trade, security, and cultural initiatives, systematically marginalising Pakistan and affirming longstanding public notions of antagonism. However, recent political transition, now under the control of an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus and supported by emerging political forces, provides a distinctive and historic transformative opportunity for Bangladesh and Pakistan to reevaluate their historical relations.⁵ These include the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP),⁶ which sprouted out of protest leadership, the broad based civic

¹ Amna Mahmood, Sadaf Farooq and Nadia Awan, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: A Hostage to History," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 52 (2015), https://www.aijernet.com/journals/Vol_5_No_2_April_2015/10.pdf

² Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (University of California Press, 1991).

³ International Crisis Group, *A New Era in Bangladesh? The First Hundred Days of Reform*, Asia Report No. 344 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 14 November 2024), https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/344-bangladesh-hundred-days_0.pdf.

⁴ Khalid Ibn Muneer, "Bangladesh's Political Shift and Its Impact on South Asia," Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, September 18, 2024, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/bangladesh-political-shift-and-its-impact-on-south-asia/>.

⁵ Paul Staniland, "Bangladesh Is Well-Positioned to Build a New Political Area. Can It Seize the Moment?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 15, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/10/bangladesh-hasina-government-politics-what-next?lang=en>.

⁶ NCP is a youth-led political party in Bangladesh, established after the July 2024 uprising to channel student activism into formal politics. Led by Nahid Islam with a core team of former protest leaders, it seeks to challenge entrenched party dominance and promote participatory democratic reform.

movement called Jatiy Nagorik Committee (JNC),⁷ and the reinstatement of peripheral Islamist groups, most notably Jamaat-e-Islami (JI).⁸ These forces, despite their diverse ideologies, are all indicators of a change in previous status-quo of the Awami League-BNP domination in Bangladesh's political landscape.

This shift not only represents domestic political realignment in Bangladesh; instead, it exhibits a wider geopolitical change in Bangladesh's foreign policy posture. As Dhaka seeks to diversify its strategic alignments, there comes an increasing likelihood of reconfiguring its foreign policy away from over dependence on India. On the other hand, Pakistan, which has been industriously trying to restore its relevance in South Asia as a mean to counter India's predominant influence, now has an opportunity to forge closer ties with Bangladesh.

This study hypothesises that the transition unfolding in Bangladesh creates a strategic opening for Pakistan-Bangladesh cooperation across economic, strategic, and diplomatic domains. Despite the prevalence of persistent historical grievances and nationalist pressure, the evolving dynamics are likely to pave the way for pragmatic, multidimensional engagement between the two nations.

The research analyses the evolving dynamics of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations by probing some key research issues. First, it weighs economic, political, and security interests that could potentially drive closer bilateral relations between the two countries. It also examines Bangladesh's efforts for strategic distance from India, highlighting specific policy changes or initiatives that promoted re-evaluation of foreign policy. Lastly, it identifies major impediments and constraints that could stand in the way of establishment of robust bilateral partnership, along with and outlines a way forward for both nations.

⁷ JNC, formed on 8 September 2024, is a broad civic coalition of student leaders, lawyers, activists, and professionals aimed at restoring inclusive governance and accountability in post-uprising Bangladesh. Convened by Nasir Uddin Patwary with key figures like Akhtar Hossain and Samanta Sharmin, it mobilized mass support that paved the way for the formation of the NCP.

⁸ Mohammad Amimul Ahsan, "Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh in the Post-July 2024 Uprising Era: An Analytical Study of Political and Social Challenges," *Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan Journal for Human and Social Studies* 63 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.15849/ZJHSS.251130.08>.

A qualitative research methodology that incorporates document analysis, case studies, thematic review, and the application of triangulation. Historical documents, policy papers, and scholarly literature provided the context of the paper, while case studies provided insights into the pattern of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Due to contemporary nature of the topic at hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key experts to gather primary data and analyse key trends. Lastly, triangulation of multiple sources such as official government statements, media reports, and analysis by think tanks, was employed to ensure reliability and validity of findings.

Historic Overview of Bangladesh's Approaches towards Pakistan

Since Bangladesh's independence, different governments have approached for strengthening relations with Pakistan in varying ways, shaped by their ideological leanings and regional strategies. Awami League (AL), rooted in its pro-liberation stance, has traditionally maintained an adversarial posture towards Pakistan, often leveraging nationalist sentiments for domestic political gains.⁹ In contrast, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has historically been more open to engagement with Pakistan, reflecting its opposition to Awami League's policies and alignment with conservative factions. Military regimes, such as those led by General Zia ur Rahman and General Ershad, pursued pragmatic foreign policies, balancing relations with both Pakistan and India while positioning Bangladesh as an independent regional player.

Sheikh Hasina's first term (1996–2001) followed a measured approach, maintaining diplomatic ties with Pakistan while strengthening relations with India. However, her second term, beginning in 2009, marked a decisive shift, with her government consolidating power through authoritarian measures, including corruption, systematic human rights abuses, and suppression of opposition voices.¹⁰ Her government

⁹ Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari, Shujat Ali and Inam Ul Haq, "Realigning Alliances in South Asia: Exploring the Dynamics of Pakistan–Bangladesh Relations in a Post-Hasina Era," *Journal of Regional Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2025): 94-109, <https://doi.org/10.62843/jrsr/2025.4a055>.

¹⁰ Asharaf-ud-Doula (Former Ambassador of Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 16, 2024.

successfully excluded opposition parties, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, from the political scene. Executions of Jamaat leaders alleging war crimes, contrary to the overall amnesty declared by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the 1970s, further polarised the country.¹¹ India was the pivot for Hasina's long-term grip on power, offering diplomatic, political, and economic support, which heavily influenced the foreign policy trajectory of Bangladesh.¹²

Multiple reasons accounted for Bangladesh's alignment with India under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. First, India extended political patronage to the Awami League government, which allowed Hasina to stabilise her government, especially through contested elections. India played the role of a de facto supporter of Hasina's extended stay in power through the Bangladesh general elections of 2014, 2018 and 2024, which were both tainted by credible allegations of vote-rigging.¹³ Second, when it comes to trade, Bangladesh is India's biggest trading partner in the subcontinent. In return, India is the second-largest export partner for Bangladesh, making up 12 per cent of its total exports.¹⁴ In the fiscal year 2023, the total trade turnover between the two countries reached an impressive US\$14.22 billion, a dramatic increase as compared to pre-Hasina era.¹⁵ For example, in FY 2007–08 Bangladesh imported about US\$3.38 billion worth of goods from India while exporting only around US\$0.36 billion, illustrating the much smaller scale of bilateral trade before the subsequent expansion.¹⁶ Third, India and Bangladesh

¹¹ Maryam Mastoor, "Awami League's Politics of Vengeance," *Spotlight on Regional Affairs* 35, no. 8 (August 2016).

¹² Mohammed Salimullah, *India-Bangladesh Relations: A Historical Perspective and Present Realities*, December 6, 2024, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5047930>.

¹³ Mohammed Salimullah, *India-Bangladesh Relations: A Historical Perspective and Present Realities*, December 6, 2024, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5047930>.

¹⁴ S. M. Saifee Islam, "Bangladesh-India Trade Cooperation: Expanding Market for Mutual Benefit," *The Geopolitics*, January 15, 2024, <https://thegeopolitics.com/bangladesh-india-trade-cooperation-expanding-market-for-mutual-benefit/>.

¹⁵ Islam, "Bangladesh-India Trade Cooperation: Expanding Market for Mutual Benefit."

¹⁶ Badrul Ahsan, "Bangladesh-India Trade Dynamics," *Financial Express*, April 7, 2012, <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/education-youth/bangladesh-trades-gap-with-india-reaches-new-high>.

institutionalised security cooperation, leading to significant developments in military and strategic collaboration, allowing India to exert strategic influence on Bangladesh.¹⁷ This was supplemented by bilateral military exercises, intelligence-sharing and cooperative border patrols.¹⁸

New Realignment and Bangladesh's Evolving Foreign Policy

Bangladesh's foreign policy went under a strategic recalibration, characterised by its gradual re-orientation away from its conventional India-centric posture to a more diversified and multipolar engagement strategy.¹⁹ This was the result of the interaction of various factors such as economic conditions, political discontent, and transforming regional dynamics, ultimately leading to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina from power. On domestic front, Hasina's highly centralised and coercive model of governance eroded institutional legitimacy. For example, repression against opposition movements, manipulation of elections, and restriction of fundamental media freedom led to alienation of crucial social constituencies, such as students, professionals, and certain segments of military.²⁰ Simultaneously, mounting concerns over corruption, patronage-driven allocation of resources, and elite capture consolidated a perception of moral decay within the Awami League.

These institutional fractures coincided with the external narrative of dependency on India, which was viewed as a significant factor in extending Hasina's tenure through economic, political, and diplomatic support. Ultimately, the convergence of anti-government mobilisation and

¹⁷ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "India-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation: Coming of Age, at Last?," orfonline.org, December 4, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-defence-cooperation-coming-of-age-at-last>.

¹⁸ Aftabuddin Ahammad, "*India-Bangladesh Conflict: An Overview*," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 5 (September-October 2024): 1-14, <https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2024/5/28454.pdf>.

¹⁹ Bian Sai, "Uncertain Diplomatic Shift: Bangladesh's Foreign Policy and Its Internal Logic," *ISAS Insights* no. 761 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, January 24, 2025: 4, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ISAS-Insights-761.pdf>

²⁰ Maksudul Shadat Akash and Md. Toufiqul Sharif, "From Reform to Revolt: The Complex Path Leading to Sheikh Hasina's Political Fall," *European Journal of Law and Political Science* 4, no. 1 (February 2025): 21-23, <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejpolitics.2025.4.1.163>.

nationalistic pushback against India transformed a domestic political situation in a broader crisis of sovereignty and national identity.

Even though India-Bangladesh relations have historically remained close, various material and ideational factors have gradually led to consolidation of anti-Indian sentiments in Dhaka. Factors, such as border killings, trade imbalance, and India's growing interference in Bangladesh's domestic political affairs, have all contributed to public unease.²¹ For example, Modi's visit to Bangladesh and India's self-declaration as the "saviour" of Bangladesh's independence also created nationalist pushback, particularly among the youth and opposition constituencies.²² Even though India provided support to separatist groups during 1971, but it also attempted to dominate Bangladesh economically and politically post-independence, which was not welcomed by various segments of Bangladeshi society.²³ This realisation played a crucial role in driving a shift in post-Hasina Bangladesh's foreign policy, particularly in terms of asserting its independence from Indian influence.

On the economic front, trade imbalances, unresolved water-sharing disputes, and inequalities in border management contributed to a sense of economic marginalisation in Bangladesh. Dhaka remained heavily dependent on the Indian market for export, but tariff and non-tariff barriers constrained Dhaka's ability to diversify trade on equitable terms. Furthermore, India maintained control over the upper riparian flows of the shared rivers, which has led to resurgent tensions over resource governance, especially over the Teesta River.²⁴

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) introduced by Modi government also fuelled tensions, and fears of forced displacement created resentment. There is a fear in Bangladesh that the NRC and the CAA may trigger an exodus of Bengali-

²¹ Md. Shah Alam, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Trends and Challenges," *International Journal of Research*, no. 12 (December 2019): 243-51, <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v7.i12.2019.318>.

²² Asharaf Qureshi (Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 10, 2024.

²³ Asharaf-ud-Doula (Former Ambassador of Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 16, 2024.

²⁴ Md. Obaidullah and Md. Riday Howlader, "Assessing Geopolitical and Socio-Economic Consequences of India-Bangladesh Water Disputes," *Discover Global Society* 3 (2025): art. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00137-0>.

speaking people from Assam and create a Rohingya-like crisis.²⁵ Religious tensions have also tested relations. The arrest of Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das on a sedition charge and past events like the 2021 anti-Hindu riots have been used by Indian political forces to justify tightened border controls, which have added to charges of selective intervention in Bangladesh's domestic affairs.²⁶

Against this backdrop, student protests over quota reforms and general discontent with Hasina's rule demonstrated the volatility of Bangladeshi politics. The swift mobilisation of protests proved that even deeply entrenched political figures like Hasina could be challenged by strong domestic opposition.²⁷ The ousting of Hasina and the appointment of Dr. Muhammad Yunus as Bangladesh's interim leader in August 2024 was a turning point in Dhaka's diplomatic path.

In the context of upcoming elections in Bangladesh, such sentiments will serve as both a mobilising frame and a constraining force. Opposition parties and populist movements could potentially use an anti-Indian narrative to galvanise mass support, thereby presenting themselves as guardian of state sovereignty in the face of perceived external interference. Such development is likely to prompt even mainstream political parties to reassess their policies vis-à-vis India. Therefore, deep-seated resentment against India could restrict the strategic latitude of Bangladesh's foreign policy in the post-Hasina era.²⁸ For example, economic interdependence calls for continued Bangladesh-India engagement in areas such as trade, energy and connectivity. However, the domestic political cost of perceived acquiescence will limit the scope for greater cooperation. Therefore, anti-Indian sentiments within Bangladesh does not solely serve as a reactive

²⁵ Haroon Habib in Dhaka, "Neighbour's Worries over CAA and NRC," *Frontline*, March 13, 2024, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/neighbours-worries/article64757060.ece>.

²⁶ John Curtis, "Bangladesh: The Fall of the Hasina Government and Recent Political Developments" (House of Commons Library, January 23, 2025), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10096/CBP-10096.pdf>.

²⁷ Asharaf Qureshi (Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 10, 2024.

²⁸ Saqlain Rizvi, "Navigating New Realities in India-Bangladesh Ties," *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), June 20, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/navigating-new-realities-india-bangladesh-ties>.

phenomenon, it is an important structural variable shaping Dhaka's foreign policy trajectory and post-Hasina national identity.

Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations in the Post-2024 Era

With the ouster of Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League government in August after 15 years of rule, the country's political landscape and diplomacy have taken a new turn. The following section will examine Pakistan-Bangladesh relations in the post-2024 period, highlighting opportunities for collaboration across economic, political, and security dimensions.

Economic Cooperation

The economic dimension of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations has gained traction in the recent times. Despite this, the bilateral trade between the two countries remains considerably low. Valued at US\$782 million between 2022 and 2023, the trade volume is far below than its actual potential, especially in the wake of economic synergies and complementarities between Pakistan and Bangladesh.²⁹ While reciprocal political gestures have conveyed a forward-looking momentum to their alliance, deep-rooted systematic and institutional constraints, regulatory barricades, and enduring diplomatic divide have defined the contours of trade relations and exchanges between the two states in the past.

The most notable transformation in their economic partnership has emerged with the growing acknowledgement that financial imperatives surpass conventional political motives. In this regard, at the sidelines of the 11th Summit of the Developing Eight (D-8) Countries in Cairo, Prime Ministers of Pakistan Shahbaz Sharif and Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunas met, expressing their commitment to boost trade and travel between the two

²⁹ Arzam Murad Bajwa, "Exploring the Avenues of Cooperation Between Pakistan and Bangladesh," *Pakistan Today*, February 9, 2025, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/02/09/exploring-the-avenues-of-cooperation-between-pakistan-and-bangladesh/#:~:text=The%20trade%20volume%20between%20Pakistan,the%20bilatera1%20trade%20between%20them>

states.³⁰ This was followed by concrete steps taken by Bangladesh, including the elimination of obligatory 100 per cent physical inspection of imports from Pakistan and the closing down of a specialised screening station at Dhaka airport which conducted enhanced identity verification and security checks on passengers arriving from Pakistan.³¹ These are reflective of a change in Bangladesh's strategy towards Pakistan, one which appears visibly business-like. However, notwithstanding these positive moves, the absence of a clear-cut bilateral trade agreement remains a major challenge. The reliance on the larger South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) framework has been made obsolete by the presence of non-tariff barriers. Indicatively, Bangladesh formerly demanded 100 per cent manual inspection of Pakistani imports, which drastically inflated the costs.³² Another challenge faced by Pakistani exporters is rigorous quality requirements, such as the phytosanitary certificate, compulsory labelling and packaging requirements, and a certificate of analysis of agricultural products. These non-tariff barriers effectively negate the usefulness of SAFTA as it restricts the possibilities of meaningful trade growth.

The composition of trade between the two countries highlights major structural differences. Pakistan enjoys a trade surplus, exporting cement, textiles, and agricultural products, while Bangladesh mainly exports jute, fabrics and drugs. This difference, while reflecting each economy's inherent strengths, also points to a lack of trade diversification. However, there have been 27 per cent increase in Pakistan-Bangladesh bilateral trade between August and December 2024, particularly in the sectors of construction materials, food items, and information technology, reflects a changing trend of economic activity.³³ Pakistan's stated intention to double trade in a year

³⁰ "Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan," n.d., https://www.pmo.gov.pk/news_details.php?news_id=1307.

³¹ Muhammad Saleh Zaafir, "Bangladesh Eases Clearance of All Goods From Pakistan," *News*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1236319-bangladesh-eases-clearance-of-all-goods-from-pakistan>.

³² Reyad Hossain, "NBR Lifts 100% Inspection for Goods Imported From Pakistan," *Business Standard*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/nbr-scaps-mandatory-physical-inspection-imports-pakistan-955616>

³³ Ashraf Khan, "What Bangladesh's Resumption of Direct Trade With Pakistan After 53 Years Means for the Region," *Straits Times*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/bangladesh-resumes-direct-trade-with-pakistan-after-53-years-what-the-move-means-for-the-region>

reflects its determination to bolster bilateral relations; however, due to historical fluctuations, such intentions are dependent on the maintenance of favourable policy interventions. In order to sustain and expand this positive momentum, both countries could benefit from structured platforms, such as Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which encourage joint and targeted industrial cooperation.

Another major advancement in Pakistan-Bangladesh economic relations has been the harbouring of Pakistan's cargo ship at Bangladesh's Chittagong port, making its first return since 1971.³⁴ Previously, their bilateral trade has depended on intermediary shipment through ports in Singapore and Malaysia, resulting in substantial costs, operational delays, and logistical hindrance. Therefore, a direct maritime linkage represents a significant overhaul, which will not only diminish the role of third parties but also increase supply chain efficiency. Moreover, the tangible outcomes of this advancement expand past reducing cost, it signals normalisation of trade etiquettes. In addition, the re-emergence of direct government-to-government trade, as signalled by the purchase of 50,000 tonnes of rice by Bangladesh from Pakistan, signals an opening up of economic exchanges.³⁵

Pakistan-Bangladesh sectoral dynamics of trade reveal areas of untapped potential. Bangladesh's pharmaceutical and textile industries need raw materials available at competitive prices from Pakistan. In return, Pakistan's industrial machinery and agricultural produce present alternatives to Bangladesh's current sources of imports. In 2023, Bangladesh imported raw cotton worth over US\$300 million, but hardly any of it was from Pakistan. Instead, India was Bangladesh's sole largest source of imports, bearing witness to Pakistan's poor contribution to a market where it enjoys a comparative advantage. While trade experts estimate that bilateral trade can reach up to US\$3 billion within next three

³⁴ Najmus Sakib, "Pakistan, Bangladesh Establish Direct Maritime Link for First Time Since Relations Severed in 1971," November 13, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-bangladesh-establish-direct-maritime-link-for-first-time-since-relations-severed-in-1971/3393312>.

³⁵ "Pakistan, Bangladesh Resume Direct Trade After More Than 50 Years," *Business Recorder*, February 24, 2025, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40349771/pakistan-bangladesh-resume-direct-trade-after-more-than-50-years>

years if facilitated, persistent structural barriers make this projection more aspirational than a near-term reality.³⁶

A new dimension of economic cooperation between Bangladesh and Pakistan lies in potential strategic alliances, including Bangladesh-Pakistan-China trilateral coordination and alliance with the Gulf States. The rising axis of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China has the potential to present an alternative structure for economic cooperation, riding on China's expanding economic leverage in South Asia. Bangladesh has been a pro-active participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2016, securing more than US\$24 billion worth of investment commitments to infrastructure and energy schemes.³⁷ With Pakistan's pivotal position in China's regional connectivity initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can potentially facilitate higher economic integration between Bangladesh and China, enabling Bangladesh to enjoy land connectivity with the Central Asia via Pakistani transit links.

Political Cooperation

With regards to diplomatic and political cooperation, Bangladesh and Pakistan are moving towards a more realistic and pragmatic model of cooperation, a significant departure from the previous era of estrangement. High-level political interactions between senior leadership of both countries are a defining feature of this transforming landscape. For example, on March 8, 2025, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Bangladesh's Advisor on Foreign Affairs conducted a dialogue on the occasion of OIC summit in Jeddah.³⁸ This represents how both states are utilising multilateral frameworks to strengthen their diplomatic ties; this is particularly pertinent since previously there was hesitation to partake in

³⁶ Engineer Hussain Ahmad Siddiqui, "Reviving Pakistan-Bangladesh Trade," *News International*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/money-matters/1281006-reviving-pakistan-bangladesh-trade>.

³⁷ Munira Jahan and Md Farid Hossain, "Chinese Strategic Hedge in Bangladesh Through Investment," *Millennial Asia*, March 14, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09763996241233819>.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Deputy Prime Minister's Meeting With the Advisor for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh," n.d., <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/deputy-prime-ministers-meeting-with-the-advisor-for-foreign-affairs-of-bangladesh>.

direct bilateral exchange of views. Furthermore, on August 23-24, 2025, Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Ishaq Dar paid the first high-level visit to Dhaka since 2012, reflecting both countries' renewed dedication to establish a formal political relationship. During the talks, Dar engaged in top-tier consultations with the interim government of Bangladesh, emphasising on the normalisation of trade, free movement of labour and regional connectivity. The visit also included discussions on how to reopen closed communication links between the two countries and increase cooperation in multilateral forums. This re-engagement has been an indication that there is a conscious effort by both parties to normalise relations following years of being in minimal contact.

Another classical indicator of political détente has been elimination of enduring travel restrictions. Beginning in 2018, operations of direct flights between the two states were suspended indefinitely and rigorous visa requirements were put in place, thereby enhancing diplomatic isolation. However, in the post-2024 period, Bangladesh's interim government's move to revoke security clearances for Pakistani nationals followed by Pakistan mutual cancellation of visa charges and security checks for Bangladeshi visitors, is a calibrated confidence-building measure.³⁹ With free flow of people and goods, both states are laying the foundation for greater collaboration in financial, educational, and cultural domains, which have, for long, been stymied by political distrust and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Additionally, Pakistan is employing educational diplomacy as a means to expand its influence. The state has announced awarding of 300 scholarships in Pakistani universities to be availed by Bangladeshi students.⁴⁰ In the similar manner, Pakistan's high commissioner in Dhaka, Syed Ahmed Maroof, visited the Urdu Department of Dhaka University.⁴¹

³⁹ "Bangladesh Visa Rules Relaxed for Pakistanis, Sparking Security Concerns in the Region," *South Asia Press*, December 13, 2024,

<https://www.southasiapress.org/2024/12/13/bangladesh-visa-rules-relaxed-for-pakistanis-sparking-security-concerns-in-the-region/>.

⁴⁰ Shahjahan Khurram, "Pakistan Launches Scholarships for 300 Bangladeshi Students Amid Push to Forge Closer Ties," *Arab News*, December 14, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2583025/pakistan#:~:text=ISLAMABAD%3A%20Pakistan's%20government%20this%20week,under%20a%20new%20Bangladeshi%20administration>.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "High Commissioner Visited Dhaka University and Met With Vice Chancellor," n.d., <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/high-commissioner-visited-dhaka-university-and-met-with-vice-chancellor/>

This initiative is highly significant because, historically, Urdu language was perceived as a badge of political subjection by the East Pakistan.

Even with an improvement in bilateral relations, regional power dynamics remain to dictate both the scope and nature of cooperation between the two states. Frustration has been engendered in Pakistan and Bangladesh over the failure of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to serve as a useful multilateral forum. However, following the Monsoon Revolution, the two states have shown a renewed interest in reviving SAARC, especially by supporting the holding of the long-delayed summit.⁴² This reflects a pragmatic recognition that a functional SAARC could still offer a stabilising regional platform. Simultaneously, the two countries have started exploring alternative multilateral frameworks, reflective of broader regional realignment away from multilateralism towards minilateralism. While Pakistan and Bangladesh have not yet joined any formal economic or security minilateral frameworks, the declining relevance of SAARC has provided a window for alternative alignments outside classical regional forums. At the international level, Pakistan and Bangladesh also have an opportunity to promote common interests within multilateral frameworks, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations (UN).

Even though the current state of strategic alignment might not permit complete political solidarity, it represents a period of political détente, whereby both states are likely to cooperate on the issue-specific and goal-oriented basis.

Security and Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation in the post-2024 period between Pakistan and Bangladesh is emerging as a benchmark in South Asian security politics. One of the most notable aspects of the changing defence relations between the two countries is Bangladesh's desire to procure the JF-17 Thunder

commissioner-visited-dhaka-university-and-met-with-vice-chancellor?mission=Dhaka%20

⁴² Irshad Hussain, "Pakistan, Bangladesh Discuss Revitalizing SAARC - TDI," *The Diplomatic Insight*, October 26, 2024, <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/pakistan-bangladesh-discuss-revitalizing-saarc/>.

Fighter aircraft, jointly developed by Pakistan and China.⁴³ As part of its Forces Goal 2030 Programme, Bangladesh plans to modernise its air force by phasing out older systems such as the F-7 and MiG-29, and the potential acquisition of JF-17 aircraft for the Bangladesh Air Force fulfils these objectives, serving as a more practical and cost-effective substitute that can easily integrate in its existing infrastructure.⁴⁴

In addition, Dhaka's intent to purchase the jet represents a shift in strategy where Bangladesh is attempting to lower its military dependence on New Delhi, allowing for a more comprehensive security strategy to be formulated. Bangladesh has also shown interests in Pakistan's defence industry, including locally developed military hardware and technological advancements.⁴⁵ Its admiration of the innovative Pakistan Air Force model indicates a wider scope of cooperation than the purchase of the JF-17.

In another crucial step to enhance military-to-military relations, Bangladesh has accepted Pakistan's proposal to train the Bangladeshi army.⁴⁶ This exhibits a stark departure from Dhaka's previous policy of restricting its military interactions to countries, including India, China, and the West. Bangladesh also participated in Pakistan-hosted AMAN 2025 naval exercise. Participating in the exercise signalled strong will of Bangladesh to engage in defence field with Pakistan for regional security and shared challenges.⁴⁷ Although, every year three Bangladeshi officers

⁴³ “Bangladesh’s Pursuit of Sino-Pak JF-17 Jets Sparks India’s Fury as Regional Tensions Soar,” *Defence Security Asia*, March 8, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/bangladesh-pursuit-of-sino-pak-jf-17-jets-sparks-indias-fury-as-regional-tensions-soar/>.

⁴⁴ Jérôme Brahy, “Bangladesh Could Purchase up to 32 Pakistani JF-17 Thunder Fighter Jets to Modernize Its Air Force,” n.d., <https://armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2025/bangladesh-could-purchase-up-to-32-pakistani-jf-17-thunder-fighter-jets-to-modernize-its-air-force>.

⁴⁵ “Bangladesh Military Officials Express Interest in JF-17 Thunder Fighter Jet,” *The Express Tribune*, January 15, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2522349/bangladesh-military-officials-express-interest-in-jf-17-thunder-fighter-jet>.

⁴⁶ Amjad M. Safi, “Pakistan’s Outreach to Bangladesh: An Analysis,” *Strategic Analysis* 49, no. 1 (January 2025): 83-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2025.2500267>

⁴⁷ Sohini Bose, “Changing Equations: The Bangladesh-Pakistan Defence Realignment,” *Observer Research Foundation*, July 6, 2025,

come to National Defence University (NDU), Pakistan, for their War Course and defence cooperation under the ambit of the UN peacekeeping missions; however, the recent exercise represents the closest and institutionalised level of defence cooperation between the two states since 1971. These expanding defence ties, particularly in the context of regional instability, provide a timely opportunity for both countries to deepen collaboration in counterterrorism and intelligence sharing, areas where Pakistan has considerable operational experience could be of strategic relevance to Bangladesh's evolving security landscape.

India's Rising Threat Perception vis-à-vis Pakistan-Bangladesh Cooperation

India considers growing military relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh as a contributing factor to border insecurity and changing population dynamics in its north-eastern states. Despite no tangible evident to support the claims, India labels joint trainings of Pakistani and Bangladeshi defence officers in Bangladesh as a threat to its security. To keep an eye on these training activities, India has enhanced its broader security arrangements, increased troop deployments, and implemented greater surveillance along its north-eastern borders. India also fears greater Chinese military presence in the region in the face of strengthening Bangladesh-Pakistan ties. With the change of regime in Bangladesh and the new government leaning close towards Pakistan, India fears losing a long-standing ally to China-dominated bloc in the region.⁴⁸ Despite Bangladesh's continuous reiterations of an autonomous and independent foreign policy, India perceives its defence interactions with Pakistan, and possibly China, in the context of great power competition.

Therefore, the possibility of a formal strategic trilateral alliance between, Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh has become a source of growing concern for New Delhi. Even though such an arrangement has not been institutionalised in a traditional sense, several characteristics of

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/changing-equations-the-bangladesh-pakistan-defence-realignment>.

⁴⁸ Al. Amin, "Sino-Indian Rivalry in Indo-Pacific and Bangladesh's Geo-Strategic Hedging in Response to Its Security Threats," *Discover Global Society* 3, no. 1 (2025): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00144-1>.

this emerging axis are being viewed as challenging in India. These fears have escalated after the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee of Pakistan, General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, visited Dhaka in October, 2025,⁴⁹ and both sides promised to enhance military collaboration, increase joint training and drills, and cement the advanced exchanges.

North-eastern states of India are connected with the mainland through the narrow Siliguri corridor. According to Indian analysts, proposals, such as the establishment of Chinese base near Lalmonirhat in Bangladesh, probably with Pakistani subcontractors, would bring adversary's infrastructure in close proximity to this vulnerable corridor.⁵⁰ Another pressing concern for New Delhi is that China, via Pakistan and Bangladesh, could establish alternative connectivity and logistical nodes, which, in turn, could erode India's perceived integrative role. Developments such as the establishment of industrial economic zones, port modernisation, and Beijing's involvement in Teesta River project already signal deepening China-Bangladesh cooperation.⁵¹ Additionally, renewed trade and transport linkages between Pakistan and Bangladesh add to India's concerns regarding diminishing influence over South Asian connectivity.

Ultimately, India perceives that the emergence of China-Pakistan-Bangladesh axis may shift South Asia's strategic architecture away from being India-centric to a more China-led multipolar arrangement. In turn, this would eradicate New Delhi's ability to assert influence over regional norms, institutions, and connectivity projects. Therefore, the implication for Indian foreign and defence policy is that it must recalibrate its strategy for its eastern flank and its immediate neighbourhood.

⁴⁹ Berk Kutay Gokmen, "Top Pakistani Military Commander Visits Bangladesh," *Anadolu Agency*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/top-pakistani-military-commander-visits-bangladesh/3727407>.

⁵⁰ "Dragon's Shadow near Siliguri? China Aids Revival of WW2-Era Bangladeshi Airbase near India's 'Chicken's Neck,'" *Economic Times*, May 18, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/dragons-shadow-near-siliguri-china-aiding-revival-of-ww2-era-bangladeshi-airbase-near-indias-chickens-neck/articleshow/121246761.cms>.

⁵¹ Kawsar Uddin Mahmud, *Bangladesh-China Relations in 2024: New Context, Renewed Partnership*, CBGA Annual Review Series 02, (Dhaka: KRF) Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA), February 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5553859

Challenges in Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations

In spite of more than half a century since the independence of Bangladesh, some unresolved issues periodically resurface between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Issue of Apology

Pakistan's stance on the events of 1971 has been consistent. As a matter of policy, Islamabad considers all matters relating to the conflict settled and fully resolved, particularly following the Bangladesh-India-Pakistan (Tripartite) Agreement signed in New Delhi on April 9, 1974.⁵² This Agreement, signed under the specific instructions of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, established a durable legal and diplomatic foundation for Pakistan-Bangladesh relations and continues to serve as the definitive framework for bilateral engagement. However, the formal stance of Bangladesh, restated by the Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin in the April talks, is that the 1974 Agreement did not address the moral, political, and legal questions that were left unanswered in 1971, and that a formal public apology is a prerequisite for fully normalised relations.⁵³

On the other hand, any contemporary demand for a formal apology from Pakistan, particularly by the Awami League, is viewed in Islamabad as not aligning with the terms and spirit of the Tripartite Agreement.⁵⁴ These demands are often seen as politically selective, reflecting the position of a single political party, while other major political actors in Bangladesh have not consistently pursued this issue, suggesting that public opinion remains divided. Moreover, an unconditional apology would imply acceptance of contested allegations regarding casualties and atrocities, potentially

⁵² Moonis Ahmar, "Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations — Prospects and Way Forward," *IPRI Journal XXII*, no. 1 (2022): 151-79, <https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.220107>.

⁵³ Abdullah Momand, "FO Acknowledges 'Outstanding Issues' Raised Amid Reports of Bangladesh Seeking 1971 Apology," *Dawn*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1905083/fo-acknowledges-outstanding-issues-raised-amid-reports-of-bangladesh-seeking-1971-apology>.

⁵⁴ Porimol Palma and Mohiuddin Alamgir, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Ties Grow, but '71 Still Unreckoned," *Asia News Network*, <https://asianews.network/bangladesh-pakistan-ties-grow-but-71-still-unreckoned/>.

exposing Pakistan to claims for reparations, division of assets, and legal liabilities.⁵⁵ It would also alienate significant constituencies within Bangladesh, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Bihari community, and contravene Pakistan's longstanding policy of goodwill toward those who suffered during the conflict, such as West Pakistanis and pro-Pakistan Bengalis.⁵⁶

Furthermore, Pakistan has, on several occasions, expressed regret over the human suffering caused during the conflict, acknowledging the tragedy without compromising its legal or political position.⁵⁷ Geopolitical realities, particularly India's enduring influence in Bangladesh, would also limit any meaningful reconciliation. Pakistan's policy of finality on 1971, aligned with international agreements and national interest, demonstrates that the issue is conclusively resolved from its perspective.

Asset Division: Diplomatic and Legal Challenges

Another unexplored yet legally complex issue between Pakistan and Bangladesh has been the division of assets and liabilities. According to International Law, in the aftermath of the creation of a new state, doctrine of state succession governs the transfer of rights, obligations, and property. However, emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 as a result of secession as opposed to partitions makes the direct application of these principles complicated. In contrast, when India and Pakistan became independent in 1947, negotiated frameworks under the Independence Act guided the division of assets between the two states. In case of Bangladesh, no such treaty of mutually accepted financial settlement existed.

Even assuming the question of financial assets aside, there is still a considerable amount of physical and commercial property in Bangladesh owned by West Pakistanis. These assets, ranging from industrial units to

⁵⁵ Amna Mahmood, Sadaf Farooq and Nadia Awan, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: A Hostage to History," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5, no. 2 (April 2015): 66-77.

https://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol_5_No_2_April_2015/10.pdf.

⁵⁶ Adeel Khan, "The Politics of Memory and the 1971 War: Reconciliation, Accountability, or Forgetting?," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2021): 702-719, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2021.1968324>.

⁵⁷ Mahmood, Farooq, and Awan, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations."

enterprises, were nationalised by the Bangladeshi state after 1972, and absorbed into the public sector.⁵⁸ This unsettled legacy poses several significant questions, particularly regarding the moral and legal dimension of post-succession statecraft. Bangladesh maintains that the nationalisation of these properties has no bearing on Pakistan's financial liabilities. It asserts that both state assets, as well as the misappropriated 1970 Bhola Cyclone relief funds worth US\$ 200 million, should be included as general assets in the settlement of financial issues with Pakistan.⁵⁹ Under the 1983 Vienna Convention on Succession of State in Respect of State Property, Archives and Debt, it is generally acknowledged that equitable distribution should reflect both the historical contributions and territorial realities.⁶⁰ While not retroactively binding, application of these principles could be conducive in addressing issues that could hinder deeper cooperation between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Beyond legal considerations, the issue continues to carry symbolic and economic significance for stakeholders in both countries. Revisiting it could result in domestic backlash and rekindle a divisive historical narrative between the two states, as it equates to a matter of sovereign equity and recognition of historical linkages for Pakistan. Therefore, a carefully crafted and pragmatic approach is required to deal with this issue. Engaging on this issue in future bilateral or multilateral forums may offer a pathway to build mutual trust. Acknowledging the complexity of legal claims while seeking practical, forward-looking solutions could help transform a historically sensitive matter into a platform for economic cooperation and confidence-building.

Plight of Stranded Pakistanis (Biharis in Bangladesh)

The status of stranded Pakistanis, generally known as Biharis, has remained one of the enduring legacies of the 1971 conflict. Majorly, Urdu-speaking

⁵⁸ Md. Awal Hossain Mollah, "Privatization in Bangladesh: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Public Administration* 2, no. 1 (2020): 11-23, <https://sryahwapublications.com/journal-of-public-administration/pdf/v2-i1/2.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Abul Kashem, "Govt Prepares to Reclaim US\$4.52b Pre-independence Assets From Pakistan," *Business Standard*, April 16, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/foreign-policy/govt-prepares-reclaim-452b-pre-independence-assets-pakistan-1117011>.

⁶⁰ United Nations, *Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of State Property, Archives and Debts*, 1983, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/3_3_1983.pdf.

Muslims who immigrated from Bihar and other parts of India during 1947, many Biharis maintained a strong sense of identification with Pakistan during and after 1971. When Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state, a major portion of this community chose to remain there. Resultantly, they have faced decades of uncertainty, marginalisation, and lack of access to basic rights.⁶¹

Some legal and political progress has been witnessed in this regard. For example, in a major verdict, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh recognised the Biharis as complete Bangladeshi citizens and entitled them to vote, issue ID cards, and access to commercial opportunities.⁶² Yet, there are still some in the Bihari community who resist integration with the hope of proprietary rights on the war-emptied properties. As of 2025, the civil-society data indicate that around 324,147 Bihari speakers of the Urdu language live in 79 camps scattered in 14 districts across Bangladesh.⁶³ Although a larger population has embraced citizenship in Bangladesh after the court ruling, there are still a few who still consider themselves as being stranded Pakistanis. So far, 26,941 people have been sent back to Pakistan.⁶⁴ However, given the existing political climate in Bangladesh, such a chance seems remote; many of the assets were redistributed or taken over under state laws, making reversal legally complex.⁶⁵ Pakistan acknowledges legal progress on Bihari rights in Bangladesh but maintains humanitarian concern for those still facing marginalisation. While large-scale repatriation has stalled, integration is now seen as a pragmatic path, with scope for cooperative efforts to ease remaining grievances.

Therefore, unresolved historical issues continue to influence Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, but their trajectory is increasingly

⁶¹ Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, “‘Stranded Pakistanis’ in Bangladesh – Victims of Political Divisions of 70 Years Ago,” *Nationalities Affairs, New Series* 51 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.1912>.

⁶² Kazi Nazrul Fattah, “The Enduring Liminality of Camp Life: Navigating Identity and Belonging in Dhaka’s Bihari Camps,” *Anthropology Now* 17, no. 1 (2025): 33-48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2025.2518880>.

⁶³ “30 Civil Society Members Seek Withdrawal of Foreign Secy’s Comment Describing Urdu-speaking Community as ‘stranded Pakistanis,’” *Business Standard*, May 4, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/30-civil-society-members-seek-withdrawal-foreign-secys-comment-describing-urdu-speaking>.

⁶⁴ “30 Civil Society Members Seek Withdrawal of Foreign Secy’s Comment Describing Urdu-Speaking Community as ‘Stranded Pakistanis.’”

⁶⁵ Asharaf Qureshi (Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 10, 2024.

contingent on domestic politics in both states. The trends in Bangladesh, specifically, will set the tone of bilateral relations. The next general elections, in February 2026, therefore, mark a significant point of departure: its outcome would either keep past political grievances politically dormant or lead to cautious rapprochement.

A government that puts domestic responsibility and historical redress on its cards, particularly the legacy of 1971, might hamper greater engagement with Pakistan, limiting economic and connectivity efforts. The Bangladeshi Foreign Ministry has stressed that such unresolved historical matters continue to be one of the preconditions of looking to the future. On the other hand, a move toward a more pragmatic form of governance, characterised by a trade-oriented, regionalised, and diversified conglomeration of partnerships, may enable renewed Pakistan engagement. Indicative talks at the Foreign-Secretary level at the beginning of 2025 might point to open options for Islamabad to re-present it as a viable economically instead of a strategic opponent.

However, improvement is not a certainty. Cooperation may be derailed by domestic volatility, legitimacy issues, or external pressure by India or other regional actors. Therefore, the future bilateral development depends on the post-election legitimacy of Dhaka and strategic diplomacy, along with Pakistan's emphasis on mutual gains rather than the historical antagonism.

Policy Recommendations to Enhance Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

Considering the changing political environment in Bangladesh, Pakistan's diplomatic strategy needs to be grounded in long-term institutionalised relationships that are sustainable and immune to domestic political upheavals. Moreover, Pakistan must not view Bangladesh's strained relations with India as an opportunity for diplomatic leverage; Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship must be built on mutual interest rather than political convenience.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Asharaf-ud-Doula (Former Ambassador of Bangladesh), Interview by the author, March 16, 2024.

Fostering Economic Collaboration

- *Preferential Trade Agreement:* Pakistan and Bangladesh need to strengthen their trade relationship by formulating a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with wider sectoral coverage of pharmaceuticals, agricultural products, and high-value textiles. Such an agreement would provide a structured framework to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers, enhance market access, and create a more symmetrical trade relationship between the two countries. The PTA must include regulatory alignment, simplified custom procedures, and dispute resolution mechanism to ensure smooth flow of trade between the two nations.
- *Boosting Industrial Cooperation through Special Economic Zones:* In order to improve industrial cooperation, joint ventures are crucial in the textile industry through the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Dhaka and Faisalabad. The SEZs would draw investment in textile manufacturing, taking advantage of Bangladesh's strengths in ready-made garments and Pakistan's advantages in raw cotton production. Considering that Bangladesh's economy remains largely reliant on agriculture, remittances, and textile exports, there is an urgent need to have a diversified industrial base. SEZ-driven collaboration, especially in higher-value or backward-linked segments of textiles, could help promote structural transformation and make the bilateral partnership more resilient.
- *Forging a Sustainable Energy Partnership for Mutual Growth:* In the energy arena, Pakistan and Bangladesh must explore Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) supply contracts and electricity trade partnerships. Pakistan's Port Qasim LNG terminal can be utilized as a transshipment terminal for Bangladesh to reduce its dependence on distant suppliers, such as Qatar. Bangladesh can invest in Pakistan's Thar coal deposits, thus creating a two-way sustainable energy alliance that provides a secure energy exchange to the benefit of both countries' economies.

Strengthening Strategic Security Collaboration

- *Institutionalising Intelligence and Counterterrorism Cooperation:* Pakistan and Bangladesh need to institutionalise intelligence-sharing agreements to assist in combating terrorist threats. Pakistan's efforts in counterterrorism, as demonstrated by Operations *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ul-Fasaad*, offer Bangladesh an opportunity to enhance its counterinsurgency and cybersecurity. The Bangladesh police force and military commanders could benefit from special workshops in Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and the National Defence University (NDU).
- *Advancing Maritime Security through Collaborative Frameworks:* Maritime security collaboration can be enhanced through collaborative naval exercises, synchronised anti-piracy patrols, and sharing intelligence on smuggling and trafficking networks. Bangladesh's Bay of Bengal blue economy plan aligns with Pakistan's plan to protect its blue economy trade routes in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. India-Sri Lanka-Maldives trilateral cooperation on maritime security is an ideal example, which encouraged information-sharing and surveillance. Pakistan and Bangladesh can develop the same example with possible extension to Sri Lanka and Oman.

Strengthening Political Cooperation

Utilising Minilateralism as a Diplomatic Tool: With SAARC paralysed due to Indian exclusionary approach, other diplomatic models need to be pursued by Pakistan and Bangladesh. One model could be establishment of trilateral cooperation framework of Pakistan-Bangladesh-China, where Bangladesh, as a key player in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), could avail land connectivity to Central Asian markets through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Likewise, by linking Pakistan's access to Bangladesh's expanding market, such a framework would link Pakistan's export to wider regional supply chain.

- *Establishing a Structured Framework for Diplomatic Engagement:* To institutionalise senior-level diplomatic interactions, it is essential that Pakistan and Bangladesh have a Senior-Level Strategic Dialogue, allowing policy coordination and resolution of differences through a structured mechanism. Leadership-level summits and periodic ministerial meetings could further economic cooperation and build political trust. In addition, the two states should utilise multilateral platforms, e.g., the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) the United Nations (UN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in an attempt to advance collective interests, set global governance narratives, and enhance their collective bargaining power with regard to regional and global issues.

Enhancing People-to-People Connectivity

A sustainable and lasting change in the Pakistan-Bangladesh relations cannot be based on state-to-state interaction only; it should be supported by more profound societal interconnection. Development of sustainable interpersonal connectivity will offset political variability, negative stereotyping, and create constituencies for cooperation in both states. In order to do so, multifaceted approach is necessary.

- *Relaxing Visa Regimes and Mobility Restrictions:* Pakistan and Bangladesh should implement a liberalised visa policy, prioritising businesspersons, students, researchers, cultural delegation and tourists. Moreover, a system of e-visas, visa on arrival in special categories and multi-entry business visa would go a long way in alleviating bureaucratic hurdles. In this regard, designated visa facilitation departments in Dhaka and Islamabad could assist in facilitating mobility, especially for scholars, journalists and technology professionals
- *Restoring and Expanding Direct Flight Connectivity:* Direct flights on routes connecting Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Dhaka and Chittagong need to be reintroduced to reverse decades of limited travel. Enhanced flight connectivity would improve economic engagement, boost tourism, and promote cultural interchange. Additionally, Pakistan International

Airlines (PIA) and Biman Bangladesh Airlines can consider options, such as code-sharing arrangements, seasonal flights to major cultural events, and discounted fares for students to stimulate youth mobility.

- *Advancing Academic, Cultural, and Digital Collaboration:* Bangladesh and Pakistan should also formalise comprehensive academic, cultural, scientific, and digital partnership aimed at stabilising the mutual understanding and ensuring the sustainable development. This can be achieved through joint research programmes, faculty exchanges, cultural initiatives, and coordinated ICT partnerships, facilitated by virtual collaboration platforms and joint innovation centres in key areas, including climate resilience, public health, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

Conclusion

The recent political transformation in Bangladesh marks a pivotal moment in South Asian geopolitics, with profound implications for Pakistan's foreign relations with Dhaka. Sheikh Hasina's departure after a 15-year tenure has disrupted India's stronghold over Dhaka, paving the way for a potential recalibration of Pakistan-Bangladesh ties. For decades, relations between the two countries remained strained due to historical grievances, ideological differences, and Dhaka's strategic alignment with New Delhi. However, the change in leadership has signalled a shift, offering Islamabad — a rare opportunity to foster stronger diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation with Bangladesh.

For Pakistan, this transition presents both opportunities and challenges. While the immediate signs of rapprochement are promising, sustaining and institutionalising this momentum will require deliberate and long-term efforts. Ultimately, the reset in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations must transcend political transitions and develop into a stable and strategic partnership. A strong Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship has the potential to not only reshape regional geopolitics but also contribute to broader South Asian stability.