

Focus
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Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

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Abstract

Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are a victim of internal and regional politics. Internally, the political strife between former East and West Pakistan over the electoral majority of the Awami League against the Pakistan Peoples' Party was stretched to an extent that the outcome was the separation and dismemberment of the country. The internal political strife was exploited by regional powers which led to the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Fifty-one years after the dreadful episode, Pakistan and Bangladesh are progressing as sovereign countries. The foreign policy outlooks of both the countries are diversified with more inclination towards trans-regionalism and economic connectivity. At the bilateral level, the memories of 1971 are still an obstacle in the way of a cordial Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship. This subject paper is an evaluation of the internal weaknesses that reinforced Indian ingress in former East Pakistan, the factors behind the Modi-Hasina nexus, and where does the Pakistan-Bangladesh relation fall in the backdrop of regional connectivity overtures.

Keywords: Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, China, economic relations, 1971 war

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Introduction

Fifty-one years have passed since the breakup of then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). There are various narratives associated with the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Bangladeshis see the war as liberation from former West Pakistan, while for Pakistan it was India that intervened and provoked the nationalistic tendencies in former East Pakistan. The developments responsible for the separation of East and West Pakistan are diverse and are debated in academia and policy circles to date. Bengali sensitivities and discrimination at the hands of West Pakistan are often projected as the prime factor which prompted the conflict. It is argued that Bengalis then were Pakistanis and it was their right to form a government. However, denying them the road to the corridors of power widened the divide.

India played the game of dividing lines between the two wings and on 21 November 1971 Indian troops landed on the sovereign territory of former East Pakistan.¹ Indian Army along with the Mukti Bahini militia² carried out destruction and Pakistan plunged into civil unrest.³ While the Pakistan Army's presence in the conflict had been to preserve state unity and it was not a willful assault on the Bengali people.

In the aftermath of 1971, Pakistan has tried to build ties with Bangladesh. However, the Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship lacks cordiality. Bangladesh's political ties with India are often seen as the reason for the lack of warmth towards Pakistan.

Bangladesh's tilt towards India carries a geographic factor. The India-Bangladesh border length is 4,096 kilometres, stretching along the east, west, and north.⁴ The role of India in 1971 is yet another major factor in Bangladesh-India relations.

In the recent past, Pakistan's narrative of geoeconomics and regional connectivity could be an opportunity to enhance its relationship with Bangladesh. Bangladesh, like Pakistan, is in support of regional connectivity. Bangladesh has 'formalised its participation' in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵ These developments bring Pakistan and Bangladesh on the same page regionally. Chittagong and Gwadar seaports are likely to emerge as strategic gateways for East, South, West, and Central Asia.

The Historical Context of Pakistan-Bangladesh Baggage

On 7 December 1970, Pakistan's first general elections under the Legal Framework Order (LFO) were conducted. The election till-date is regarded as one of the fairest. Awami League and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) were the two leading political parties in the election. Awami League had a majority in former East Pakistan: 160 out of 162 seats. While Pakistan People's Party was in lead in West Pakistan; 81 out of 138 seats.⁶ The election results pointed towards a disjoint between the two wings of the country. After the election, President General Yahya Khan visited Dhaka and Larkana but no breakthrough was achieved.⁷ The political parties of the time did not realise the severity of the

situation. Had a cooperative approach been adopted, Pakistan could have been saved from a breakup. On the contrary, the electoral divide between East and West Pakistan was stretched into internal strife. It was the lust for power that led to the dismemberment of former East Pakistan. India, a keen spectator, took advantage of the situation and waged a war against Pakistan.⁸ Around 3 million people lost their lives in the war.⁹ Air Vice-Marshal (Retd) Zubair Alam, a veteran of 1971 who during the war flew C-130 transport aircraft in combat support and airfield assault operations, talks about India's negative role in the war, he says, "The continental transport was rendered impossible by the Indian trained miscreants of Mukti Bahini."¹⁰

The subject of Pakistan-Bangladesh is close to the hearts of many, especially those who had lived in former East Pakistan. The war of 1971 is often cited as a governance failure of Pakistan. It remains a fact that the Bengalis' rights were denied and became a reason for Bengali resentment against the West Pakistanis. Awami League's majority vote gave the party the democratic right to form the government. However, denying the election outcome provoked resentment in Bengalis. The worst was the exposure of internal weaknesses to outside forces. The situation provided ground for adversarial tendencies to further their nefarious agenda. The war was a loss for the people of Pakistan. 1971 is a reality 50 years down the lane invoking bitter memories. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were the lead

politicians of the time. Bhutto had once remained part of military authoritarianism. He served as the Foreign Minister in General Ayub's cabinet. In 1966, Bhutto parted ways with General Ayub.¹¹ Bhutto's slogan *roti, kapra, makan* inspired the students and the working class. While, Sheikh Mujib, whose party was in the lead position had remained in the headlines owing to his Six-Point Programme. Earlier, he had been implicated in the Agartala Conspiracy Case but was later freed.¹² Dr GW Choudhury, a central minister in the cabinet of President General Yahya Khan writes in his book *The Last Days of United Pakistan*, "Mujib's election campaign and strategy were to carry the gospel of Bengali nationalism and the ideal of Bangladesh."¹³ President Yahya had pointed to Awami League's election campaign agenda and had criticised that the party was spreading venom and hatred against West Pakistan. The party's Six Points were seen as propagating an independent country. Later, it was the Awami League, which spearheaded the struggle for Bangladesh following the military operation of 25 March 1971.¹⁴ Thus, the creation of Bangladesh carries the legacy of the Bengali struggle for independence. In the aftermath of the war, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India concluded a Tripartite Agreement (9 April 1974). The agreement was an effort at foregoing past mistakes and head toward a new start.¹⁵ However, in the following years, Pakistan-Bangladesh relations have not shown any significant improvement, rather 1971 is the fulcrum around which the relations revolve. Awami League, the

incumbent political party in Bangladesh still views Pakistan through the prism of 1971. Awami League is adamant over its demands of 'apology, reparations, and division of assets' from the Government of Pakistan.¹⁶ Pakistan's stance on the apology issue rests with the Tripartite Agreement. Besides, Pakistan does not demand an apology for the atrocities committed by the Mukti Bahini against West Pakistanis, including Biharis and Bengalis.¹⁷

Pakistan-Bangladesh Ties: The Various Dimensions

Michael Kugelman, a South Asia expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington views the Pakistan-Bangladesh relations as "complex and sensitive the row over the execution of an Islamist leader in Bangladesh in 2016 led to an all-out diplomatic spat between the two countries, with both sides summoning each other's ambassadors."¹⁸ Pakistan termed the act of execution politically motivated. While for Bangladesh, Pakistan's disposition was an act of interference in internal matters of state.¹⁹

Michael Kugelman also sees the Indian government's policies of discrimination against Muslims as a uniting factor between Pakistan and Bangladesh.²⁰

The Pakistan-Bangladesh relations carry a bilateral as well as regional dimension. In the words of Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, "Bangladesh has not forgotten Pakistan's gruesome killings of some 30 lakh Bangladeshis and

rape of hundreds of thousands of women during the Liberation War in 1971."²¹

Anam Zakaria, author of the book *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* says, "Pakistan must acknowledge the violence of 1971 as well as the political, economic, and cultural discrimination prior to Bangladesh's birth." According to Zakaria, "Owning up to the past and issuing a formal apology for war crimes committed in 1971 will allow the two countries to deepen diplomatic and economic relations."²²

The prime actors in 1971 were Pakistan and India. India's military intervention in former East Pakistan had to be countered through force and that was the reason that led to Pakistan Army's entry into the conflict. India's involvement in former East Pakistan had an enemy agenda. The creation of Mukti Bahini was a subversive pursuit to spread venom and terror. The miscreants of Mukti Bahini were equipped with "Italian howitzers, Dakota DC-3 aircraft, Otter DHC-3 fighter planes and Allouette helicopters."²³ Simultaneously, the Indian armed forces also took part in the dismemberment of former East Pakistan. Indian Air Force, "4x Hunter Squadrons, 1x Sukhoi Squadron, 3x Gnat Squadrons and 3x MiG-21 Squadrons"²⁴ were deployed against Pakistan. The Indian Navy's "47 aircraft, 8x destroyers, 2x submarines and 3x landing ship tank"²⁵ were stationed in war. India's military on ground strength comprised of "4 Infantry Division, 9 Infantry

Division, 20 Mountain Division, 6 Mountain Division, 8 Mountain Division, 57 Mountain Division and 23 Division."²⁶

Awami League demands that Pakistan makes a 'formal' and an 'unconditional apology' for the genocide of "3 million Bengalis and rapes of 200,000 Bengali women by the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan in 1971."²⁷ If it is correct, what about the atrocities committed by the Indian military and its affiliate—the Mukti Bahini. Mukti Bahini and activists of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) massacred West Pakistani men, women, and children in East Pakistan.²⁸ Rudolph Rummel, Professor Emeritus at the University of Hawaii, in his book *Death by Government* writes about the atrocities in 1971. He says: "150,000 Biharis were murdered by the vengeful victors (Mukti Bahini) in the brutal bloodlettings."²⁹ Qutubuddin Aziz, a former diplomat, journalist, and chairman of the National Press Trust, in his book, *Blood and Tears* has documented "170 eye-witness accounts of the atrocities committed on Biharis and other non-Bengalis across 55 towns."³⁰ A Nepalese publication, *The People's Review* also talks about the mass killings perpetrated by the Indian Army and Mukti Bahini in 1971. It says, "mass slaughter ceremonies of Pakistanis and Bihari Muslims were carried out in Dhaka race ground."³¹

The strength of Indian troops in East Pakistan in 1971 was 300,000. While the Pakistan Army's strength was 34,000.³² This is an eye-opener for those who accuse the Pakistan Army of wrongdoings in 1971. On the figure of 3 million deaths in war,

Sarmila Bose (journalist, academic and lawyer) sees the figure of 3 million deaths as an exaggeration. In her words: "The number of 3 million appears to be nothing more than a gigantic rumour...it appears possible to estimate with reasonable confidence that at least 50,000-100,000 people perished in the conflict in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971, including combatants and non-combatants, Bengalis and non-Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims, Indians and Pakistanis. Casualty figures crossing one hundred thousand are within the realm of possible but beyond that one enters a world of meaningless speculation."³³

In subsequent years, the assassination of Sheikh Mujib (15 August 1975) by his army proved the Bengali anger and hatred towards the pro-Indian elements. In the words of Anthony Mascarenhas, "Few men in history have betrayed the aspirations of their people as did the first leaders of Bangladesh... Once the darling of the independence movement in whose magic name all things are done; Sheikh Mujib as Prime Minister and President became the most hated man in Bangladesh within three short years of its founding."³⁴ The members of Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini (a private army loyal to Mujib) fled to India and started guerrilla warfare from there.³⁵ With the assassination of Mujib, one thing is clear that Awami League is not the sole political party representing the Bengali nation. There are other political parties in the country as well, like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and many more. JI brands India as a Hindu

state³⁶ and BNP has a positive tilt towards Pakistan.³⁷ Due to these varied political outlooks, the society of Bangladesh is divided into various socio-political ideas and ethos. Despite these different political orientations, the bottom line rests in the fact that Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country. Article 2A² of the Bangladesh Constitution says, "The state religion will remain Islam."³⁸

The faultlines that led to 1971 and the ultimate dismemberment of former East Pakistan need to be accepted and ratified. Indeed, the majority's democratic right was not respected. This discrimination provoked Bengali resentment and the outcome was the breakup of the country. The foreign hand cleverly exploited the inner fragility to its advantage. 1971 is a lesson that a country united internally can face the outside world. However, with inner weaknesses, the country becomes vulnerable to adversarial designs. This is what happened in 1971 and till today, the inimical forces are trying to widen the divide between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan and Bangladesh are independent countries, it is in the interest of both regional countries to have cordial ties, engage economically, and move forward. To clear the misgivings of 1971 and to overcome the dreadful episode, the people of both countries need to look at the war with an open mind. Biases and prejudices toward one particular political party or class or institution will only make

things difficult. Once again, this will provide an opportunity for the hostile elements to further their agenda.

India's Ingress in Bangladesh

India's role in 1971 and the India-Bangladesh relationship in later years carries an impact on the Pakistan-Bangladesh ties. India's detrimental role in 1971—from the military intervention in former East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) to the abetting of Mukti Bahini—was targeted at the dismantlement of a united Pakistan. In the aftermath of the war, India and the Awami League government in Bangladesh concluded a 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship.'³⁹ India in pursuance of its adversarial tendencies covertly provoked Bengali nationalism and after the separation of the eastern wing from Pakistan, India was there to build ties with Bangladesh.

India's ingress in Bangladesh is not confined to the political spectrum alone, rather efforts have been directed toward the strengthening of people-to-people contact. The Chilahati-Haldibari rail link, connecting Assam, West Bengal, and Bangladesh could be termed a step in this direction. The 'India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit' held in December 2020 labelled "Bangladesh as a key pillar in India's neighbourhood first policy while India was called a true friend."⁴⁰ These developments reflect the warmth in the Bangladesh-India relationship. Prime Minister Modi visited Dhaka in March 2021. Indian Premier attended the

Bangladesh Independence Day celebrations, visited the Mausoleum of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in Tungipara Gopalganj), and also paid tribute to the freedom fighters of Bangladesh (National Martyrs' Memorial at Savar).⁴¹ Bangladesh and India have made headway towards cooperation. The element of religion has never been a hurdle in the bilateral relationship. Moreover, the situation along the India-Bangladesh border and the Border Security Forces' killings of Bangladeshi civilians has hardly impacted the ties.⁴² Colonel Mohtashim Hyder Chowdhury from Bangladesh Army at India's 72nd Republic Day Parade said: "It's a great honour for us to become part of India's Republic Day Parade. Most of the parade personnel are from those Bangladeshi Units that were raised during the 1971 Liberation War." 122 personnel of Bangladesh Armed Forces marched on Rajpath alongside their Indian counterparts on 26 January 2021, India's Republic Day Parade.⁴³ The Modi-Sheikh nexus shows that neither India has an issue with Bangladesh's Muslim population nor Bangladesh has a problem with the ill-treatment of Muslims in West Bengal in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) or National Register of Citizenship (NRC) by India. Prime Minister Modi has "declared almost 2 million Muslim Bengalis living in Assam as aliens, and has also threatened their deportation to Bangladesh."⁴⁴ This policy of India towards Muslims is an eye-opener for Bangladesh, it shows that India, which once sent troops to former East Pakistan, wants to weaken the Muslims of

South Asia. From Bangladesh's response, it can be inferred that it is not likely to question India's abrogation of Article 370 and 35-A, and the violation of UN Security Council resolutions on the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. However, in an extreme scenario where the Hindutva political construct spreads all across the region and India employs a coercive muscle towards the region's Muslim countries, Bangladesh might adopt a counter-strategy. Meanwhile, another angle to the Modi-Hasina nexus is the China factor. India will continue to have cordial ties with Bangladesh and would try its level best to limit Dhaka's orientation toward Beijing.

India's engagement with Bangladesh on the one hand has reinforced the pro-Indian elements in the country. On the other hand, it has also ignited hate sentiments within the Bengali populace. This sentiment is an outcome of India's boastfulness, of projecting its crucial role in liberating the Bengalis. Comments like "Bangladesh is India's gift to the people of Bangladesh," and "New Delhi made Bangladesh, New Delhi can also unmake Bangladesh" have led to hate sentiments.⁴⁵

Bangladesh's Significance for China

Bangladesh's significance for China in the backdrop of emerging regional corridors is a new development. It is likely to diversify Bangladesh's regional outlook. Bangladesh has provided China with access to the Chittagong seaport.⁴⁶ The Bangladesh-

China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and through the Chittagong seaport, China can access the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁷ Besides, through the land-based connectivity with Bangladesh, the oil and gas pipelines from Chittagong seaport to Kunming (Myanmar territory) will ease the transport of energy resources in southwestern China.⁴⁸ Given Bangladesh's strategic significance, China has stepped up politico-military cooperation with the South Asian country. China has signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi army personnel get training in China. Bangladesh is a recipient of 70 per cent of Chinese weaponry.⁴⁹ Economically, the China-Bangladesh trade is US\$ 18 billion,⁵⁰ which is higher than the India-Bangladesh trade of US\$ 10 billion.⁵¹

Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations: Prospects of Cooperation

On relations with Bangladesh, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Aisha Farooqui said: "We have a very strong historical connection and we want to have cooperative relations between us. As founding members of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and for the mutual objective of forward movement toward economic prosperity and fulfilment of development goals of the people of South Asia we believe both Pakistan and Bangladesh can play an important role to strengthen SAARC processes for regional cooperation."⁵²

Pakistan is desirous of improving ties with Bangladesh. In this regard, as a goodwill gesture, Pakistan has set up cement plants in Bangladesh. Pakistan also spends 10 million Taka on development projects in Bangladesh annually. In support of education, Pakistan has established schools in Dhaka.⁵³ In the field of defence, Pakistan has offered training to the Bangladesh army personnel on the Al-Khaled tank. Besides, Pakistan has also gifted 46 aircraft and 35 tanks to Bangladesh's armed forces. Despite these goodwill efforts by the Government of Pakistan, relations with Bangladesh lack warmth.⁵⁴ To move forward and to take the relationship from bilateral to regional levels, concerted efforts at government, diplomatic, military, and societal levels are needed. Some suggestive measures to improve Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are listed below:

- Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are construed through the prism of 1971. The 1971 debacle was a governance failure exploited by India. Pakistan needs to identify the strengths that can build relations with Bangladesh. The commonality between Pakistan and Bangladesh is religion and culture. These two factors can be a strength in promoting bilateral relations.
- Pakistan-Bangladesh ties should evolve with people-to-people contact. To start with, in schools, literature on Pakistan-Bangladesh relations should be taught. There is a need to academically engage with the schools of Bangladesh.

This practice will encourage the students of both countries to interact and participate in joint ventures. This will further promote student exchange programmes and will contribute toward people-to-people contact.

- The promotion of art and culture in Bangladesh is an area where a lot can be done. Through cultural exchange programmes, artists from both countries can interact. Prospects of film and drama collaboration need to be explored. Pakistani dramas can be aired in Bangladesh and Bengali cinema can be given access to Pakistani movies. Programmes like 'Coke Studio' can be a platform where artists from Bangladesh can participate. Meanwhile, Pakistanis who have lived in former East Pakistan and have memories attached to the land need to be encouraged to share their experiences on media. This soft power can set the stage for people-to-people contact between the two countries. It will also help win over the Bangladeshis psychologically.
- Pakistan also needs to have sporting links with Bangladesh. Sports events can be organised in both countries on yearly basis. This will help in boosting people's confidence on both sides.
- There is also a need to ease the business and travel visa regime. Pakistan has upgraded Bangladesh to 'Visa Category A'.⁵⁵ Pakistan should further ease the visa regime. This will

facilitate businessmen in both countries to explore opportunities. It will also ensure economic interdependency.

- In the prevalent era of geoeconomics, economic cooperation is a gateway toward sustained / durable partnership. The example of China-ASEAN is proof that despite conflicting claims in the South China Sea, the Southeast Asian countries have established economic cooperation with China. The China-India bilateral trade (US\$ 92.68 billion)⁵⁶ is another example, wherein both the neighbours have economic ties despite the territorial border dispute along the Himalayan. Given these examples, the Pakistan-Bangladesh economic relation can prosper. Seeing the present trend in bilateral economic ties, Bangladesh is the tenth-largest export destination for Pakistan. Likewise, Pakistan is one of Bangladesh's top ten import partners.⁵⁷ Pakistan's market share in Bangladesh is 8.4 per cent (US\$ 61.94 million, 2020 figures). Pakistan's exports to Bangladesh are more in number than its imports, this puts the trade balance (US\$ 521.50, 2020 figure) in favour of Pakistan. The prime exports of Pakistan to Bangladesh are cotton (73 per cent of total exports), salt, sulphur, plastering materials, lime and cement, edible vegetables and fruits, machinery and inorganic chemicals. Pakistan imports 'man-made staple fibres' from Bangladesh. The government of Pakistan is making efforts to import raw jute from Bangladesh.⁵⁸ This will benefit Pakistan as the

country can export jute processed products to other destinations. Thus, the existential trade potential between Pakistan and Bangladesh needs to be exploited to the fullest. As a first step, both countries need to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Secondly, a direct connection for the supply of trade and goods needs to be in place. Pakistan's trade cargo traverses through Singapore or Colombo to reach out to Chittagong. This indirect flow of trade is slow and expensive.

- On the diplomatic front, it should be a preferred option that Pakistani diplomats with Bangladeshi connections are posted in Dhaka. This will promote cultural affinity between the two countries.
- Pakistan needs to maintain frequent political interaction with its Bangladeshi counterparts. The Foreign Secretary-level dialogue between the two countries has been suspended for 12 years.⁵⁹ It needs to be resumed.
- Pakistan's policy towards bridging the differences with Bangladesh should not entirely rely on bilateral relations. They should be diversified given the regional context. The ongoing atrocities in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and their impact on the region's peace could be a point of interaction between the two countries. Pakistan can ask for support from Bangladesh on the Kashmir dispute. The policy of marginalising Muslims by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India carries a regional impact. Pakistan and

Bangladesh being regional Muslim players can have a united front for Muslims.

- Bangladesh has provided China with access to the Bay of Bengal. Pakistan, as part of CPEC and Gwadar seaport, is also an ardent supporter of regional connectivity and economic integration. Thus, both Pakistan's and Bangladesh's regional outlook is more inclined towards regional connectivity. This is a strategic consonance between the two South Asian countries. With the eventual launch of regional corridors and operation of seaports, Pakistan and Bangladesh are likely to emerge as lead players in the region. This new trend at the regional level offers opportunities to both Pakistan and Bangladesh to not only reap the benefits of economic connectivity but also to progress together.

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