



## Policy Brief

# Internal Interference: Role of Indian Intelligence in Bangladeshi Domestic Politics

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# **Internal Interference: Role of Indian Intelligence in Bangladeshi Domestic Politics**

## **Executive Summary**

This study examines the extensive role of India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), in shaping Bangladesh's domestic political, security, and strategic landscape since its creation in 1971. From providing covert support to the Mukti Bahini during the liberation war to influencing post-independence politics, RAW has consistently acted as a decisive player in Bangladesh's internal affairs. Its activities have ranged from backing uprisings and dismantling opposition-linked groups to influencing electoral outcomes and supporting regimes favorable to Indian interests, particularly under Sheikh Hasina's government.

RAW's mechanisms of influence have included covert operations, manipulation of electoral processes, alignment with intelligence and security institutions, use of disinformation and media campaigns, and the advancement of economic and infrastructure agreements that largely favored India. While these actions strengthened bilateral security cooperation - especially against insurgent groups - they also entrenched perceptions of Indian interference and undermined Bangladesh's political autonomy.

Recent events, including Sheikh Hasina's ouster in 2024 and the rise of the "India Out" movement, marked a setback for Indian influence in Bangladesh and opened new opportunities for Pakistan. Pakistan has moved quickly to re-engage Bangladesh through trade talks, cultural and educational exchanges, and proposals for trilateral cooperation with China. However, Pakistan must carefully navigate historical grievances from 1971 and avoid the pitfalls of overreach that characterized India's approach.

## **Policy Recommendations**

- **Capitalize on Anti-India Sentiment with Balanced Engagement:** Pakistan should carefully leverage the rising "India Out" movement and anti-India sentiments within Bangladesh without appearing opportunistic. While emphasizing historical commonalities and shared challenges as Muslim-majority states, Pakistan must position itself as a respectful, balanced, and multi-dimensional partner. Pakistan also need to acknowledge and address the past grievances - particularly 1971 - to avoid reopening wounds. This would

allow Pakistan to present itself as a partner in sovereignty preservation rather than a replacement hegemon.

- **Institutionalize Multi-Dimensional Cooperation:** Pakistan should broaden cooperation beyond politics to embed durable linkages based on interdependence. Initiatives could include:
  - Trade: Reviving preferential trade agreements and establishing direct shipping and air routes to reduce dependence on Indian corridors.
  - Education & Culture: Scholarships, academic exchanges, and cultural programs to foster people-to-people goodwill.
  - Technology & Health: Joint ventures in ICT, pharmaceuticals, and medical cooperation to create tangible benefits for Bangladeshi citizens.
- **Forge Strategic Triangular Diplomacy with China and Bangladesh:** Given Bangladesh's growing interest in balancing India's influence, Pakistan should position itself as part of a China–Pakistan–Bangladesh strategic triangle as also indicated at the leadership level. Through CPEC connectivity, Bangladesh could gain access to new markets via Gwadar and Kashgar. Collaborative projects in energy, infrastructure, and logistics can be pitched as alternatives to Indian-dominated frameworks, creating durable stakes for Bangladesh in a balanced regional architecture.
- **Prepare for Political Transitions in Bangladesh:** With elections due in 2026 and the BNP projected as a strong contender, Pakistan must prepare to engage all major Bangladeshi parties, not just the interim or opposition leadership. Establishing quiet backchannel diplomacy across the political spectrum will help ensure continuity regardless of electoral outcomes. A non-partisan diplomatic posture will prevent Pakistan from being perceived as exploiting internal divides, unlike India's long support for the Awami League.

# **Internal Interference: Role of Indian Intelligence in Bangladeshi Domestic Politics**

## **Overview**

Since Bangladesh's emergence as an independent state in 1971, India's intelligence agency - the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) - has played a complex role in shaping its domestic political landscape. India's support was instrumental during the liberation war, which was also acknowledged by Indian PM Modi's statement in 2015, where he admitted that "there had been a conspiracy to divide Pakistan, and that the establishment of Bangladesh was a desire of every Indian and that's why India's forces fought along with the Mukti Bahini, thus creating a new country."<sup>1</sup> This study explores RAW's involvement - ranging from covert wartime support and political interventions to contemporary crisis management and strategic partnerships - highlighting the tension between security cooperation and national sovereignty.

## **Issue**

RAW has historically exerted deep influence in Bangladesh, shaping its liberation struggle, electoral politics, and security landscape, often at the cost of its sovereignty. This persistent interference has fuelled domestic backlash, culminating in Sheikh Hasina's ouster in 2024 and creating both risks and opportunities for Pakistan to recalibrate its ties with Bangladesh.

## **Analysis**

### **Liberation Era Foundations**

During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, RAW was a critical protagonist behind the scenes. The agency helped form the Mukti Bahini, providing training, weapons, and intelligence to freedom fighters engaging Pakistan's military in East Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Indian spy agency even orchestrated a false-flag Indian Airplane hijacking on 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 1971 to hinder Pakistani aircraft movements.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Indian forces fought along Mukti Bahini: Modi," *The News*, 8 June 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/12923-indian-forces-fought-along-mukti-bahini-modi>

<sup>2</sup> Volker Prott, "We have to tread warily": *East Pakistan, India and the pitfalls of foreign intervention in the Cold War*, *Cold War History*, 23(1), 23–44, [Full article: 'We have to tread warily': East Pakistan, India and the pitfalls of foreign intervention in the Cold War](#)

<sup>3</sup> "From plane hijacking to Mumbai, Pulwama attacks: Falsehood remains India's statecraft," *Express Tribune*, 12 Dec 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2333581/from-plane-hijacking-to-mumbai-pulwama-attacks-falsehood-remains-indias-statecraft>

RAW's role extended to coordinating operations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, particularly through the Special Frontier Force. Post-independence, RAW reportedly warned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the impending military coup in 1975, but he did not act on those warnings - and was ultimately assassinated. These actions established RAW's early pattern of direct engagement, using intelligence to influence events at pivotal historical moments.<sup>4</sup>

### **Early Post-Independence Influence**

The close Indo-Bangladesh ties were solidified soon after independence through the "1972 Indo-Bangla Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace," a 25-year agreement that laid the foundation for strategic cooperation between the two. Over time, however, elements within Bangladesh perceived the treaty and other bilateral arrangements as manifestations of Indian overreach and asymmetric power relations.

In the 1990s, RAW reportedly supported pro-democratic uprisings against military autocracies. For instance, RAW played a role in the downfall of General Ershad in 1990, supporting the movement that restored democratic governance. After Khaleda Zia's win in the 1991 elections, India became wary of radicalization by Jamaat-e-Islami factions. RAW allegedly dismantled Jamaat-affiliated terror camps and an alleged ISI-linked base in Bangladesh to safeguard Indian security. During this period, RAW also supported the Shanti Bahini rebels in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, implying a continued willingness to leverage non-state actors for strategic ends.

### **Electoral and Political Influence**

Beyond insurgency and democratization, RAW's influence also extended to shaping Bangladesh's electoral outcomes. Reports suggest that Indian funds and strategic advice helped swing political support. For instance, an Indian journalist Rajesh Joshiit reported that a Bangladesh political party received ₹4.5 crore from RAW during the 1991 election, although the party lost.<sup>5</sup>

Academic analysis indicates Indian pressure on Bangladesh's electoral stakeholders was also evident in 2014. At that time, when opposition parties boycotted

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<sup>4</sup> "Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had ignored RAW alert ahead of bloody 1975 coup," *Economic Times*, 14 Aug 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sheikh-mujibur-rahman-had-ignored-raw-alert-ahead-of-bloody-1975-coup/articleshow/48483920.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>5</sup> "India's RAW Operations In South Asian Countries," *Eurasia Review*, 29 Aug 2012, [https://www.eurasiareview.com/29082012-indias-raw-operations-in-south-asian-countries-oped/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.eurasiareview.com/29082012-indias-raw-operations-in-south-asian-countries-oped/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

elections, Indian officials reportedly lobbied to ensure the participation of at least some opposition, preserving electoral legitimacy. In addition, India's involvement in the 2008 election, which brought Sheikh Hasina to power, has been described as pivotal. RAW is believed to have engaged key Bangladeshi actors to facilitate a favorable environment for her victory, aligning Dhaka's leadership with Indian strategic interests.

### **Mechanisms of Influence**

India had been employing several tactics to cast its influence in Bangladesh through multiple channels which include; covert operatives, leveraging close ties with military and intelligence bodies, manipulating electoral dynamics by suppressing opposition movements through strategic guidance and funding, undermining dissenting voices through Indian-aligned media outlets and digital campaigns, and strategic economic penetration.

### **Contemporary Dynamics**

Since 2009, under Sheikh Hasina's long tenure, India-Bangladesh ties deepened and the influence of RAW was extended into contemporary confrontations, political crisis response, and strategic infrastructure cooperation. India has consistently supported the Awami League (AL) government, a political strategy driven by India's interest in a stable, pro-India ally in Bangladesh.

- **Security & Counterterrorism**

RAW's intelligence sharing and cooperation significantly aided Bangladesh in countering India-focused insurgent groups like ULFA. This mutual interest in preventing radical militant safe havens reinforced ties between the two states.<sup>6</sup>

- **Electoral Management and Crisis Response**

In 2014 and 2018, Awami League's successive electoral victories came under scrutiny, with allegations of vote-rigging and opposition suppression. Analysts argue that RAW provided political and intelligence support during these elections to ensure regime stability.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "The Influence and Interference of India in Bangladeshi Politics During the Last Fourteen Year Rule of the Awami League," *Bangladesh Policy Institute*, 7 Sep 2024, [https://www.bdpolicyinstitute.org/2024/09/the-influence-and-interference-of-india.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.bdpolicyinstitute.org/2024/09/the-influence-and-interference-of-india.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>7</sup> "India's role in Bangladesh elections sparks outrage," *East Asia Forum*, 4 June 2024, [https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/06/04/indias-role-in-bangladesh-elections-sparks-outrage/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/06/04/indias-role-in-bangladesh-elections-sparks-outrage/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

During more volatile periods, such as the BDR (Border Guard Bangladesh) mutiny and subsequent civil unrest, RAW reportedly provided Hasina's government with crisis-management advice. Tactics reportedly mirrored India's handling of unrest in Kashmir, including network shutdowns and curfews RAW operatives are said to have coordinated with Bangladesh's DGFI, influencing military posture and advising on public order strategies.<sup>8</sup>

- **Strategic Agreements**

Among consequences of this intelligence-tinged relationship were infrastructure deals perceived to favor India. Agreements granting India management of the Mongla port, railway corridors through Bangladesh to the Northeast, and water-sharing projects (notably Teesta) were signed - though not all have been fully implemented.<sup>9</sup>

- **Media & Disinformation**

During Sheikh Hasina's sudden departure amid mass unrest in 2024, a wave of disinformation accused RAW of orchestrating killings and vandalism in Bangladesh. Indian media was also accused of propagating narratives that sidelined opposition voices or amplified instability, reinforcing perceptions of pro-India bias.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, reports also highlight RAW's use of subtle media framing to shape political discourse in favor of governments aligned with Indian interests.

- **Backlash and Political Reactions**

These developments sparked domestic backlash. In early 2024, the emergence of the "India Out" campaign reflected deepening anti-Indian sentiment, especially following controversial election results and perceived Indian interference. Bangladesh's interim leaders and opposition parties accused India of hegemonic designs, with some claiming the recent political crisis was aimed at reinstating Indian influence. Although Hasina won her fourth straight term in elections this year, she was accused of muzzling opposition forces and other forms of dissent,

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<sup>8</sup> "How India's Intelligence Agency 'RAW' Assisted Sheikh Hasina's 'Crisis Management'," *Bangladesh Center*, 31 July 2024, [How India's Intelligence Agency 'RAW' Assisted Sheikh Hasina's 'Crisis Management' | Bangladesh Centre](#)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Rushad Faridi, "Indian Media's Misinformation Campaign on Bangladesh," *The Diplomat*, 5 Dec 2024, [Indian Media's Misinformation Campaign on Bangladesh – The Diplomat](#)

orchestrating disappearances and arranging extrajudicial killings.<sup>11</sup> The students led demonstrations began in early July in Dhaka over court's reinstatement of a job quota scheme that was rescinded in 2018. The protesters grew increasingly bold and resulted in the ouster of the world's longest serving Female head of the Government. Hasina's fall was a strategic setback for India as it ended the long time favorable government in Bangladesh favoring Indian interests.

### **Pakistan-Bangladesh Reset of Relationship**

Bangladesh and India shared deep ties under Hasina; she and her family have had a special relationship with India for decades. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan were essentially cold during Hasina's years in power. The July revolution and the ouster of Sheikh Hasina gave Pakistan an opportunity to cash on the anti-India sentiment within Bangladesh. The recent visit by Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar indicates a notable resurgence in bilateral relations since PM Sheikh Hasina resigned under pressure in August 2024. The talks between the two counterparts focused on resumption of direct trade, trilateral diplomacy with China, academic exchanges, visa facilitations, direct air flights and people-to-people ties. These rapid and dramatic changes in Bangladesh are strategic for the region and appear to have unnerved India.

Pakistan; however, needs to carefully navigate through the situation given the two countries' history which is believed to be the biggest hurdle in sustained and substantive partnership. Bangladesh is expected to hold elections in February 2026 and the next government may want to mend its ties with India. According to some analysts, Bangladesh National Party (BNP) is expected to win the elections and its leaders are calling for improving ties with India.<sup>12</sup>

### **Recommendations for Pakistan**

- **Capitalize on Anti-India Sentiment with Balanced Engagement:** Pakistan should carefully leverage the rising "India Out" movement and anti-India sentiments within Bangladesh without appearing opportunistic. While emphasizing historical commonalities and shared challenges as Muslim-majority states, Pakistan must position itself as a respectful, balanced, and multi-dimensional partner.

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<sup>11</sup> "Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina forced to resign: What happened and what's next?," *Al Jazeera*, 5 Aug 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/5/bangladeshs-sheikh-hasina-forced-to-resign-what-happened-and-whats-next>

<sup>12</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Ties Get Dramatic Reset," *Foreign policy*, 27 Aug 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/27/bangladesh-pakistan-diplomacy-reset-india-hasina-trade/>



Pakistan also need to acknowledge and address the past grievances - particularly 1971 - to avoid reopening wounds. This would allow Pakistan to present itself as a partner in sovereignty preservation rather than a replacement hegemon.

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