



# Sino-India Influence in Bangladesh and Possibilities for Pakistan

---

Amna Ejaz Rafi  
Feb 2021

**POLICY BRIEF**

## Executive Summary

China and India, both are trying to strengthen relations with Bangladesh. China's interest is to develop political and economic links and settle for an access to Bay of Bengal via Chittagong seaport. India's influence in Bangladesh stems from the geographic proximity. On the political account, Awami League has strong inclination towards India. This nexus has led to New Delhi's influence into the civil and military institutions of Bangladesh. The influence and objectives of China and India in Bangladesh carry a different political connotation. On part of Pakistan, it is essential to observe these developments and strategize accordingly. Firstly, Pakistan is a part of China's regional connectivity endeavour. Bangladesh is also a part of BRI, thus, this brings both Pakistan and Bangladesh on the same page. Secondly, on India's influence in Bangladesh, the Modi-Sheikh nexus is a challenge for Pakistan. Modi will exploit Awami League's anti-Pakistan rhetoric and further pollute the Bengali psyche against Pakistan. In this backdrop, the Sino-India influence in Bangladesh is a test for Pakistan. To benefit from the China-Bangladesh economic cooperation and to deter Modi-Sheikh nexus a united front by Pakistan's political leadership and opposition is de rigueur. Some of the recommendations include:-

- India should not be brought into discussion with Bangladesh.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan should visit Dhaka and address the Bengali public.
- The visa regime for Bangladeshi businessmen should be eased.
- Pakistan needs to develop ties with Bangladesh regionally. Pakistan can take up the case of Bangladesh's membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).
- Pakistan and Bangladesh are dependent on water from India and China. Through collaboration, both countries can evolve better mechanism to serve the water needs.
- The prospect of Pakistan-China-Bangladesh economic cooperation needs to be explored.

## Issue to be Analyzed

Bangladesh after its independence has had a chequered relationship with Pakistan. The influence of India on Bangladesh especially during Modi-Sheikh reign poses a challenge for Pakistan in fostering strong ties with Bangladesh. The emergence of China as an economic partner of Bangladesh presents opportunities of weaning Bangladesh away from Indian influence for better ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan. This paper analyses above issue in order to present some viable recommendations to achieve the above end.

## Analysis

### India-Bangladesh Relations

India is the immediate neighbour of Bangladesh bordering along the east, west and north; the border length is 4096 kilometers. The other neighbour of Bangladesh to the southeast is Myanmar, sharing 271 kilometers frontier. While, on the south of Bangladesh lies the Bay of Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The Bangladeshi seaports of Chittagong and Mongla are located along the Bay. Bangladesh has allowed India an access to Chittagong seaport through a MoU signed in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

The war of 1971, in which India played a central role at both covert and overt fronts was a basis for New Delhi's influence in Bangladesh. After the war, the government of Awami League concluded a 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' with India. In subsequent years, the bilateral relations progressed. The India-Bangladesh bilateral trade reached US\$ 10 billion.<sup>3</sup> During Awami League's rule, India offered investments worth US\$ 9 billion and defence loans of US\$ 500 million to Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> The militaries of India and Bangladesh undertake joint exercises. The latest in series was a counter terrorism exercise 'Sampriti-IX', held at Umroi, Meghalaya, northeast India (February 2020). 300 soldiers participated in the exercise from both sides.<sup>5</sup>

### India's Influence in Bangladesh

There are reports of Indian media referring to Indian intelligence agencies' financial assistance to Awami League.<sup>6</sup> The influence of India in Bangladesh's bureaucracy has been talked about as well. In the words of a veteran Bangladeshi Foreign Service Officer "every ambitious officer of the Bangladesh Foreign Service knows too well, the road to success in his country's diplomatic service, passes through New Delhi."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taufiq-E-Faruque, "Sino-Indian Geostrategic Competition: Bangladesh Perspective," *ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, 1-24, (2018): 5, accessed on December 26, 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335164097\\_SINO-INDIAN\\_GEOSTRATEGIC\\_COMPETITION\\_BANGLADESH\\_PERSPECTIVE/link/5d53fd7a299bf16f0736e822/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335164097_SINO-INDIAN_GEOSTRATEGIC_COMPETITION_BANGLADESH_PERSPECTIVE/link/5d53fd7a299bf16f0736e822/download).

<sup>2</sup> "Joint Declaration between Bangladesh and India during Visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 7, 2015, accessed on December 2, 2020, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral\\_documents.htm?dtl/25346/Joint\\_Declaration\\_between\\_Bangladesh\\_and\\_India\\_during\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_India\\_to\\_Bangladesh\\_quot\\_N](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral_documents.htm?dtl/25346/Joint_Declaration_between_Bangladesh_and_India_during_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_Bangladesh_quot_N).

<sup>3</sup> Anita Inder Singh, "Chinese Game in Bay of Bengal," *Sri Lankan Guardian*, accessed on December 21, 2020, <http://www.slguardian.org/2020/10/chinese-game-in-bay-of-bengal.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Faruque, "Sino-Indian Geostrategic Competition: Bangladesh Perspective," 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ankit Panda, "Armies of India, Bangladesh Begin Military Exercise in Indian Northeast," *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2020, accessed on December 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/armies-of-india-bangladesh-begin-military-exercise-in-indian-northeast/>.

<sup>6</sup> Afrasiab Mehdi Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh," Third Edition (Islamabad: Khursheed Printers Pvt Limited, 2016), 240.

<sup>7</sup> Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh," 210.

India's involvement in Bangladesh, on one hand has strengthened the pro-Indian elements while on the other hand, it has also reinforced hate sentiments. There is a segment within the Bangladeshi society, which looks at India as a hegemon. Comments like "Bangladesh is India's gift to the people of Bangladesh," and "New Delhi made Bangladesh, New Delhi can also unmake Bangladesh" have led to hate sentiments. The people have realized that India's intention had not been to help in the cause of Bangladesh; rather it had only endeavoured to dismember "the arch enemy, Pakistan". Another angle apparent at societal levels in both neighbours is the Hindu-Muslim hate sentiment. It is pertinent to mention that the "Brahmans of Kolkata look down upon the Muslims of Bangladesh." While, the Bangladeshis call the Hindus of India as "Malaoons" (the 'desperate creatures').<sup>8</sup>

#### *Latest Political Encounter*

On December 17, 2020, the "India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit" was held, in which the leadership of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Awami League reaffirmed their commitment to a stronger India-Bangladesh relationship. Bangladesh was called "a key pillar in India's neighbourhood first policy" while India was called "a true friend."<sup>9</sup> The Modi-Sheikh nexus shows that neither India has an issue with Bangladesh Muslim population nor Bangladesh has a problem with the ill-treatment of Muslims in West Bengal in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

India and Bangladesh have inaugurated the Chilahati-Haldibari rail link, connecting Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Dhaka in March 2021, to attend the Independence Day celebrations. The documentary on 'Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' by Shyam Benegal, an Indian filmmaker will be released prior to Bangladesh Independence Day celebrations. Bangladesh and India have made headways towards cooperation. The element of religion has not been a hurdle in the relationship. Moreover, the situation along the India-Bangladesh border and the Border Security Forces killings of Bangladeshi civilians has hardly impacted the ties.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Trans-regionalism*

Bangladesh borders India's northeastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam. The northeastern region is a gateway for India to reach out to Southeast Asia. This makes Bangladesh a corner stone of India's policy to strengthen political ties with countries of East Asia.

<sup>8</sup> Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh," 221 - 223.

<sup>9</sup> "Friend and Neighbour: On India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit," December 19, 2020, *The Hindu*, accessed on December 21, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/friend-and-neighbour-on-india-bangladesh-virtual-summit/article33367913.ece>.

<sup>10</sup> "Indian Border Forces Killed 25 Bangladeshis this year: Report," *Al Jazeera*, July 8, 2020, accessed on December 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/8/indian-border-forces-killed-25-bangladeshis-this-year-report>.

### Bangladesh's Geostrategic Significance for China

The China-Bangladesh bilateral trade is US\$ 18 billion.<sup>11</sup> China during last four years, has invested US\$ 26 billion in Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> China has also offered US\$ 1 billion loan to Bangladesh to manage water levels of Teesta River, the river originates in eastern Himalayas, flows through Sikkim and West Bengal before reaching Bangladesh.<sup>13</sup> In the field of defence, China has a "Defence Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh." China trains the Bangladeshi army and Bangladesh is also a recipient of 70 percent of Chinese weaponry. In 2017, Bangladesh purchased two submarines from China. China is also involved in Bangladesh's missile programme. Anand Kumar, Associate Fellow at Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis sees the defence cooperation between Bangladesh and China, in particular the arms sales as strategically driven.<sup>14</sup> There exists a geopolitical dimension to China's growing tilt towards Bangladesh. China's submarine base in the Bay of Bengal,<sup>15</sup> and access to seaports of Chittagong and Mongla merit consideration in this regard.<sup>16</sup> The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) is part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chittagong seaport is a major pivot through the Indian Ocean and China needs the seaport to activate the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>17</sup>

### Pakistan and Bangladesh as Cooperative Neighbours, Likely Options

On April 9, 1974, an agreement was reached between Bangladesh, Pakistan and India at foregoing the past mistakes and making a new start. The Tripartite Agreement was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the three countries in New Delhi. Since then, Pakistan's stance on the apology issue rests with the tripartite agreement and Pakistan does not demand an apology for the atrocities by the Awami League-led Mukti Bahini against West Pakistanis, Biharis and Bengalis.<sup>18</sup> At the bilateral front, as a goodwill gesture, Pakistan gifted two commercial aircrafts, 46 fighting aircrafts and 35 tanks to Bangladesh. Pakistan also provided training to the Bangladeshi army personnel on its indigenously produced Al-Khaled tank. On the economic side, the Pakistan-Bangladesh

<sup>11</sup> Anita Inder Singh, "Chinese Game in Bay of Bengal," *Sri Lankan Guardian*, accessed on December 10, 2020, <http://www.slguardian.org/2020/10/chinese-game-in-bay-of-bengal.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Singh, "Is India Slipping Behind? Bangladesh Reveals India's challenged Pre-Eminence in the Bay of Bengal."

<sup>13</sup> Abdul Hannan, "Too Woo and Entice," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 21, 2020, accessed on December 2, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2020/10/19/op-ed-to-woo-and-entice>.

<sup>14</sup> Anand Kumar, "Domestic Politics of Bangladesh and India-Bangladesh Relations," *Strategic Analysis*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, Vol. 38 and Issue. 5, 652-667, (September 2014), accessed December 27, 2020, <http://doi.org/10.1080?09700161.2014.941214>.

<sup>15</sup> Hannan, "Too Woo and Entice."

<sup>16</sup> Singh, "Is India Slipping Behind? Bangladesh Reveals India's Challenged Pre-Eminence in the Bay of Bengal."

<sup>17</sup> Faruque, "Sino-Indian Geostrategic Competition: Bangladesh Perspective," 10, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh," 203, 204.

trade is US\$ 800 million. Pakistan has also helped Bangladesh by supporting the development projects. On yearly basis, Pakistan spends 10 million taka on development projects in Bangladesh. Pakistan has setup cement plants and educational institutions in Bangladesh, including the Beaconhouse and the City Schools in Dhaka.<sup>19</sup> Despite these cooperative gestures, the Awami League's anti-Pakistan rhetoric continues to thrive at societal level. Awami League is adamant over 'Apology, Reparations and Division of Assets' from Government of Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> The Bangladeshi media highlights Pakistan as a weak country, entangled in terrorism. This projection gives the Bangladeshis' a feeling of outshining Pakistan. So, there is a sense of victory in Bangladesh, against the "defeated state of Pakistan."<sup>21</sup>

## Recommendations

- **Government and Opposition Unanimous Front.** With Modi's government and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, the circumstances do not support a cordial Pakistan-Bangladesh relation. To counter the Modi-Sheikh nexus, the government and the political parties need to have a united approach in dealings with Bangladesh and India.
- **Pakistan-Bangladesh Ties**
  - The bilateral ties should evolve with people-to-people contact and cultural linkage.
  - India should not be brought into discussion with Bangladesh, neither should Pakistan talk about CAA. The Indian atrocities in occupied Jammu and Kashmir should also not be a point of discussion with Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup>
  - The image of Pakistan Army as an oppressor needs to be countered through effective propaganda. In this context, the killings of non-Bengalis need to be cited. One such example is the brutal slaughter of Urdu speaking Muslim migrants from Bihar on March 28, 1971 by Bengalis.
  - The cultural diplomacy with Bangladesh needs to be ramped up through appointment of diplomats with Bengali connections and cultural affinity.
  - Dramas / documentaries on subjects like Kashmir and Muslim sufferings in India should be aired with Bangla translation.
  - The people of Pakistan who have lived in old East Pakistan and have memories attached to the land need to be encouraged to share their experience on media.

<sup>19</sup> Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh," 200.

<sup>20</sup> Hashmi, "1971: Fact and Fiction," 203.

<sup>21</sup> "1971: Fact and Fiction," 220.

<sup>22</sup> Ambassador Rafiuzzaman Siddiqui, former High Commission to Bangladesh, interviewed by Amna Ejaz Rafi, January 19, 2021, Dubai, virtual "Government of Bangladesh told Pakistan High Commission Dhaka not to observe Kashmir Day."

Such a practice will be useful in highlighting the positive aspects between Pakistan and former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Through such exchanges, the “sohni dharti of Pakistan” and the “sonar Bangla of Bangladesh” can lead to a fusion of soils and souls.<sup>23</sup>

- **Travel Ease.** There is a need to ease the business and travel visa regimes. While Pakistan has already upgraded Bangladesh to visa category A, Bangladesh has not responded in kind. Easing visa regimes would help businesses explore opportunities in respective countries and ensue economic interdependency.
- **Academia**
  - The literature on Bangladesh mostly read and taught in universities is by Indian authors. This has made the students unaware of the true happenings and they look at the dismemberment of former East Pakistan from the Indian lens.
  - Another deficiency in academia is lack of writings by Pakistani authors on issues sensitive to Pakistan. Hardly, any scholar takes up Bangladesh as a country of interest. The universities should include study on Bangladesh.
  - In academia circles and universities, the trend towards neutrality is mostly linked to democracy of India, civil-military relations and anti-Army sentiment. However, to compete with the Indians and counter their propaganda, university education should focus more towards India’s nefarious policies and role as a spoiler in the region.
  - Learning of Bengali language by Pakistani students followed by interaction through student exchange programmes and educational visits is recommended.
- **Think Tank Collaboration.** Pakistani think tanks should collaborate with Bangladesh’s think tanks and conduct joint research and seminars on subjects of mutual interest such as climate threats and economic cooperation.
- **Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Visit to Dhaka.** Prime Minister Imran Khan should visit Dhaka and address the Bengali public. The speech should be in English, with translation in Bangla. The translation should be done by a Bengali living in Pakistan having relatives in Bangladesh. The speech should have following elements.
  - The tragedy of 1971 was sponsored by India. Prime Minister Modi’s statement that India was involved in the breakup of Pakistan and Indian forces fought along with Mukti Bahini should be mentioned.
  - The fault lines at that time provided India with ground to play with its sinister designs.
  - India’s subversive pursuits could not have been successful without the support from internal elements.

<sup>23</sup> Javed Jabbar, “From 1971 to 2021,” *Dawn*, December 16, 2020, accessed on December 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1596044>.

- The majority in Pakistan agrees that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the winner of 1970 general elections. To Bangladeshis' this would sound pleasant.
- Wreath laying at the memorial of Sheikh Mujib.
- The cultural and religious bond between Bangladesh and Pakistan is Islam.
- Bangladesh-Pakistan friendship Jindabad (Zindabad).
- Pakistan and Bangladesh both drive the major portion of water from outside sources. Pakistan gets 77 percent water from India (some degree from Afghanistan, and marginal from China), while; Bangladesh derives 90 percent of water from China (Brahmaputra) and India (Ganges). In view of Pakistan and Bangladesh's dependency of water from outside sources, both the countries can develop a joint mechanism. Through 'Hydro-Diplomacy,' Pakistan can buildup relation with Bangladesh. The collaboration will also address the challenge of climate change.<sup>24</sup>
- **China-Pakistan-Bangladesh Mutual Political and Security Interests**
  - Pakistan and Bangladesh, both are part of BRI. This unanimity of interest between the South Asian countries and China needs to be exploited. Pakistan's focus should be to improve ties with Bangladesh regionally.
  - China is increasing its' tilt towards Bangladesh to secure access to Bay of Bengal via Chittagong seaport. Pakistan is also cooperating with China regionally and their mutual connectivity project is China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These economic connectivity projects place China, Bangladesh and Pakistan on one page regionally. This cooperation needs to be further elevated to security level. In this regard, Pakistan can take up the case of Bangladesh's membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).
  - The prospect of Pakistan-China-Bangladesh collaborative economic projects need to be actively explored.

<sup>24</sup> Dr Saleem H Ali, "Is Climate Change Going to Drive National Security?" *IPRI Lecture Series*, January 14, 2021, <https://ipripak.org/ipri-distinguished-lecture-series-is-climate-change-going-to-drive-national-security/>.