

# Changing Nature of India-Bangladesh Relations After Cold War Era

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## **Abstract**

India-Bangladesh relations have a strong foundation and have witnessed significant developments in mutual interest since Bangladesh's independence. The outstanding nature of bilateral ties is reflected in an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust and understanding. This paper examines the evolution of India-Bangladesh relations in the post-Cold War era, focusing on key political, economic, and security dimensions. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the bilateral relationship underwent significant transformation, marked by both cooperation and contention. The study explores the impact of shifting regional dynamics, including the influence of global powers, on Indo-Bangladesh ties. Key areas of analysis include trade agreements, border management and water-sharing disputes. The paper also delves into the role of political leadership in shaping bilateral relations, as well as the changing public perception of each other's policies. The paper concludes by assessing the prospects for a stable and mutually beneficial relationship in the context of a rapidly evolving regional and global order.

**Keywords:** Relations, Cold War, Bilateral

## **Introduction**

Apart from Political Science, International Relation draws upon from such diverse fields as Economics, History, Law, Philosophy, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology and Cultural Studies. It involves a diverse range of issues - from globalization and its impacts on societies and state sovereignty to ecological sustainability, nuclear proliferation, nationalism, economic development, terrorism, organized crime, human security and human rights.<sup>1</sup>

On the international level the year 1991 was truly historic, worthy of being remembered for most undreamt and radical changes all over the world. The pace of changes has been far too swift for any conceptual interpretation. These changes have transcended all geographical and ideological boundaries and put questions to long established perceptions and theories. These changes include the end of the cold war, end of the 40-year long bi-polar world, the ostensible unipolarism or multipolarism of a world dominated by the United States, the break-up of Soviet Union, many technological developments, including especially in communication.<sup>2</sup>

India and its neighbours have many things in common, particularly their political history. Most of India's neighbours were the victims of the colonial rule and acquired independence almost at the same time. India achieved the freedom by means of non-violent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, which inspired many Asian and African countries to follow India and achieve their independence. India emerged as a natural leader, so far as fight for the freedom against the mighty British Empire by means

of non-violent movement characterized by disobedience and non-cooperation, which may appear unique for the rest of the world and easy to practice. Independence to the countries extremely exploited by the colonial rulers presented a Herculean task to rebuild their economies and march towards economic development and the welfare of the masses.<sup>3</sup>

India got independence in 1947 and became the world's largest democracy. Being the world's second most populous country embracing six major religions and sixteen major languages, India's survival as a nation is a remarkable accomplishment. In addition India was capable of rising from a neglected friendless power to a regional power with global ambitions. During the Cold War era, India adopted policy of non-alignment towards the two rival blocs and tried to keep an independent foreign policy agenda. As the end of the Cold War came closer, the geo-political situation changed and India had to refine its foreign policy goals though it continues to be a member of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM).<sup>4</sup>

Bangladesh has immense geo-strategic and geo-economic importance. Its geographic location in South Asia has made it an important country in the region. On one hand, a major portion of the country is surrounded by Indian states, which makes the Bangladeshis feel India-locked. On the other hand Bangladesh is seen as a potential transit route and connection point for social and commercial interaction between South and South East Asia. Bangladesh is also located between two strong economies i.e., China and India, both of whom are also looking at Bangladesh as a potential market for trade and investment. Apart from these advantages of location, Bangladesh's huge market, cheap labour and potential source of oil and gas, has gone unnoticed.<sup>5</sup>

India played a leading role in the liberation of Bangladesh. Its people made bold sacrifices for securing to the people of Bangladesh their freedom and their rights. These historic and unparalleled sacrifices made by the people of India and the material and moral support that they gave to the people of Bangladesh combined together to provide a solid foundation for the development of warm and highly friendly and co-operative relations between India and Bangladesh. The commonality between the two countries is reflected in multi-dimensional relations at several levels of interaction. High-level exchanges, visits and meetings take place alongside the wide-ranging people-to-people interaction.<sup>6</sup>

## Review of Literature

Literature review provides a multipurpose guide to a particular topic. By reviewing existing literature, we can chart our course of study in this vast ocean of literature. Published and unpublished literature on Indo-Bangladesh relation is very vast. Much of the existing literature on Indo-Bangladesh relations primarily focuses on the Cold War period. However, there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the relationship between the two countries in the post-Cold War era. This gap suggests a need for more research on the evolving dynamics and current state of Indo-Bangladesh relations after the end of the Cold War. The below mentioned studies have been helpful in understanding and analyzing the issues related to the present study:

**Ashok Swain (1996)**, in his article, "Displacing the Conflicts : Environmental Destruction in Bangladesh and Ethnic Conflict in India", has stated that India and Bangladesh are in long-standing dispute over the sharing of waters of the river Ganges. Researcher determines environmental and economic conflicts which has forced the people to migrate, thus leading to native-migrant conflicts in India.

**AKM Abdus Sabur (1999)**, in his article, “ Bangladesh Foreign Policy in the Post- Cold War Era : Challenges and Options”, has described that, the relations between Bangladesh and India have been constrained under the influence of a host of historical, geographical, economical, socio-economic and politico-cultural factors which are themselves highly contradictory in nature. While some of them warranted close ties, other dictated a distant approach. In addition, some factors were creating high degree of interdependence between the two countries, others generated almost irreconcilable conflicts of interests.

**Harun Ur Rashid (2002)**, in his book, *Indo-Bangladesh Relations: an Insider’s View*, has described his personal experience of dealings with his Indian counterpart in bilateral negotiations and attempts to outline the causes of the ups and downs of Bangladesh’s relations with India. The author argues that there is no adequate reason why the relations cannot but be friendly if divergence of interests between India and Bangladesh is recognized and respected.

**N.S. Jamwal (2004)**, in his article, “ Border Management: Dilemma of Guarding the India-Bangladesh Border”, has stated that Indo-Bangladesh border, which came into existence after India's partition in 1947 gave rise to many questions as to the interpretation and implementation of the boundary so drawn. The paper looks at various dimensions of management of the Indo-Bangladesh border including challenges to its management and the internal political and security environment of Bangladesh and recommends measures to improve the border management.

**Pushpita Das (2008)**, in his article, “India-Bangladesh Border Management: A Review of Government’s Response”, has described India-Bangladesh border as the ‘problem area of tomorrow’. The problems include illegal migration, smuggling and transborder movement of insurgents, which are serious threats to the security of the country. The article analyses the problems arising along this border and reviews the recommendations of a report by the Group of Ministers on Border Management and the measures undertaken by the government to tackle the problems.

**Samruti.S.Pattanaik (2010)**, in her article, “New Dawn in Indo-Bangladesh Relations?”, throws light on the historical backdrop, changing course and present condition of India-Bangladesh relations. She traces various reasons responsible for the deterioration of Indo-Bangladesh relations in the past.

**Pramod Kumar (2011)**, in his article, “India’s Economic Policy Towards its Neighbours”, has analyzed India and Bangladesh economic relations. One of the problems faced by India has been illegal migration of Bangladesh people to Indian Territory, mostly for the search of job and livelihood. Though Bangladesh has been denying any migration of her people to India, but the reality is that lakhs of people have migrated to India. Until recently, Bangladesh had nothing to offer to India in trade much of the trade relations were centered towards aid and assistance to that country by India. After the discovery of oil and natural gas in Bangladesh, the other countries interest has grown towards Bangladesh including India.

**Shahnawaz Ahmad Mantoo (2012)**, in his article, “Indo-Bangladesh Relations-Looking Ahead”, has described that India may adopt a regional or sub-regional policy approach where all its smaller neighbours are on board for commonality of interests. A sub-regional unit comprising Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and North Eastern states of India would prove a pivotal centre for economic growth because there are many opportunities to explore and exploit to mutual benefits. Later, the sub-regional unit may extend its link with ASEAN and China.

**Naresh Kumar Bhari (2015)**, in his article, “India-Bangladesh relations: analyzing the recent developments”, has stated that Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship is rooted in common civilizational

heritage. The bilateral relationship encompasses political, economic, cultural and strategic dimensions. The assumption of office by the new leadership in both India and Bangladesh has led the two Asian neighbors into a new phase of bonhomie. The present ties maybe defined as mature, pragmatic and practical. It is founded on the values of friendship, equality, sovereignty, trust and understanding. Consequently several issues which are a manifestation of sovereign reality, such as the disputed boundary between the two countries, have seen the light of settlement in the recent past.

**Islam, Kabir, and Akter (2018)**, in their paper entitled, “Bangladesh -India Relations and Look East Policy of Bangladesh to China”, has stated that there are a number of interconnected issues that determine the nature of Bangladesh-India relations. In this perspective, trade, border killing, border dispute, smuggling, water dispute, security, power, connectivity remain as vital issues. Indian foreign policy action since the beginning shows that India has always been concern about three kinds of threats of its security. A threat from the politics of cold war, a threat from the side of Pakistan and a threat from the side of China. Bangladesh wants to keep friendly relation with other countries. At the eleventh hour, it can be said that Bangladesh wants to go out Indian circle. To avoid Indian dominating trend, Bangladesh is strengthening “Look East Policy” to explore and utilize untapped potentialities.

**Md. Shah Alam (2019)**, in his articles entitled, “Bangladesh-India Relations: Trends and Challenges ”, has pointed out that Indo-Bangladesh working relationship is crucial for the individual purposes of both nations. Hence, both governments should take into account public emotions before formulating mutual agreements and foreign policies as well. In particular, the government of Bangladesh should adopt more transparency and accountable policies in informing people about ongoing bilateral economic and similar treaties. Disregarding the public perception will damage the steps for building up a meaningful, cooperative alliance between these two states.

**Mohak Gambhir (2020)**, in his article, “India-Bangladesh Relations: An overview of Success and Challenges”, has described that relations between India and Bangladesh have shown great progress in the last decade across a wide spectrum. While Chinese presence is a reality, India must come to terms with it and manage it to the best of abilities, especially to secure its strategic interests close to its own shores. India should not get into competing with China on every turn in Bangladesh and should follow a much more focused approach due to its limited resources. India should continue to improve its own implementation process of the various LOCs extended, stimulate private investments in Bangladesh by way of tax incentives and faster clearances, remove trade barriers and homogenise documentation and other requirements to better facilitate trade. At the same time, our engagement with Bangladesh should not always be seen in the context of a third country and consistent efforts will be required to keep the bilateral ties friendly and peaceful.

This research aims to critically analyze the evolution and dynamics of India-Bangladesh relations in the post-Cold War era. Specifically, it will explore the political, economic, and socio-cultural ties between the two neighbouring countries from the 1990s onwards, examining key events, policy shifts, and bilateral engagements. The study will focus on the impact of global and regional changes, including the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world, on their diplomatic relations.

## Methodology

In order to pursue our study, both primary and secondary sources have been consulted. The subject has been treated in a chronological order. Primary sources include treaties, convention, documents, parliamentary debates documents and speeches of leaders of the both nations. Secondary sources include

books, articles, journals, magazines and newspapers etc.

### **India-Bangladesh Relations After Cold War Era**

The study is an attempt to understand the relationship between India and Bangladesh in the new perspectives. The foreign policy of Bangladesh has always been guided by its two core factors i.e. economic compulsions and India as a regional power. In this paradigm India occupies the center stage in Bangladesh's foreign policy, which is persuaded by virtue of its geographical surroundings, historical legacy, and more importantly, persistence of a number of outstanding bilateral issues which are vital to its existence. Bangladesh has to develop its foreign policy in the light of certain basic factors such as the geographical realities of the region, its search for security, historical background, and cultural affinities. In this paradigm for the foreign policy makers of Bangladesh nothing figures more prominently than the 'India factor'.<sup>7</sup>

The over throw of H.M. Ershad was a result of mass movement launched by Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Begum Khaleda Zia. In the beginning of the 1990s, there were two factors, which determined Indo-Bangladesh relations. One, the Cold War came to an end after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US remained the sole super power. The other, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), founded by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, came to power under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia. During her Premiership, Bangladesh moved towards liberalization, globalization and privatization to enhance the trade and investment for the economic development of the country. These developments added extensive economic contents in the foreign policy of Bangladesh. More importance was attached to trade with other countries. The foreign policy of Bangladesh during Khaleda Zia seemed resembling the policies of the previous military regimes. Initially, the two countries had differences over a number of issues.<sup>8</sup>

The resumption of democracy in Bangladesh coincides with the return of the Congress government in India in 1991. However, Dhaka's relations with New Delhi did not improve under Begum Khaleda Zia led Bangladesh Nationalist Party government. The anti-India policy followed by Khaleda Zia and the Bhartiya Janta Party's growing influence stalled the concrete effort to resolve the contentious issues between two countries. The Awami League government's return to power in 1996 after two decades brought new era of cordial relations based on mutual trust and cooperation. Her government signed the historic Ganga Water Treaty with India. It also paved the way for the return of thousands of Chakma refugees from Tripura to Bangladesh with the signing of a landmark accord that ended decades of tribal insurgency in the border region. Then, it sent a strong signal to insurgents operating all across northeastern India. Relations were further strengthened by India's "Gujral Doctrine" which favoured the policy of giving unilateral concessions to small and weaker neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike past, this phase (2001-2006) witnessed hardening of positions by both sides in resolving differences. The Khaleda Zia government largely ignored Indian security concerns. One major cause responsible for souring of bilateral relations was granting asylum to ULFA leaders Anup Chetia and ATTF leader Sanjeev Dev Barman by Bangladesh. As if this was not enough she termed the Indian militants as 'freedom fighter'. In this context, India expressed concern on the BNP governments policy of supporting Indian terrorist groups. It also provided proofs to Dhaka regarding terrorist camp run by North-East insurgents within Bangladesh. Another issue which contributed to worsening of relation between two countries was Khaleda Zia government's opposition to any proposal to export natural gas to India. This policy of BNP government was quite contrary to the international companies claim that

there was large scale deposit of natural gas in Bangladesh which could be commercially exploited and exported.<sup>10</sup>

The Indo-Bangladesh relations had got a boost during the caretaker government's regime led by Fakruddin Ahmed. After a gap of ten years, the Bangladesh Army Chief Moeen Ahmed visited India and in a significant development the two Armies held joint exercise in Assam in February 2008. Minister for State for Commerce has also visited Bangladesh in 2007 and the two countries had agreed for border *haat*. In a deviation from the practice, for the first time Bangladesh during the regime of care taker government had invited Indian soldiers to be a part of the victory day celebration on December 16 at Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka.<sup>11</sup>

The Awami League government again won a landslide victory in the December 2008 elections. PM Sheikh Hasina adopted not only a pragmatic foreign policy but inaugurated a new era of friendship and cooperation with India. She has shown considerable courage and conviction to free its soil from terrorist who were inducing in anti-India propaganda to India. The joint communique signed by Prime Ministers of two countries during the visit included various new areas of bilateral cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh, in September 2011, was the beginning of a new era in Indo-Bangladesh relationships. The presence of Chief Ministers of four bordering Indian states – Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram gave a new impetus to the bilateral ties and underlined the significance of North- East and East India in India's bilateral relationships. All the Chief Ministers proposed intensification of exchanges through land ports, 'connectivity of minds,' besides cooperation in health, education and environment, echoing the similar agenda of the BCIM.<sup>13</sup>

The power sector cooperation between Bangladesh and India is witnessing steady progress. Bangladesh and India are in negotiation to link a Power Purchase Agreement for the purchase of 250MW electricity from India to Bangladesh. A Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) setting up a 1,320MW coal fired power plant in Bangladesh was also signed. On January 2012 India welcomed Bangladesh's participation in power projects in India particularly in the north-eastern Indian states.<sup>14</sup>

The relations between the nations are unquestionably moving positive way. Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj went to Bangladesh in her first authority abroad excursion in June, 2014. On 7 May 2015 the Indian Parliament, within the sight of Bangladeshi representatives, consistently passed the Land Limit Understanding (LBA) as its 100th Protected revision, in this way settling every one of the 68-year old fringe question since the finish of the English Raj. The bill was pending sanction since the 1974 Mujib-Indira concurs. In June 2014, amid her first authority abroad visit, Sushma Swaraj closed different understandings to support ties.<sup>15</sup>

The landmark visit paid by Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on 6 June 2015 laid down new milestone in Delhi-Dhaka ties. 22 agreements were inked and renewed on multifaceted issues including security, connectivity, power and trade which is expected to bear the fruit in future.

The executive head of Bangladesh, to India in April 2017 contributed to strengthening Indo-Bangladesh relation to the next level. With 22 government-to-government agreements on energy cooperation and connectivity issues, and another 14 agreements in the field of private investment, this visit was incomparable by all means to deepen the bilateral relations. Apart from the above mentioned visits paid by the head of states, the third and fourth India–Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meetings which is delegated at foreign ministers level were also important in fostering bilateral relation.<sup>16</sup>

The usage of waterways and maritime routes has seen a substantial improvement. In a recent move India and Bangladesh (October 25, 2018) signed three bilateral memorandum of understandings with Bangladesh Government to strengthen inland water transportation from above the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Trade and Transit (PIWTT) was signed in 1972 It was last renewed for a period of five years, with provision for auto renewal, during the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh in June 2015. This Protocol permits the movement of goods on identified inland waterways between India and Bangladesh through specified routes that link points in West Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, India and Bangladesh have developed several protocols, MOUs, and SOPs to facilitate the development of fairways, ease of movement of vessels, and the use of ports. In the last virtual Summit meeting held on 17 December 2020, both leaders reviewed the situation of ongoing bilateral connectivity measures and welcomed recent initiatives, including the signing of the second addendum to the Protocol, the trial run of the trans-shipment of Indian goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chittagong, and the operationalisation of the Sonamura-Daudkandi Protocol route. Both leaders agreed to expeditiously operationalised the trans-shipment of Indian goods through the Chittagong and Mongla Ports. In the Summit meeting, India reiterated its request to the Government of Bangladesh of having at least one Land Port with a minimal negative list between each neighbouring states of India and Bangladesh, beginning with Agartala-Akhaura. On the other hand, Bangladesh proposed that Bangladeshi trucks avail of the Feni Bridge once completed, for the transportation of goods from the Chittagong port to India's Northeast.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between India and Bangladesh after the Cold War has evolved significantly, characterized by a growing partnership in several sectors, but not without its challenges. The positive trajectory of cooperation in trade, security, and regional diplomacy has helped overcome historical grievances and fostered mutual trust. While unresolved issues like water-sharing, border management, and the Rohingya refugee crisis remain, both countries have demonstrated a commitment to finding solutions through dialogue and compromise. As they move forward, the India-Bangladesh relationship will likely continue to serve as a model of cooperation in South Asia, balancing economic, security, and humanitarian interests in an increasingly interconnected world.

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