



PRIMARY RESEARCH

# Bangladesh-India relations: Honeymoon period returned?

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## Abstract

This article aims to understand better how deeply Bangladesh and India are maintaining good relations between them in recent times. Furthermore, this study has investigated and identified the factors that motivated India and Bangladesh to revive their sound relations. In the South Asian region, India is the dominant power in terms of population, economy, military strengths, geographical size, location, etc. Bangladesh shares 78.86% of its total border with India. Both countries' history, languages, culture, and economic nature are more or less similar manner. During the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, it got much support from India. After getting independence, both countries experience a sound relationship until 1975, which we can call the 'Honeymoon' period. After that, Bangladesh faces some difficulties maintaining its relationship with India due to border killings, a sense of distrust, security concerns, trade deficits, transit issues, water-sharing issues, etc. Recently, through Modi and Hasina's government's diplomatic efforts, both countries' relations have reached a new height, which the researcher labels as the 'Honeymoon period' has returned. This study is based on the review of the secondary data and content analysis in nature. This paper finds that the strategic geographical location of Bangladesh and China's strategic engagement with Dhaka motivates India to maintain more close relationship with Dhaka to get it into its grip. In addition, this study suggested that if India wants to be a regional power, and Bangladesh wants to maintain its development, to fulfill its ambitions, both countries need to maintain a good relationship.

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## INTRODUCTION

India's predominant existence in South Asia is a matter of concern to all of its smaller neighbor countries. India always considers South Asia as an integral security part of her and playing a dominating role as it has a big size, strong economy, and resources comparing to other countries of this region. An Indian researcher finds out the essential characteristics of India's dealings with its neighbors' as "geographical contiguity, socio-cultural affinity, common security concerns, economic development and harnessing common rivers" (M. A. Karim, 2009), since South Asian countries shared waters among them. There is no exception in perspective to Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh and India have shared strong ties with each other geographical, historically and culturally, both have a significant impact on

their bilateral interactions. India helps a lot during the independence movement of Bangladesh in 1971 (Rashid, 2010). New Delhi assisted refugees from Bangladesh and provided relief and reconstruction aid to build the foundations of a new country. Not surprisingly, India was the first country who was offering recognition to Bangladesh (Rather, 2014). So, it is clear that both countries' relations were shaped initially by historical episode like Bangladesh' liberation war. Such type of emotional bonds set the tone for bilateral relations between the countries. Therefore, India enjoyed an advantageous relationship with Bangladesh for at least some years.

From 1975 to 2008, both countries' relations were ups and downs; have been marked by mistrust, boarder killing, transit problems, intervention in domestic politics, large trade

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deficits, etc. (Rana, 2018). Moreover, Bangladesh emerged the second largest market for Chinese arms and ammunition exports behind Pakistan (Matthews, Zhao, et al., 2018; Yang, 2020). Beijing's Bay of Bengal centric investment including sea port expansion consider to Indian scholar as a policy of containing India by creating 'string of pearls' that Bangladesh as a vital 'pearl' in this 'string'. A rising relation between Bangladesh and China is discerned by India as a potential threat. Both countries are also actively participating in joint military exercise programs under the Defense cooperation agreement signed in 2001 that allows higher officials of Bangladesh military to visit China for learning techniques and strategies from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Furthermore, Bangladesh has apparently welcomed China's maritime silk route project, a part of Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) (Sarker, 2019) which India considered as a potential threat in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to her, as Beijing will be more engaged to operate the port in this IOR (Singhini & Tuli, 2017). India is concerned about the vulnerability of the Siliguri corridor, also known as 'chicken neck', which is 200 km long and 40 km wide (Rao, 2013). India accused that China desires to acquire Tawang (a district of Arunachal Pradesh) to appear more nearer to the Siliguri corridor with the intension of making connection with Bangladesh from the north side. Indian government perceives Bangladesh location is vital for its security, political and religious reasons. New Delhi accused that Indian insurgent group well known as United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Bodo Security Force (BdSF) who have undisturbed shelters in Chittagong, Bangladesh, cross the borders and act as catalysts for unrest, social chaos, and insurgency (Rana, 2018). This insurgent group had already been used Chittagong port for Chinese arms (Sakhuja, 2009).

Moreover, gradually Bangladesh became dependent on India economically, politically and commercially. Bangladesh heavily relies on India for its economy. Most of the necessary daily commodities like rice, meat, onion, pulses come from India (Datta, 2008). In addition, Bangladesh depends on India for water, as both countries shared more than fifty rivers. Between the countries most conflicting issue is sharing of the Ganga water that badly affected Bangladesh's amiable relationship with India since 1975 to till now (Dash, 2008). Bangladesh shared the longest border with India, but it is mostly restricted. It is noteworthy that, many Bangladeshi citizens were killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) in the border areas. On July 11, 2019, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal who is the Home Minister of

Bangladesh said in the parliament that "the number of border killings by the BSF was 66 in 2009, 55 in 2010, 24 each in 2011 and 2012, 18 in 2013, 24 again in 2014, 38 in 2015, 25 in 2016, 17 in 2017, and only three in 2018" (Anik, 2020). Recently, both countries realize the importance of keeping good relations between them. They have solved several bilateral relations like land and maritime boundary disputes, transit issues. Moreover, Bangladesh is giving access to its port to India, which is currently upgrading by China. India is also providing loans for infrastructure development and investing in Bangladesh. Such a dramatic change in relations between the countries provide a puzzle- what are the reasons behind the good relations between India and Bangladesh in recent time?

### Objectives of the Study

The present study intends to address the following objectives:

- To show the recent development of the relations between India and Bangladesh.
- To find out what factors are acting as motivators to enhances the relationship between the countries.
- To identify the challenges that are still existing to maintain good relations between the countries.

### METHODOLOGY

This study depends on qualitative methods, mainly the content analysis method. Secondary sources have been studied to analyze the relationship between India and Bangladesh. Textbooks, journal articles, policy papers, international and local newspaper reports, etc. have been included in the secondary sources. The researcher searched data through Google by using key words, title and sub-title. Thus, a good number of articles, books, and newspaper articles were found related to Bangladesh and India relations. The author selected documents as a data which were most relevant with this study. Moreover, to accomplish the paper, the author selected documents that are more authentic, reliable and well established journal and online newspaper. Furthermore, in case of online newspaper, couple of documents have been considered for cross checking. The collected data has been organized as well as analyzed with descriptive manner.

### BANGLADESH'S POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH INDIA

Bangladesh and India's relations have been passed an up and down curve for the period of the last 46 years. These bonding have been shifting for many causes like changing the political regime in Bangladesh and India's non-cooperative attitude towards Bangladesh. Reality is that,

Bangladesh and India had scope to boost their bilateral relations as both countries are historically, geographically, ethnically and culturally so close. They cannot neglect each other having major bilateral interaction.

India played a significant role in the nine-month liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. At that time Indian armed forces and Bangladesh's Mukti Bahini fought together against Pakistan army. During 1972, India came forward with 800,000 tons of food assistance and also provided support in the transportation of that food. From 1971 to 1975, India provided aid to the amount of US\$304.3 million (N. Islam, 2003). In 1972 Sheikh Mujib and India's Prime Minister said in a joint communique that "Bangladesh and India would live in eternal friendship as brothers" as both countries had "an identity of ideals, outlook, and values and would live in amity" (Rashid, 2010). The first government of Bangladesh led by AL, tenured from 1971 to 1975, adopted a clear pro-India foreign policy. At that period, Bangladesh and India developed a deep friendship, a cooperative rapport that is mostly labelled as a 'honeymoon' period. In 1972, Bangladesh and India signed a 'Treaty of Friendship and Peace' for 25 years, adhering firmly to the principles of peaceful coexistence, sovereignty, mutual cooperation and non-interference in internal affairs (Bhari, 2015; Rashid, 2010). Though mid-1974 bilateral relationship seemed to stumble and New Delhi acted to push a rigid line with Dhaka on several issues like Ganges waters sharing and Bay of Bengal boundary issues.

The political backdrop had been changed dramatically with the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and the rise to power of General Zia-ur-Rahman. President Zia provided more emphasis on its relation with China, Western and Islamic countries and moved away from its previous Indo-Soviet axis. It marked the beginning of Bangladesh's feeling of worry towards the rising regional power profile of India. During Zia's reign, mistrust, suspicion and hostility were the main norms in Bangladesh-India relations. Many of the AL government's initiatives perceived by the military government that Bangladesh had become subservient to India. For example, the creation of a Rakkhi Bahini (paramilitary force) was considered by the Bangladesh army as New Delhi's blueprint to make division among the armed forces and making it weak with the intention of maintaining its influence on Dhaka (Chakma, 2012). In 1977, Zia amended the Constitution and removed the words "secularism" and added meaning of "socialism" to it. He tried to get domestic support through underlining on a religious identity for the country that basically had an anti-India connotation to India. The gap between the countries gradu-

ally widened whenever both started to pursue destabilizing strategies; for example, India started to support Shanti Bahini insurgents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. On the other hand, India accused Bangladesh inaugurated to cooperate with Pakistan and China and performed as a channel to transfer weapons to insurgents in the northeast region of India (Bhaumik, 1996).

India hardened its position and begun withdrawing massive waters from the common river Ganges during the dry season through Farakka Barrage that had a severe navigational and irrigation difficulties on Bangladesh which further worsened the relationship between the countries. In 1981, the South Talpatty Island ownership became a hot issue as New Delhi sent its naval vessel "INS Sandhayak" near to the island. Furthermore, its armed forces landed on the island, and some fishermen raised Indian flag demanding sovereignty on the island. However, there was an observation that India desired to make pressure on Zia's government in every possible way (Huq, 1993). The first military regime had finished in 1981 when President Zia was killed in a military coup. The second military regime had started by General Ershad through the taking power unconstitutionally on 24 March 1982, and continued for eight years. He was forced to transfer power by a mass uprising in December 1990. During his tenure, Bangladesh pursued more or less a similar approach of Zia regime towards India. The crucial bilateral problems, such as the access to the Bangladesh enclaves via the Tin Bigha corridor, the maritime boundary in the BoB, the sovereignty over the south Talpatty Island did not solve. The cross border mutiny had raised in the Hill Tracts area of Chittagong and India was not in a positive mood to resolve this problem with Bangladesh (Rashid, 2010).

An election was held and Begum Khaleda Zia who is the chairperson of BNP, came to power in March 1991. Begum Zia visited India in May 1992 and held a bilateral dialogue on the unsettled issues. But the Indian government did not respond effectively to the issues raised during the trip. However, there were some positive changes during the period of 1991-1995. The corridor of Tin Bigha was leased on 26th June 1992 for 999 years on the subject of the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary agreement 1974 to have entrance to the Bangladesh enclaves of Dahagram and Angorpata from the mainland of Bangladesh (Rashid, 2010). Two agreements were signed in May 1993; one involving with the repatriation of tribal refugees from India's eastern region and another one is related to New Delhi's investment in the railway sector in Bangladesh. Overall, the relationship between the countries was not up to the mark during

this regime.

The relationship between the two countries with took a dramatic turn for the better when the AL returned to power in 1996 by winning the general election. A 30 year Ganges water sharing treaty was signed on 12 December 1996, which India had declined to sign with the previous governments. Another landmark Peace Agreement was signed on the Chittagong Hill Tracts issues with the Tribal Representatives on 2nd December 1997. It was believed that both agreements were possible due to India's fullest co-operation with the Sheikh Hasina government. From Dhaka to Calcutta a bus route had started again, and it was stated that a train would run between Calcutta and Bangladesh. The Bangladesh-India relations had worsened again when the BNP returned to power, and Begum Khaleda Zia became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 2001. After the forming government, New Delhi sent its special representative to Dhaka. The visit was characterized a "goodwill" official visit and seemed to an indication that India desired to carry on its friendly relationship with Bangladesh.

However, the reality is that the Indian government did not appear to be eager to resolve bilateral matters with Bangladesh's new government. Instead, they had accused many issues like increase of Islamic fundamentalism, sheltering of Indian northeast region terrorist within Bangladesh, gas export refusal in India and emergence of large number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India. Since 2003 the Joint Working Group on Trade met two times to decrease Bangladesh's massive trade deficit with India. In March 2006, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited India and during that time, two agreements were signed with India: 1) The Revised Trade Agreement 2) The agreements on Mutual Cooperation for Preventing Illicit Drug Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Related Matters (*Global Security, n.d*). However, during the caretaker regime from 2007-2008, some security cooperation were observed, though a usually negative attitude and suspicion towards each other sustained in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

The Awami League party came to power in 2009, and Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister. She had visited India in January 2010, during her milestone four-day visit created a great environment of mutual trust that will lay grounds to a much more strong and effective relations with India. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India gave a return visit to Bangladesh in September 2011 to bring forward the transformative agenda which begun in 2010. Both countries Prime Minister had signed a Framework Agreement of Cooperation for Development On 6th September 2011.

The agreement was wide-ranging pursuing cooperation on significant issues at the bilateral, sub-regional and regional levels. The Hasina Government had adopted hard positions to insurgents and beating Indian separatists in the country. A lot of the Indian militants left Bangladesh and surrendered to law implementing authorities of India. In July 2014, Bangladesh and India acknowledged the verdict of International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and settled their long-lasting sea boundary dispute. In 2015, two countries Prime Minister were signed 20 agreements including most expected historical Land Boundary Agreement. Through this LBA agreement, both countries resolved their historical disagreement and provided national identity to the nationless inhabits.

### **Economic and Trade: Bangladesh's Economic Dependency on India?**

The geographical closeness of both Bangladesh and India makes them instinctive trading partners. Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, India was the foremost trading partner of her. Both countries have a chance to become benefited immensely with the trade. However, their bilateral trade hampered due to lake of trust seriously. In 2010-2011, two way trade was US\$ 5.099 billion in which Bangladesh imported from India worth of US\$ 4.586 billion and exported only \$ 0.512 million (*Rather, 2014*). The Bangladesh Bank statistics indicated that in 2017 the FDI from India in net terms reached \$114.65 million whereas it was \$79.2 million in 2016. Recently, both countries bilateral trade have been reached accounting for \$6.6 billion. Trade between the countries has been dominated by India, and trade deficit increased year to year that is in disfavor of Bangladesh (*A. M. Islam et al., 2019*). According to International Trade Center's data, Bangladesh imported 763 percent more than India imported from Bangladesh in 2015.

Bangladesh considers India as her one of the vital sources of imports count of 11 to 13 percent of its total import. For example, Bangladesh imported consumer goods, intermediate goods, capital goods, primary commodities respectively 20, 10, 8, and 13 percent (*N. Islam, 2004*). Bangladesh has been worried regarding the growing bilateral trade deficit that is on average at 9.5% yearly with India. Bangladeshi people always worried about the trade deficit and India's dominating role towards the weak economy of Bangladesh. Some issues like Indian negative list on particular Bangladeshi products, non-tariff barriers, and bureaucratic hurdles are identified as India's unwillingness to open up its economy (*Pattanaik, 2010*).

Furthermore, India's rejection to give free entrance to



the few exportable things from Bangladesh has contained more suspicions to Dhaka. Another concerning issue for Bangladesh is that a huge portion of informal imports from New Delhi across the border which turn aside import duties of Bangladesh. In 2011, Bangladesh got the duty-free facilities from India for 25 drug and alcoholic items. At the same year, Bangladesh has provided transshipment opportunity to India. Recently, as a commitment to SAPTA and WTO, India and Bangladesh have declined their trade barriers. India has provided preferences on about 2,925 tariff lines to Bangladesh under SAPTA. In 2015 Bangladesh exported things amount to \$0.64 billion but imported items for USD 5.52 billion in the same period. Whereas, Bangladesh export increase only 1% in the last five years, but import has been rising 13% rate from India at the same time. So it is clear that existing bilateral changes are not assisting Bangladesh to decrease trade gap with India. Recently, To-fail Ahmed, who was the Commerce Minister of Bangladesh, argued that because of the emergence of countervailing duty and various non-tariff barriers, Bangladesh is not able to enjoy the duty-free benefits which is provided by India. Further, he said that to enter the Indian market Bangladeshi exporters need to be confronted 12.5 percent countervailing duty.

Moreover, Bangladesh's exporters do not have enough marketing as well as distribution opportunity in India. As sales are of very low volume in India, exporters marginal cost of supply is upward. On the contrary, Indian exporters marginal cost is very small due to their big domestic market as well as large export sizes in Bangladesh (N. Islam, 2004). Furthermore, there is another strong reason behind the low volume trade of Bangladesh in India which is- export items are not very diversified and similarity on production items of both India and Bangladesh (M. S. Islam, 2008). For example, Bangladesh is vastly focused on readymade garments that is not a major import thing for India as it has also got potential in this sector. Bangladeshi experts feel that as a larger economy of India, it should provide more concessions to Dhaka.

In 2014-15, bilateral trade between the two countries raised at USD 6.9 billion in which India exported to Bangladesh worth of \$6.2 billion and Bangladesh's export to India amounted to \$0.6 billion. In 2018, the number is expected to stand up the \$10 billion (Bhari, 2015). In 2016, during the visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina in India both countries inked 22 pacts. In the recent times, India expanded a USD 4.5 billion concessional line of credit to Bangladesh for infrastructure projects, including the expansion of three ports named Mongla, Payra and Chittagong

Ports. Both countries signed an agreement to launch a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Bangladesh which is specially designed for Indian enterprises.

### **Bangladesh's Security Relations with India**

Military relationship is playing a crucial role to perceive the nature of bonding between the countries. And the Bangladesh-India relations are not exceptional. Both countries friendly military relationship had started in 1971 during the independence movement of Bangladesh. This was clearly pointed out in the joint statement: "The two leaders agreed to foster mutually beneficial and deeper defence cooperation, taking into account the illustrious history of cooperation which began with both forces' joint operation during Bangladesh's Great Liberation War in December 1971" (The Wire, 2017). Though, it continued only for a small number of years, in 1975, after the death of first Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the dynamic of the relationship had changed between the countries. For a long period of time, it is observed both countries security, as well as a military relationship was incredulous. In June 2015, during the visit of Prime Minister Modi's in Bangladesh, both countries agreed on joint coast guards in view of combating piracy and enhancing maritime security in the BoB region. In the same year, Defense Minister of India, Mr. Parrikar visited Bangladesh along with the Indian vice-chiefs of the three forces (army, navy and air force) and India's coast guard. Parrikar intension was of this visit to finalize a "defense cooperation framework" with Bangladesh. Hasina and Modi held a dialogue on "regional security and cooperation in combating international terrorism." Both countries higher officials signed a variety of agreement including cyber security, defense, connectivity, energy, and a civil nuclear cooperation pact. In April 2017, Sheikh Hasina visited in India and signed an agreement with New Delhi to enhance defense cooperation (Uddin, 2019). Delhi assigned \$500 million in line of credit for Bangladesh to buy military hardware and weapons from India itself (Ali, 2018; D. Hossain, 2019). It also comprised of annual consultations, training between the military forces of the two countries, and capacity-building cooperation (Ali, 2018). In November 2017, both India and Bangladesh' military appeared at a field training exercise named "SAMPRITI 2017" at Mizoram in India to strengthen cooperation and interaction between the forces. Both countries agreed to arrange joint military training, interchange of military experts and trainers. Recently, Bangladesh raising its number of armed personnel to India for receiving training.

During the four days (April 07-11, 2017) visit of Bangladesh

Prime Minister in India, both countries signed a “memorandum of understanding” to enhance their security relationship (Uddin, 2019). According to reports, India was willing to enter a formal treaty or pact for 25 years regarding military ties, but Bangladesh is not consenting to a defense treaty or pact, rather it chooses a less binding as well as less formal agreement like a MoU. Some security specialists and diplomats believed that Bangladesh would not be benefited through the agreement, even it could go contrary to the country’s interests, adding that it is India’s hegemonic attitude towards Bangladesh. Bangladesh depends on China for its military equipment, and both countries have a defense cooperation agreement.

### **Recent Development of Bangladesh-India Relations**

Recently, India realizes that to become a regional power, strategic geographical location of Bangladesh and its economically strong Bangladesh’ support is required to her. On the contrary, development hungry Bangladesh is trying to utilize the rising economy of India. Therefore, both countries are trying to mitigate their conflicting issues.

#### ***Land boundary resolved***

Land borderline and enclaves issues were the long unresolved issues since 1947. India acquired ownership of 111 enclaves, and Bangladesh got 51 enclaves (D. Hossain, 2019). “The enclave’s issues were areas that belong to Bangladesh but were inhibited by Indian citizens and areas belong to India but inhibited by Bangladeshi citizens” (Mostofa, 2005). In 1974, Bangladesh and India signed Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) on land boundary disputes when it was believed that those differences had become past (A. Hossain, 2016). However, this agreement was not implemented due to India’s balked on the ratification of it. Bangladesh more or less instantly approved the agreement, and urged New Delhi to take required initiatives as soon as possible to make it functional but failed (Bhattacharjee, 2012). After 35 years, land and enclaves issues reemerged during the period of Hasina government in 2009. In January 2010, both countries prime ministers agreed to resolve the boundary disputes taking into consideration of the 1974 LBA and made a joint Land Boundary Working Group to accelerate the negotiations process (Chakma, 2012).

At last in June 2015, during the visit of Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister to Bangladesh, both countries signed the historic LBA to settle all the boundary problems, including delimitation of 6.9 kilometers of the discorded boundary, and exchange of 152 enclaves. Through this agreement,

50,000 deprived people who were living in the border enclaves finally got their national identity. Abul Hassan Mahmood, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, termed the agreement as a “historic milestone” in the relationship between the countries whereas Modi called the noteworthy of LBA with the “fall of the Berlin Wall” (Jason, 2015). Lack of territorial sovereignty, the disputed area, were a zone of various illegal activities like human trafficking, illicit migration, smuggling, harborages of terrorist and exchange of fake currency. It was expected that through the LBA, a horrible chapter will be closed fruitfully and a continuous irritant matter will be erased in the India-Bangladesh relationships.

#### ***Maritime disputes resolved***

It is noteworthy that sea boundary disputes in the Bay of Bengal between Bangladesh and India had been solved in 2014. The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at Hague in the Netherlands, officially declared its decision on 7th July 2014 regarding a decades-old maritime dispute in the BoB between the countries (Rosen & Jackson, 2017). In a landmark judgment, Bangladesh was awarded 19,467 sq. Kilometers four-fifth of the total disputed area and leaving 6,135 sq. kilometers (24%) to India (D. Hossain, 2019). Although, Dhaka and New Delhi maritime boundaries discussion held in several times in 1974, 1978, 1980, 1982 and 2008, it failed to resolve due to the differences over ways of delimiting the boundary between the countries (Chakma, 2012; Rashid, 2010).

Since 2008, Bangladesh and India have left the matter on the backburner, just sometimes expressing their aspiration to resolve the problem through dialogue without giving much follow-up attention. In December 2008, Indian survey ship along with two naval vessels encroached into the disputed waters. Dhaka and New Delhi have overlapping demand over 18 blocks in the BoB region. Whereas, both countries disputed maritime area of 25,602 sq. Km. which is only 3% to 5% of India’s total maritime area as it has a large maritime portion in the IOR, BoB and Arabian Sea (Rashid, 2010). As the area is of 100% in the west side maritime area of Bangladesh with India and no available area in the west side for Bangladesh remained, so it is very important for Bangladesh to keep this area under its jurisdiction. According to UN provisions, any nation’s ownership will not be deliberated if there is a difference with another country that could have overlapping claims. Bangladesh observed that bilateral talks were stalled with India regarding maritime boundary issue, so there was no option to Bangladesh except to look out for another path to settle the dispute. However, the government of Bangladesh had initiated to

lodge the dispute with the PCA on 8th October 2009. Required documents submission and oral heritage from two countries were finished in December 2013. However, the judgment brought out in 2014 and India has accepted the verdict in view of keeping a friendly relationship with Bangladesh as well as considering geo-strategic reality in the Indian Ocean region and BoB region (Quader, 2019). The verdict permits Bangladesh 200 miles exclusive economic zone, 134 miles of seabed away from the 200-miles economic zone and access to the open sea area for Bangladesh, consequently, the possibility of Bangladesh becoming a ‘sea-locked country’ has moved out forever (Rashid, 2010). In addition, it is noticeable that Dhaka’s awarded maritime zone includes 10 off-shore blocks in the previous disputed side with India.

### **Access to Bangladesh ports**

Bangladesh government has signed a MoU with Indian government to use Chittagong (Chattogram) and Mongla sea ports for freight transport to and from its far-flung region in India’s northeast (Sufian, 2020). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh said in a statement, “The Leaders welcomed the conclusion of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the use of Chattogram and Mongla ports for movement of goods to and from India, particularly to and from the North East of India, which could create a win-win situation for both economies” (Port Strategy, 2020). One of the provisions of the previous draft agreement regarding Bangladeshi port use was referred that if Nepal and Bhutan wish, they can be included to the agreement. Only Bangladeshi vehicles and vessels will be allowed for carrying the goods within Bangladesh territory. The finance minister of both Assam and Tripura assumed that access to the seaports of Bangladesh would make stronger their connectivity to trading with the mainland of India.

### **Transit issue**

India had long demanded transit facilities from Bangladesh to better connect with its remote north-eastern region. Bangladesh denied allowing transit demand because Dhaka was arguing that it would make security jeopardies and threats to the country’s sovereignty. Otherwise, it will be difficult to come back if once given transit facility, and such a facility might boost terrorism and mutiny. When Sheikh Hasina government came into power in 2009, she altered the country’s Indian policy and commence to improve relations between the countries. It was observed that during that time, a policy was shifted regarding the transit issue (Chakma, 2012). During Hasina’s visit to India in 2010, she

informed Indian government that in principle, Dhaka took a decision to permit New Delhi to use the Chittagong sea port, Mongla port, and Ashuganj water port of Bangladesh. After more than one year of discussions, a transit treaty was made prepared for sign in September 2011 during the Singh’s visit to Bangladesh. But the treaty could not be signed at last because Bangladesh retreated from signing the agreement as India was not willing to sign the Teesta water agreement (R. Karim, 2011). Another cause was that, Bangladesh’s infrastructure was not ready that time for takings load of the enlarged traffic which will create after giving transit to India (Bhattacharjee, 2012). However, India’s long-awaiting demand for transit was met through a number of transport agreements and framework arrangement on June 6, 2015. Through this agreement, India allowed using Bangladesh territory for passage of cargo and passengers to the North East region. The goods and things transit via Ashugunj river port in Bangladesh was inaugurated in June 2016. It permitted Indian consumers to ferry cargo from Kolkata port to Ashugunj through inland water. India has also offered a soft loan for the expansion of Ashugunj container terminal to Bangladesh. New Delhi has granted \$338.8 million loans for the reconstruction of the Ashugunj to Akhaura road in Bangladesh. India has been investing in the Ashugunj area so that it could fully utilize its transit right.

### **Bangladesh Bhutan India and Nepal Initiatives (BBIN)**

Although South Asian countries have shared their history and culture with each other, they are still one of the less connected regions in the world. India offered BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal), a sub-regional initiative to improve connectivity and economic development among the member countries. Four South Asian countries respective ministers of transportation signed Motor Vehicles Agreement for ‘the Regulation of Passenger, Personal and Cargo Vehicular Traffic’ in Thimpu on 15 June 2015. Already Bangladesh, India, and Nepal have ratified in parliament the Motor Vehicle Agreement and have decided to begin operation of the MVA among the three participant countries (D. Hossain, 2019). But Bhutan has tried more than a year to ratify the BBIN-MVA, but finally stated that it was not able to advance with the ratification procedure ‘for now.’ It thinks that by implementing this agreement, other countries vehicles would move easily which will create a negative impact on its transportation and it will not be environment-friendly. Earlier, New Delhi had proposed an analogous vehicular agreement during the 18th SAARC summit for the member countries of SAARC which was later held back by Islamabad. Within the BBIN MVA structure, the agreement

will expand and progress corridors, assure port access with efficiency and develop border to ensure mellifluous cross-border goods and manufactures movements. It was projected during BBIN conceptualization, to invest \$8bn over five year period for 30 road projects to attain its goals under assistance with Asian Development Bank (ADB). India is gaining economic and strategic interest through BBIN co-operation.

### **Driving Forces of Recent Development of Bangladesh-India Relations**

#### ***Is geographical location a fact!!***

Geographical location of any country is a significant factor of geopolitics. As Napoleon Bonaparte claimed that “the foreign policy of a country is determined by its geography”. Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides east, west, and north along with a 4094 Km land border, another south side is the Bay of Bengal. Moreover, in the South-East side, a little boundary (about 271 kilometers on river land) is covered with Myanmar. India is about 22 times bigger than Bangladesh in considering its area. There are 57 trans-boundary rivers in Bangladesh of which 54 are shared with India and rest of 3 with Myanmar. If we look at from various angles, geographical location of Bangladesh provides it both opportunity and disadvantages.

Bangladesh' territory is vital for India to communicate with its land-locked northeastern region. For example, North-east Indian trader needs to travel 1,600 km to access a port of India from Agartala in Tripura to Kolkata in West Bengal, through Siliguri. On the contrary, to reach the same destination via Bangladesh, traders required 600 kilometers to travel, or even more convenient way is to access Chittagong port in Bangladesh, where they only need 200 km to go (Kathuria, 2017). Another important reason is that, people of the northeastern state of India can get access in Sea route via the Chittagong port of Bangladesh. Furthermore, Bangladesh cooperation is also needed to India if it wants to impede cross-border terrorism to the unstable northeastern region. Therefore, India's required corridor via Bangladesh sets an opportunity to make its foreign policy in a beneficial position to Bangladesh.

A little land boundary of Bangladesh with Myanmar is a bridge between South East Asia and South Asia through Myanmar. Bangladesh's physical location has provided a great opportunity to work as an economic and strategic bridge in various regional organizations like SAARC, BIM-STEAC, and ASEAN (Mourya, 2016). In the 21st century, the Indian Ocean is very significant for not only considering its commercial value but also for security motive of a key

power. According to Alfred Mahan, the sea is a key factor in geopolitics, who wants to lead the world, it needs to take control over the sea. Bangladesh is located on the focal point of Bay of Bengal with 45,000 square miles of sea territory where valuable maritime resources like energy, fisheries etc. are available. Bangladesh's location is not only vital to increase trade facilities in northeastern region of India but also its position is considered as a cost-effective path to import gas from Myanmar (Mourya, 2016). China's eagerness to get access in the Indian Ocean gives a privilege to its outer orientation.

#### ***China factor***

Recently notwithstanding India's changing its Neighbourhood policy, China has tightened its position in South Asia. China has increased multi-dimensional (political, economic, and security) supportive relations with India's neighboring countries, including Bangladesh (Freeman, 2018). China's investment looks lucrative to Bangladesh as it is required of infrastructure and connectivity for continuing her development. Most of the investment of China is the Bay of Bengal centric. China's such investment consider to India as a strategy of “Strings of pearls”. China is providing \$38 billion to Bangladesh for various infrastructure development projects. Moreover, last few years, China is upgrading Chittagong port, which is located at strategic points of Bay of Bengal, building up another deep seaport located close to India's border named Payra. China is also trying long years to invest in the Sonadia deep Seaport in Cox's Bazar. China is supplying military equipment and providing training to Bangladesh armed forces. As a part of military modernization, Bangladesh purchased two submarines from China in 2016. In 2016, for the first time, the PLA navy fleet paid visited Bangladesh to participate in a joint maritime drill in Chittagong with the Bangladesh navy (M. S. Islam, 2016). Each year the PLA of China sends delegation in Bangladesh as many as India does. Growing Beijing's security engagement with Dhaka made New Delhi wary due to its vulnerable Northeast region. Therefore, the Modi government is trying to counter Chinese engagement in Bangladesh so that it does not get closer to China. Currently, Modi has been commenced ‘neighborhood first’ of his foreign policy initiative. The “neighborhood first” strategy indicates the diplomatic approach of Modi's government towards its neighbors.

For getting closer to Bangladesh, apart from strategic and economic engagement, both India and China are also competing through other engagements. For instance, on 25 March, India had donated 30,000 surgical masks and 15,000



caps to Dhaka as an urgent medical assistance. Again, it has donated 30,000 COVID-19 test kits on 6 May 2020 ([The New Indian Express, 2020](#)). Apropos it is mention worthy that Bangladesh is the first nation who has obtained Kits from New Delhi that reflects the importance of Bangladesh to India. Before China reached, India had handed over quickly this assistance. Interestingly Lahiri, one of the Bangladesh expert noted that “Within hours of India’s aid reaching Dhaka, on 26 March China sent 15,000 N95 mask and 1000 infrared thermometers” ([Siddiqui, 2020](#)). Moreover, Xi Jinping called to Hasina and proposed to send Chinese experts in Bangladesh to fight COVID-19. During this time Xi said Hasina that Beijing would carry on its efforts to strengthen strategic partnership with Dhaka ([Bdnews 24, 2020](#)).

Modi understood that if India does not resolve its conflicts with its neighboring small countries, it could not be able to check the Chinese growing influence in the South Asian region. Ali Riaz, Professor of Political Science at Illinois State University, USA told AFP that, “Bangladesh is in India’s sphere of influence,” he added “Understandably, India is watching Bangladesh’s growing ties with Beijing. But Bangladesh is improving ties with China carefully so that it does not jeopardize its relations with India” ([Dawn News, 2020](#)).

## CHALLENGES

For a long time, Bangladesh has been negotiating with India to distribute equitably of trans-boundary river water, which has been a key source of dispute between the countries. The trans-boundary rivers stream through Indian land, but it is not willing to make a treaty with Bangladesh regarding the obstruction or diversion of water even though a Joint River Commission (JRC) was established by Bangladesh and India in 1972 for sharing of water resources, irrigation, and controlling flood. It is a regrettable matter that both countries share fifty-four rivers but Bangladesh has merely one single river water sharing treaty with India, on the Ganges River that was signed in 1996. In the Ganges Water Treaty 1996, article 9 makes it obligatory for New Delhi to accomplish water sharing treaty with Dhaka on principles of fairness, equity and no destruction to either side ([M. S. Islam, 2011](#)). But the reality was different. New Delhi took aside the guarantee and arbitration clauses about the lowest amount of water from the treaty. In 1975, India built the Farakka Barrage with the intension of diverting water flow in the dry season to escalation the navigability of Calcutta port. “No state has the right to divert the natural flow of international river water within its territory through unilateral action” ([M. S. Islam, 2011](#)). When the Farkka Barrage begins opera-

tion in 1975, the Ganges fresh water supply reduced significantly. In addition, agriculture, irrigation, fisheries, navigation, river silting, coastal erosion, ground water exhaustion, and regular economic actions have been affected badly.

A draft deal was supposed to prepare to sign in 2011-allocated 42.5 percent for India and 37.5 percent for Bangladesh of the Teesta’s water. But the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed this agreement and intensely thinks that Bangladesh might get at best 25% of the water so it was deferred and still it remains unsigned ([Uddin, 2019](#)). Indeed, she was planning to accompany the then Prime Minister Singh to Dhaka in 2011 to sign that agreement but canceled the visit. In every year from December to May, Bangladesh desired to get half (50%) of the Teesta’s water, because in that time, water flow drops extremely in the country. According to Bangladeshi experts, “The historical flow of the river at Rangpur is 5,000 cusecs, but we’re getting only 500 cusecs of water now” ([The Times of India, 2017](#)), which has affected farmers and fisherman’s livelihood. According to the Observer Research Foundation, over 1, 00,000 hectares of land across 5 districts in Bangladesh are harshly worn-out due to the removal of the Teesta’s waters by India ([The Times of India, 2017](#)).

New Delhi has started the Tipaimukh dam project to generate 1500 megawatt power on the trans-boundary Barak River which would lead to huge ecological destruction for both Bangladesh and India’s Manipur state. Specialists showed concern that a major earthquake might cause the disaster of the dam and it will generate risk for the lives, land as well as forests of the two countries. Although there was a lot of expectation of Bangladeshi policy maker during the Modi’s visit in Bangladesh in 2015 regarding the Teesta issue. Modi said that “rivers nurture our relationship, not become a source of discord and water sharing is a human issue and should be translated into action” ([Bhuyan, 2015](#)). He also said that “I am of the view that birds, air and water-these three do not have to have visas at all” ([Bhari, 2015](#)). Already, three years have gone, but there is no hope to share Teesta river water with Bangladesh. Mamata Banerjee proposed sharing of the Torsa rivers water instead of the Teesta, which is nearer to the boundary of Sikkim and Bangladesh ([The Times of India, 2017](#)). In fact, the Torsa has connectivity with the river of the Padma in Bangladesh. She suggested that both countries can establish a commission to determine the flowing water level through the Torsa and the consideration of water that might be shared.

Indian border security force kills many Bangladeshis, but Bangladesh cannot protest hardly because of geopolitical reality. Moreover, Bangladesh is located adjoining the Indo-

China disputed borderline in the north. It can be assumed that any kind of border conflict between the two countries, lines of communication of India, would be constrained to the small Siliguri corridor, which will obstruct the communication of Bangladesh and Nepal. So as a small state, Bangladesh has no scope to avoid India. Moreover, India's attempts to push Bangladeshi Muslims origin immigrants, whereas it promises to allow non-Muslim in the Assam region through the amendment to the Citizenship Act, which is considered communal sentiments (Aiyar, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Due to geographical closeness, India's policy has a significant impact on Bangladesh's interests and the country's development and stability. India also needs Bangladesh's support to fulfill its wish to be regional and, ultimately, a global power. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on India for trade, water, foods, and commodities, etc. India might have expected that Bangladesh keeps on indebted to her as gratefulness of its assisting role during the independence movement, but that did not occur in the long run. However, relations between the countries have moved on a mature and dependable partnership during the Hasina and Modi government regime from 2009 to now. Both Bangladesh and India is moving towards a new era of partnership in political, economic, and security areas. Recently, China's influence over Bangladesh has grown immensely. India desires to access the defense market through a treaty with Bangladesh, targeting to overturn China's share there. Con-

sequently, India is always trying to enhance cooperation in major defense areas such as military supplies, joint military exercise, and non-traditional securities to counter China's growing influence in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a vital factor for India due to its strategic location, trade and transit issues, energy resources, etc. So, India's policy for Dhaka should be more explicit and clear. If India wants to lead this region, it should solve the rest of the bilateral issues with Bangladesh.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is based on secondary sources which is one of the significant limitation. The article would be enriched more, if some primary data could be included. For example, interviews with relevant officials and experts opinion regarding this issues, might provide more deeply and meaningful discussion. But due to COVID-19 situation and financial constraint, the author did not consider primary sources for collecting data.

However, this research makes space for further study, and facilitates more extensively investigation of the research problem through narrowing down the ideas, texts, and concepts used. Moreover, for better understanding of Indo-Bangladesh relations, it is also important to find out what factors influence China to engage Bangladesh and how it creates challenges for Bangladesh to make balance between both power India and China. Therefore, in future such study can be done based on this study.

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