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China's Increasing Engagement with Bangladesh: Should India be Concerned

**Suresh Kumar Tiwari
Aparaajita Pandey**

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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China's Increasing Engagement with Bangladesh: Should India be Concerned

Abstract

China-Bangladesh relations have always been close. In the aftermath of the ouster of Sheikh Hasina after the July-August 2024 uprisings led by students, this warm relationship found a renewed vigour. Even as China moved closer to Bangladesh, India appeared to have drifted away. Anti-India sentiment, fueled and propagated by the Islamist parties of Bangladesh led to violent demonstrations against India. Understandably, India was forced to suspend some of its developmental and other activities. China sensed an opportunity and in pursuance of its objective to contain India within the South Asian region, it tried to quickly fill in the void created by India distancing itself. It appears to be succeeding. Pakistan, not to be left behind, is fishing in troubled waters. India should be concerned. India shares its longest land border with Bangladesh, a border that is porous and can be exploited by elements inimical to India's security interests. It is in India's long-term interest to maintain close, cordial, and collaborative relationship with Bangladesh, built on mutual respect and mutual sensitivity. The paper, having identified the threat posed by Chinese activities in Bangladesh, offers some options for India.

Introduction

Prof Mohammad Yunus, Chief Advisor to the Interim Government of Bangladesh, in his video message to celebrate the

76th founding anniversary of the People's Republic of China and the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh-China diplomatic ties, referred to China as the "closest friend and most reliable partner" (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha News, 18 September 2025). Earlier during his March 2025 visit to China, he had expressed his desire to turn Bangladesh into a transport hub and "extension of Chinese economy" to India's 'landlocked' north eastern region, as also access to the Bay of Bengal, drawing sharp criticism from New Delhi for his irresponsible utterances (The Hindu, 28 March 2025). To Bangladesh, it yielded immediate rewards. China responded by promising \$2.1 billion in investments, loans, and grants. Nearly 30 Chinese companies have assured to invest one billion dollars in the exclusive Chinese Industrial Economic Zone. While China has been a close partner of Bangladesh for a long time now, the recent warming of relations draws heavily from the events surrounding Sheikh Hasina's ouster from power. The balancing act between China and India that Hasina sought to achieve has been dropped for a tight embrace of China. Strategic ramifications are likely.

The rainy months of July and August 2024 were among the most eventful in independent Bangladesh. The mass protests by students, spurred on by the quota discrimination spread to other sections of society. Helped in large measure by the prevailing anti-Hasina sentiment, with the religious groups lending their support, the protests led to incumbent Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, fleeing her country and reaching India. In the immediate aftermath of this, Indians in Bangladesh faced uncertainty and a high level of risk. The Indian embassy was partially evacuated and provided with high level of protection by the Bangladesh Army in view of threats to it by elements, antagonistic to India. It was the only foreign embassy in Dhaka to be threatened. Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, run by the Indian Embassy, was the only one of the foreign institutions in Dhaka, to be burnt down. While the

incident was an abject failure of the law-and-order machinery, it threw bigger questions. Was it a one-off aberration, a failure of Indian diplomacy, political signalling by anti-India groups in Bangladesh, an expression of anti-Hasina resentment, or an undercurrent of anti-India sentiment finding an expression during turbulent times? While it is difficult to point out exactly which factor is responsible or if it is a cumulative impact of all of them, it did indicate the depth to which India-Bangladesh relations had deteriorated. To be fair and objective, the relations between the two countries have never been truly close, flourishing, or beyond suspicion. Their engagement has fluctuated between outright animosity and a distant and somewhat reluctant accommodation, depending on whether the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or Awami League (AL) was in power, respectively. Under Hasina's rule for over 15 years, the AL sought to bridge the differences to some extent – an endeavour not liked by the Islamists – and under their influence by a section of the population. Hasina was also accused of haughtiness and an increasingly autocratic behaviour – major contributors to the downfall of the AL.

Sheikh Hasina is perceived by many Bangladeshis as having been propped up by India and dependent on it for her political survival. This in part, was responsible for her eventual ouster (International Crisis Group Report, 2025). Reality though, appears to be far from it. China-Bangladesh military engagement flourished during Sheikh Hasina's regime, record investments were made by China even as India was running the Maitri Express, undertaking numerous infrastructure projects, and providing highest number of Visas for medical purposes. The long-standing issue of enclaves was resolved to India's disadvantage (India gave up 15000 hectares in exchange for 7000 hectares) through the 100th amendment to the Constitution (Dubey, 2024). These were intended to benefit the larger Bangladeshi citizenry and not Hasina or AL, but a successful

campaign was run to convince the people of the deep nexus between Hasina and the Indian government. Oblique references to Indian 'instructions' by AL leaders to divert the public opinion from their own failures fuelled some of such assertions. Anti-India sentiment post Hasina's departure is attributed by many scholars to this supposedly Hasina-India chemistry. In substance and manifestation, the chemistry itself was at best Hasina's attempt at balancing between China and India. Somehow, India was held responsible for the ills of the Hasina government. An unintended consequence was the reluctance of the interim government – propped up by the Students Body and bound by its gratitude to appease them – to engage in any meaningful dialogue with the Indian government. Even as Modi congratulated Yunus on being nominated as the Chief Advisor and the Indian govt expressed its willingness to work closely with the Bangladesh govt, a visit by either leader never materialised. This for such closely linked neighbours is not only untenable and inexplicable, but also loss of opportunity. Meanwhile, China has sought to upscale its already significant level of cooperation to new heights, aiming to fill the void created by India's reluctance to engage an increasingly belligerent and hostile Bangladesh. The coming weeks and months will test India's strategic wisdom and diplomatic skill in being able to choose the right approach to solving the crisis. While politics, diplomacy, and commercial interests will play their part in shaping the path ahead, the much-underplayed military dimension of the relationship needs mentioning.

Military Dimension of the Relationship

India-Bangladesh military relations have been cordial and interactive. The two militaries engage in regular bilateral exercises; high-level visits are common, and there are numerous training programmes on an exchange basis. Founded in the backdrop of the Liberation War of 1971, when the Indian military initially trained

the Mukti Bahini to rise against the oppressive regime led by the Pakistan Army and thereafter intervened directly to create Bangladesh out of West Pakistan, the relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. However, in view of the natural bond that should have existed given the circumstances, the relationship leaves much to be desired. There were precursors for Bangladesh to turn to China for its military needs, as the erstwhile West Pakistan Army was dependent on China before 1971. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and subsequent takeover by the military expedited this process. India's non-interference, mostly in good faith, made it easy for the budding China-Bangladesh relationship to bloom in the following decades. Resultantly, China-Bangladesh military relations have, over the years, grown closer than India-Bangladesh relations and are on a steep upward trajectory. Besides bilateral exercises, visits and trainee exchanges, Bangladesh procures a bulk of its military equipment from China. Bangladesh is the second biggest importer of Chinese military equipment, after Pakistan. From Chinese perspective, closer and stronger military engagements provide a great fillip to overall bilateral relations, enable the creation of strategic dependency, ensure the availability of a listening post, and limit the influence of other countries in a vital segment (Saimum, 2025). As China moves closer to Bangladesh, India will be pushed away with consequential impact on a range of issues from security to commerce.

History of China-Bangladesh Relations

The history of China-Bangladesh friendship and cultural exchanges dates back to over a thousand years through visits of Chinese monks and scholars from the Bengal region (Zahid, 2025). In the modern era, the diplomatic relationship was officially established on 4th October 1975, about a month after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. It has steadily

progressed, slow at first but with increasing intensity in the last decade or so, from a developmental partnership to a growing strategic closeness. China has made significant investments in Bangladesh's infrastructure, energy, education, cultural, and defence sectors (Hoque et al., 2025). It has been Bangladesh's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years, with nearly 1,000 Chinese enterprises operating in Bangladesh (Ranjan, 2025). In the period 1975-80, Bangladesh imported 78% of its arms from China (Bhuiyan and Yi, 2024). The scale of cooperation continues, evidenced by 82% of arms taken on credit or soft loans in the period 2009-2014 (Bhuiyan and Yi, 2024). Bangladesh is in need of developmental funds and would also like to balance against the regional big brother India. China fulfils both the requirements (Pal, 2021). Besides, India, like any other democracy, has its own limitations in policy formulation and building internal consensus, not to mention its own developmental needs and limited resources. China has a clear advantage and not surprisingly, appears very lucrative to Bangladesh. Driven by mutual benefit, the relationship has soared to new heights.

Recent Warming up in China-Bangladesh Relations

Bangladesh's desire to move closer to China has found a willing partner, propelled as the latter is by its regional ambitions. There are three major interests that China aims to achieve through this relationship: advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a strategic foothold in India's backyard to consolidate its String of Pearls, and access to Bay of Bengal. A direct spin-off would be enhanced regional influence. An opportunity presented itself when the AL government was ousted in August 2024 by the student-led mass protests. The interim government installed by the student body was nominated on an anti-India plank as the central theme. China was quick to harness the benefits even as India's diplomacy was grappling with uncertainty in the face of inadequate

intelligence and a suboptimal assessment of the fast-unfolding situation. In the entire episode, China's volte-face and diplomatic chicanery is revealing. In December 2021, Bangladesh was not invited by the USA for its international 'democracy summit'. It was an indictment of the AL government under Sheikh Hasina in power. Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jimming had authored an article titled 'Enough of Fundamentalism of Democracy' in a Bangladeshi newspaper (Jimming, 2021). The article appeared to favour the incumbent government, and by that logic, China should have been held to account by those in power after the July-August 2024 movement. Nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, the warmth in the relationship acquired a renewed vigour. China has used its immense resources and wealth to engage in Bangladesh in multiple spheres.

Spheres of Chinese Engagement in Bangladesh

China has provided total loans amounting to US\$7.5 billion to Bangladesh since 1975. It is Bangladesh's fourth-largest lender after Japan, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Ranjan, 2025). Much of this aid has been at a high interest rate, which Bangladesh has consistently requested to reduce. The request was again made during Yunus's March 2025 visit and the visit by Foreign Affairs advisor, Touhid Hossain. Bangladesh provides access to the Indian Ocean through its Chittagong port, a solution to the Malacca dilemma first voiced by Hu Jintao. While similar access is being worked upon by China through Myanmar too, the Chittagong route is attractive because of the added advantage of minimising the transit through the restive Rakhine state of Myanmar. The engagement has been particularly strong in the economic domain, especially since the time Bangladesh joined the BRI. However, interactions in the military and security domain, diplomacy, political exchanges, cultural interactions, etc., are not too far behind. Without any propaganda or sloganeering, China has

managed to reach a position to be able to influence the internal political dynamics of Bangladesh. What is admirable and a tribute to Chinese diplomatic manoeuvrings is that such influence is celebrated by Bangladesh as non-interference in its internal affairs.

BRI Related Engagement

China has invested heavily in BRI projects and promised even more. It has pledged USD 40 billion, including a whopping USD 26 billion in infrastructure and the rest in joint ventures (Bhuiyan & Yi, 2024). Some of the significant infrastructure projects funded by China include the 1320 MW Payara coal fired power plant, 1320 MW S Alam coal fired power plant at Chittagong, 85% of 320 MW coal fired power plant at Barguna, Padma Bridge rail link, Karnaphulli river underwater tunnel at Chittagong, 230 Km marine drive connecting Sitakundu and Cox Bazar, Payara port, Data centre at Joydebpur, and Digitization project for 5G digital connectivity, to name a few. China is constructing for Bangladesh, deploying its spare capacity, and in the process creating technical dependency. Chinese companies bid for most mega development projects, regardless of whether they are financed by China, a third country, multilateral institutions, or the Bangladesh government, and get the contract. A notable example is the USD 3.5 Bn Padma Bridge project. After the World Bank withdrew from the project due to corruption allegations, the Bangladesh government decided to fund it. The contract was awarded to two Chinese companies, China Major Bridge Engineering Co. Ltd and Sino Hydro Corporation Limited. The Payara bridge, funded by OPEC, is being constructed by Longjian Road and Bridge Company of China. The Chittagong-Cox-Bazar Railway, a mega project funded by ADB, is being constructed by Chinese companies, China Railway Group Ltd and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (The Financial Express, 2017).

Trade and Commerce

China-Bangladesh trade volume was USD 21.8 Bn in 2023-2024 (Jagonews, 28 October 2025), 56% more than India-Bangladesh trade, which stood at USD 14 Bn for the same period (Assistant High Commission of India, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 2025). China is Bangladesh's biggest source of imports, having overtaken India in the year 2005. The trade deficit with China has been rising consistently. At over USD 21 Bn in 2023-24, it is more than double that of India. Bangladeshi scholars often quote the Chinese largesse in granting duty-free access to 97% of Bangladeshi products (Swadhin, 2024), notwithstanding the negligible impact it has had on the adverse trade deficit, which has increased from USD 3.3 Bn to USD 21 Bn in the 15 years from 2008-09 to 2023-24. Chinese ingress into Bangladesh's economy can also be gauged from the fact that there are over 1000 Chinese enterprises operating in Bangladesh.

Soft Power Deployment

China has realised the limitations of its unique culture and language, exacerbated by relatively long periods of isolationism. It is particularly lacking in appeal to the masses of a conservative South Asian nation. China is trying to make up for the apparent deficiency and lost time by establishing a large number of Confucianist and Chinese language centres in Bangladesh, much like it is doing elsewhere in the world. Bilateral cultural exchanges are also being given due priority. Textbooks of Army Schools in Bangladesh are by Chinese authors. The shopping complexes run by the Bangladesh Army are full of Chinese garments and other provisions. China has entered every speck of a Bangladeshi's life. For a country that shares precious little in common, this is nothing short of an enigma.

Strategic Areas of Engagement

Every Chinese project in Bangladesh is driven by geopolitical considerations and serves China's geostrategic ends. Such aim could be achieved through multiple means, including but not restricted to influence on domestic politics, foreign policies, trade practices, security architecture, all this with a pragmatic and flexible approach tailored to the power in control. Under Sheikh Hasina's government, China was dismissive of USA's criticism of 'less than desired level of democracy' in Bangladesh. On that basis, China should have borne the brunt of the students' ire and the interim governments' realignment endeavours. However, the contrary happened. With its deft and pragmatic assessment of the evolving situation, it continued to remain close to whichever voice mattered in Bangladesh. The strategic ramifications are significant. China aims to counter the USA on a global level and India on a regional level. Strategic relations that China therefore seeks and guides with Bangladesh are a reflection of this aim and desire.

Engagement in the Military Domain

China is Bangladesh's biggest supplier of military hardware. The low cost of Chinese armament and easy availability of loans has enabled a steadily growing engagement (Hoque et al, 2025). Military relations between the two picked up pace with a bilateral agreement signed in 2002, which included provisions for training, maintenance, and other military-related fields (Swadhin, 2024). Since then, China has emerged as Bangladesh's primary military ally. According to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2015 to 2019, China exported 20% of its total arms exports to Bangladesh, making it the second-largest arms supplier to Bangladesh in South Asia, after Pakistan. In 2014, the Bangladesh military and the Bangladesh University of Professionals—a university operated by the Bangladesh Army—

signed four agreements with China, under which the Chinese military would train Bangladeshi military personnel (Hasib, 2014). Since 2010, China has also supplied Bangladesh with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets (Tiezzi, 2015). Additionally, China provided Bangladesh with its first pair of submarines, the Chinese Ming-class Type 035B diesel-electric submarines (Press Trust of India, 2016). Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the BNS Sheikh Hasina Submarine Base at Pekua in Cox's Bazar, a project funded and constructed by China at USD 1.2 Bn (Chari, 2023). Negotiations are believed to be underway for procuring multirole fighter jets and attack helicopters (Zahid, 2025). Besides these big-ticket projects, the engagement at lower levels across areas of exchange programs, training, exercises, and military diplomacy is numerous.

Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project

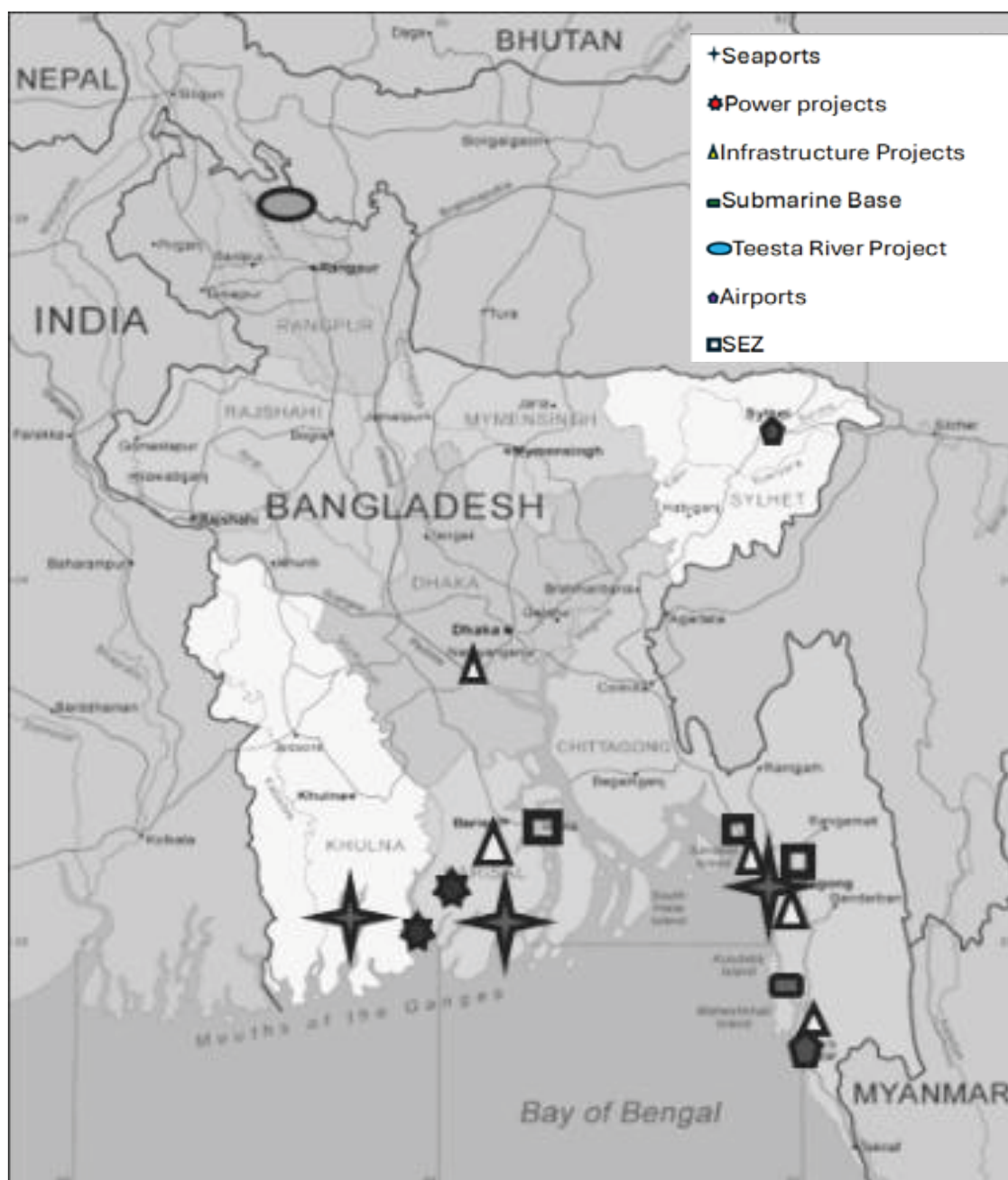
There are 54 transboundary rivers between India and Bangladesh, including the three major rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Water-related issues concerning the sharing of river waters and other management aspects are bound to be one of the central areas of engagement (Bhaduri, 2022). One such area of concern for Bangladesh is the drop in water flow of the Teesta river, a major river system for supporting agriculture in the northern areas of the country. With its origin in the Sikkim state of India, the Teesta flows through West Bengal and Bangladesh before merging with the mighty Brahmaputra (Jamuna in Bangladesh). Bangladesh alleges that over the years, India has been increasing its utilisation of the river and diverting its waters, resulting in less water flow to the lower riparian. Ever since the construction of the barrage in 1979 by the Government of West Bengal for irrigation purposes, the water flow is said to be reducing (Basumatary, 2018). In order to improve the situation through better river management, Bangladesh invited China to study the issue and propose solutions

for the comprehensive management of the river. Under Sheikh Hasina, the project having been initially worked upon by China, was shifted to India. During Yunus's March 2025 visit to China, it is learnt that China has once again been invited into the project (Noor & Wong, 2025). This provides China with a strategic presence within 50 kilometres of the Chicken Neck, considered as one of India's geographical vulnerabilities. Security implications could be obvious and ominous.

Strategic Infrastructure

Sylhet and Cox's Bazar airports are being upgraded to international airport standards by Chinese firms, as are some strategic ports. China is developing the Chattogram port, the busiest port in the Bay of Bengal region, serving 90% of the needs of Bangladesh. Chattogram port provides China with a strategic alternative in case of a Malacca contingency. It has also promised \$ 400 Mn to develop the strategic Mongla port, the second busiest after Chattogram and closest to the Indian shores. The hub of Bangladeshi RMG sector lies in and around Dhaka and is served by Mongla port. China Harbour Engineering Company and China State Engineering and Construction Company are also involved in the development of Payra Deep Seaport, the third-largest port in Bangladesh. With deep technical and financial involvement in the development of the three largest and most vital ports, an eventual stake in some sort of direct control cannot be ruled out. Even if direct control like that of Hambantota and Gwadar is some distance away, the increasing dependency will entail preferential treatment to China. Assets like gas reserves have been acquired by Chinese companies. Alipay, part of China's Alibaba Group, purchased a 20% stake in Bkash, Bangladesh's largest mobile banking company (The Daily Star, 2018). Two Chinese stock exchanges, the Shenzhen and Shanghai stock exchanges, signed an agreement to acquire a 25% stake in the Dhaka Stock Exchange, along with a commitment

to provide technical support worth USD 37 million (Reuters, 2018). China has manoeuvred itself into every aspect of Bangladesh's national structure. Resultantly, it enjoys significant leverage. The following map shows the extent of China's involvement in the strategic infrastructure of Bangladesh, either through funding or construction or both.



Map of Major Chinese Funded/Constructed Projects in Bangladesh

CHINA'S INCREASING ENGAGEMENT WITH BANGLADESH:
SHOULD INDIA BE CONCERNED

India's Concerns Over China-Bangladesh Relations

Bangladesh and West Bengal have more in common in terms of a shared sense of history, geographical contiguity, language, food habits, culture, traditions, etc. than West Bengal does so with many Indian states. While that may be a tribute to India's diversity, it is also a reflection of a common legacy and shared historical identity, beliefs, and customs between the two. This bond is clearly under strain on account of Bangladesh choosing China over India with least regard to India's concerns. Close China-Bangladesh relations, especially in the security and military sphere, would have a bearing on strategic security of India. India shares its longest land border with Bangladesh. The presence of China in infrastructure projects bordering India has direct security implications. Even though the work of fencing the border is being undertaken by India in all earnest, it remains porous. Bangladesh is the largest destination for Indian products in South Asia. Enhancement of Chinese interest in the country and increase in their bilateral trade would directly limit that of India.

Even as China's entry in big ticket and sensitive projects in Bangladesh is of concern, the Pakistan factor adds a critical dimension to India's security. As China gains deeper access to Bangladesh, it becomes that much easier for Pakistan to indulge in its propagandist and terrorist activities. The conservative Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami has been gaining serious political ground since the ban imposed by Hasina was lifted by the interim government. It is not beyond reasonable comprehension that it will be a major force in any future election. The party is no longer allied with BNP, hitherto a preferred partner, indicating that it is confident of faring well at the Hustings. Major Islamist political parties have joined together to form an electoral alliance. The self-proclaimed centrist and pluralist NCP have also joined the alliance. This could prove a serious challenge to the BNP. More importantly

for India, Jamaat's alignment with Pakistan is no secret. The way Pakistan has rapidly made inroads into Bangladesh's popular narrative must disturb India. If Jamaat was to form a government or even lend support to it as it did earlier during BNP's previous governments, the engagement would know no bounds. India can ill afford this. While the connection with Pakistan will undoubtedly be detrimental to Bangladesh in ways more than one, the realisation will not be allowed to dawn on the common public by the Islamists. Any distance that India allows to develop between itself and Bangladesh will be rapidly filled up by an eager China and a vengeful Pakistan.

China is not only providing loans, grants, and technical assistance, it is also building and constructing in Bangladesh, and in the process, creating long-term dependencies. Its presence in virtually every sector of the economy and indeed life of the country provides it with a critical hold over those who govern it. The submarine base being developed by China in Chittagong would provide it with initially a foothold for maintenance and technical support and eventually a permanent base providing a monitoring and surveillance station for Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. China's involvement in projects close to the Siliguri corridor like the Teesta River management and airport at Lalmonirhat, will place it at the doorstep of India, providing it with in-depth visibility into one of India's geographical vulnerabilities. During Yunus's visit, one of the investments cornered by China is the development of Mongla Port, second biggest port of Bangladesh (Noor & Wong, 2025). This provides China with strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal and a much closer presence to India's maritime zones than what India would have preferred.

China-Bangladesh relations will essentially be at the cost of India-Bangladesh relations. As China moves in, it will ensure that India is made to move out, especially in areas of infrastructure,

trade, and energy (Dikshit, 2025). There are critical interests that India has in Bangladesh, all of which are directly or indirectly beneficial to Bangladesh too. An additional route to the North-Eastern states through Bangladesh will reduce transit time and cost, besides relieving the Siliguri Corridor. India could fund the required infrastructure. The facilities so created would enhance Bangladesh's transportation infrastructure as well with minimal to no expenditure. Some sort of arrangement for royalty payment could also be established. The fledgling initiative in this regard will be killed by Bangladesh to appease China or alternatively Bangladesh could be 'politely coaxed' by China to do this.

Instances of China's interference in Bangladesh's internal and external policies are on the increase. The proverbial pound of flesh is being extracted. In May 2021, Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka, Li Jiming, publicly warned Bangladesh against joining QUAD (India Today, 2021) as doing so would "substantially damage" the bilateral relations. This warning represents an interference in Bangladesh's independent foreign policy (Swadhin, 2024). Such interference in Bangladesh's foreign policy matters would be detrimental to India. Bangladesh could be coerced into formulating policies inimical to India's security interests. China's long-term objective is to contain India and confine it to South Asia. Cultivating Bangladesh and using it as one of the pearls in the 'String of Pearls' will provide China with immense strategic leverage in being able to contain India. In general, China has made strident attempts to establish good relations with South Asian countries to enable it to contain India. Bangladesh is one of the target countries.

Common heritage, legacy, shared history, and socio-cultural similarity provide a strong anchor for lasting bilateral relations. It therefore behoves both countries to maintain close relations. Bangladesh has the third-largest Hindu population in the world

after India and Nepal. What happens to Hindus in Bangladesh is of interest and occasionally of concern to India and Indians. As it engages the mental space of a fairly large population, the government of the day in a democracy cannot but address the arising anxiety. On a similar note, India is home to the third-largest Muslim population in the world. There are more Muslims in India than in Bangladesh, and what happens to Muslims in India is of interest and concern to Bangladesh, it being an Islamic Republic with a relatively strong hold of religious organisations. One way to deal with potential doubts and misgivings is to maintain close, collaborative, and transparent relations. India has greater stakes. The long land border which is fairly porous in parts could be utilised by Islamic fundamentalists to push in terrorists and insurgents and shelter them. A greater understanding as that existed during the tenures of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, will provide higher sensitivity to Indian security interests and put a curb on such trans-border crimes.

Options for India

While China's predatory economics and hardline realism create for itself a place in India's neighbourhood, including Bangladesh, part of the blame must lie with India. It is a sad commentary on India's strategic naivety that China was allowed to penetrate Bangladesh as much as it has without any meaningful pushback from India. The inability to read the tea leaves when Gen Ziaur Rahman took over power in 1975 after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be telling in the ensuing decades. The regime-based family-oriented partnership that India cultivated with Mujibur's family and Awami League was symptomatic of inadequate strategic appreciation of how countries should conduct their business. Unfortunately, such ignorance continues, in parts. The list of India's policy inadequacies in the strategic domain is long. The lacklustre regional policies, feeble diplomatic responses,

track record of delayed deliveries on promised development, and a largely bureaucrats/diplomats-driven part of government approach are a few critical ones. This despite unambiguous political directions, available intelligentsia, and a willing civil society. A great deal of time and energy has been spent in the name of defending procedures and protocols, which are supposedly sacred and somehow always insurmountable. The cost has been inadequate information, resulting in inefficient deliveries and barrier-rich communication. The realisation appears to have dawned late and attempts intensified to engage neighbours. Resultantly, a jostling between China and India for influence in the region has started. China has firmly established itself as the go-to power in the mind space of the smaller South Asian countries, Bangladesh included. It would not be too far off the mark to say that India has not only allowed China in, it has also facilitated the process. The list of commonalities amongst countries in South Asia is astounding; social customs, food habits, dress codes, physical appearance, even Hindi language and all its soft products, but despite these, regional affinity and amity has somehow escaped the region (Bhatta, 2018). While there is a considerable gap in how much India can offer vis-à-vis China, there are other factors not related to the value of assistance but more to the workings of the Indian bureaucracy; slow and suffocating pace of project implementation, inadequate strategic acumen and understanding at the working and implementation levels, a penchant for working in silos, etc. The list runs long. There is a silver lining though. In the last about a decade, things are slowly but surely changing for the good. Accountability is being fixed and procedures being simplified. India must continue its progressive reforms and move from a ministry centred approach to a whole-of-government and, going ahead, a whole-of-nation approach. With the difficult relationship that India has with the current dispensation in Bangladesh and any in the immediate future, the road is likely to

be anything but smooth. It must, though be remembered that the road, rough, barren, and hostile, must be travelled. It is the only surest way of reaching what is in our long-term interest. Some specific areas are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Aggressive Awareness and Outreach Campaign. India should keep doing what it has been doing with regard to maintaining close relations with Bangladesh in pursuit of India's 'Act East', 'Neighbourhood First', and 'SAGAR' initiatives. However, if the events of post-Hasina's departure are any indication, there is an urgent need to inject fresh blood and oxygen into this very important relationship. Despite the much-advertised bonhomie and investment into the creation of public infrastructure, including projects impacting the life of the average Bangladeshi, India was at the receiving end of public wrath when the situation deteriorated during July-August 2024. Clearly, there is a disconnect in our engagement and connection with the common Bangladeshi. While the likelihood of foreign forces sponsoring an anti-India campaign and some radical elements indulging in religious bigotry cannot be ruled out, the fact remains that a large percentage of the population believes that India is invested into Bangladesh for selfish gains and that Bangladesh has not gained proportionately from the association. Statistically, it is far from the truth but statistics don't drive public opinion, and public opinion is what mostly matters in democracies. An aggressive awareness and outreach campaign by the Indian embassy in Bangladesh is needed for the hour, which appears to be conspicuous by its absence considering how much the two countries share in common.

Vibrant Military Diplomacy. India has to empower and enthuse its military diplomacy manifold. Military International Cooperation is lacklustre, meagrely resourced, and largely missing from India's overall posture. Whatever little does exist is grossly inadequate considering the size, stature, and standing of India. In

countries like Bangladesh and indeed much of the third world, Military diplomacy can be a great tool to mutually beneficial engagement, leveraging personal equations, and creating lasting and deep impact. The military is the most powerful institution in Bangladesh. India should be able to speak to them in a language that they understand, to convey India's best intentions. Very good work is being done under the political direction, which must be matched with personal-level contact with top military leaders. The classical civil-domain diplomacy, designed, dominated, and directed by civil bureaucracy, will always be limited both in penetration and impact in countries like Bangladesh which are greatly influenced by the military. Bangladeshi military officers are present in every national endeavour and often in decision-making and policy formulation roles. They are in the top echelon of public policy making, security architecture, shipping, civil aviation, education, trade and commerce, and foreign policy, just to name a few. As per open-source information, eight out of eighty Bangladeshi ambassadors are serving or retired military officers. Up to 30 of these missions have defence attaches. In such a setup, maximum leverage is possible only by robust military diplomacy. The 'on-again-off-again' relation that India has had with Bangladesh can be attributed partly to lack of all-inclusive diplomacy. Indeed, the limitation of civil diplomacy will play up in every small to mid-sized developing and underdeveloped country that has the military as one of its core nation-building and command and control institution. It applies strongly to Bangladesh. Dual-track diplomacy, wherein the military is also encouraged and empowered to build, sustain and expand diplomatic ties, will yield great benefits.

Prevention of Illegal Entry and Expulsion of Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants. Far too many for far too long have been allowed to enter and stay in India illegally. It has remained a challenge to control the movement of people for greener pastures

throughout world and throughout history. The India-Bangladesh border is no exception. Any control over the influx and deportation of illegal migrants is now perceived by Bangladesh as coercion, illegal, and even inhuman. This generates much acrimony and negative propaganda. It would have been significantly better to not to have allowed illegal entry in the first place. Regardless of the backlash that will invariably accompany attempts to push back illegal migrants, it is exactly what India should do. Ways must be explored to ensure that no person crosses over illegally. Technology can come to the big help in this regard. Aggressive drive to identify and deport persons of Bangladeshi origin, irrespective of when they entered, must be sustained. This will improve mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual understanding in the long run.

Pragmatic Promises and Quick Delivery. India has promised substantial amounts of loans and grants in the past but actual delivery has failed to measure up to the commitment. Of the USD 8 Bn promised till 2024 (MEA Site, 2025), approximately USD 1.7 Bn, less than quarter was delivered. Perhaps the processes involved are cumbersome and complex, rendering them slow. It paints a picture of inefficiency, which is somewhat explicable, but perceived indifference is less so. Delivery of committed funds, loans and grants must be within acceptable timelines. Realisation has to exist that India is competing against China in this region. While India can't compete in scale, it can attempt to make good the shortfall in efficiency.

Continuation of Liberal Policy on Medical Visas. India has a uniquely liberal arrangement of medical visas for Bangladesh. Three attendants are allowed to accompany one patient. It seemed to be a great tool for winning hearts and minds of the common person till the events of July-August 2024 proved the assumption to be wrong. Indian establishment appears to have realised to its discomfort, that the targeted population did not seem to matter, as

evidenced by the strong anti-India pitch. However, that may not be the whole truth. Liberal visa regime has made a lasting impact by easing the life of the common public through the provision of affordable and modern health care within their reach. Volatile, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding events of July-August 2024 may have been too complex for the common public to comprehend and respond in time, by when it acquired a life of its own. However, what is likely to appeal most to the common people beyond the charm of governmental loans and grants is the easing of their daily lives and a call to their religious beliefs. This is where India can outscore others, and this is what India must not lose sight of. India has, for a long time, been the most preferred medical destination of Bangladeshis. The largest category of visas is issued on medical grounds. Commonality of language, culture, living habits, and not the least, affordability has been primary drivers of such preference, besides the quality medical care that India offers. Post-Hasina's ouster and subsequent upheaval targeted at Indian establishments, the numbers have been heavily curtailed. While administrative difficulties were initially quoted to be the reason behind reduced numbers, the figure continues to be considerably less than what it was earlier. Sensing an opportunity, China has stepped in with an offer of medical visas and it is making a difference by weaning away at least those from the well-off strata of society. There is an offer of opening Chinese hospitals in Bangladesh manned by Chinese staff (The Diplomat, 06 February 2025). All this is to the detriment of Indian interests. The number of medical visas should be quickly restored to pre-July 2024 numbers.

Tourist Visas. Bangladesh is a deeply religious society. India has a large number of religious places of significance for Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, the three biggest religions in Bangladesh. This situation must be actively harnessed by India by offering visas for religious tourism and pilgrimage grounds. The process being

followed is fairly straightforward and has no specific embargoes for any of the religious sites, including those like Ajmer Sharif or other Sufi Shrines. The same should be continued.

Local Border Trade. Border trade is known to generate far stronger societal connections than the limited scale of its geographical penetration. Although carried out within the communities living across from each other and with largely informal economic impact, they play a strong role in breaking down barriers of communication and the resolution of mistrust. A likely adverse effect could be an increase in potential for illegal migration, which will need to be addressed through additional means. Local trade amongst communities living in the border areas may be encouraged.

Demonstrated Sensitivity to Bangladesh's Concerns. Some Bangladesh watchers in India believe Islamic fundamentalism to be the primary factor in the cold India-Bangladesh relations. While that could be true, as demonstrated by some of the hate speeches by Islamic radicals, it may not be the whole story. The politicians, academia, bureaucracy, and most importantly, the common citizen, often cite the two major friction points as being related to the sharing of river waters and border killings. India has shown pragmatic concerns on both these issues and attempted to find solutions. As yet, these two remain a big thorn in bilateral relations. Sincere attempts employing a multipronged strategy to find a mutually acceptable solution must continue.

Narrative around the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Many officers of the Bangladesh Armed Forces talk about India's contribution to the Liberation War of Bangladesh in unflattering terms, even questioning the intent behind. There is a list of grievances that they have accumulated against India, with the perception that enough and more has been paid back by

Bangladesh, and the country cannot remain in debt and gratitude forever. While such views may be dismissed as reflecting an ungrateful attitude, the fact remains that an increasing number of people appear to be subscribing to these. Unfortunately, one of the principal political parties of Bangladesh has tried to corner the entire legacy of the Liberation War for itself. Others have been forced to take an opposing view and India's contribution is relegated as an unintended victim of the political slugfest over the credit for Liberation War. Be that as it may, India must revisit its narrative of the Bangladesh Liberation War in its interactions with Bangladesh. Allowing Bangladesh to take the lead and remaining neutral on India's contribution could help assuage some of the feelings. India did what it did as per the prevailing circumstances and in the best interest of both countries. Times have changed, interests have changed, so should the narrative.

Conclusion

Bangladesh shapes its security engagement with China as a measure to mitigate Indian hegemony; China looks at it as an additional way to curb India's leadership in the IOR. In its practical manifestation, therefore, the interests of China and Bangladesh align into curtailing Indian influence. While it is understood in the case of China to have such designs, it is rather unreasonable for Bangladesh to harbour such feelings. As events have unfolded in the recent past, that precisely, though unfortunately, is the problem. To add to the strategic dimension, Bangladesh is a highly politicised society. Every political party of significance has an anti-India posture; only the intensity varies. The situation is unlikely to change in the near future. India will have to contend with strong headwinds and navigate turbulent waters to retain relevance and presence, even as it awaits an opportune moment to reestablish its relations based on three mutuals: mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest. Well considered and in-depth

researched strategic clarity, and not a hasty reaction to political events, must underpin India's posture and position with respect to policies and outlook towards Bangladesh. It is especially important that India continues to maintain good working relations and strategic engagement with the military even as it bolsters people-to-people contact. All avenues for such engagements in medical, religious, cultural, or tourism domains must be maintained and in fact, encouraged.

Government of the day in Bangladesh, whether interim, caretaker, or elected, may or may not be aligned with India's sensitivities. Every government will attempt to pursue its own interests and, in the process, redraw and redefine Dhaka's regional and global preferences. Our policies should therefore be so designed and approach so nimble that there is a larger scope for accommodation, ensuring primacy to long-term interests. India will do well to find avenues for engaging with all political parties even as it tries to maintain close relations with the military, civil society, and the public at large to contain the anti-India narrative. During his visit to Bangladesh in 2015, Modi referred to Bangladesh as "not merely a neighbour," but "a nation with which India shares enduring links," (Ali, 2023, p. 81). While a lot of water has flown in the Teesta since then, the enduring nature of India-Bangladesh relations persists, and it will remain so. This sober reality must dawn upon policymakers on both the sides. On India's part, being the larger neighbour, it should continue to exhibit the magnanimity and generosity that it has always shown. China will employ every trick in the book to get close to Bangladesh and influence its foreign policy to the detriment of India. By creating distance between itself and Bangladesh, India should not make it easy for the Chinese. To expect Bangladesh to become as close to India as some of the other neighbours is far-fetched. Though not irreconcilable, there are fundamental differences and deep-rooted suspicion founded

primarily on 'big brother syndrome' and fuelled by religious fundamentalists. These will likely remain in some measure. India's attempt should be to not provide any space for strategic engagement by China, particularly in the security domain. While India's proximity to Bangladesh renders it susceptible to heightened levels of criticism, it also allows it to achieve close relationship based on mutual benefit and mutual understanding, anchored in centuries of co-existence.

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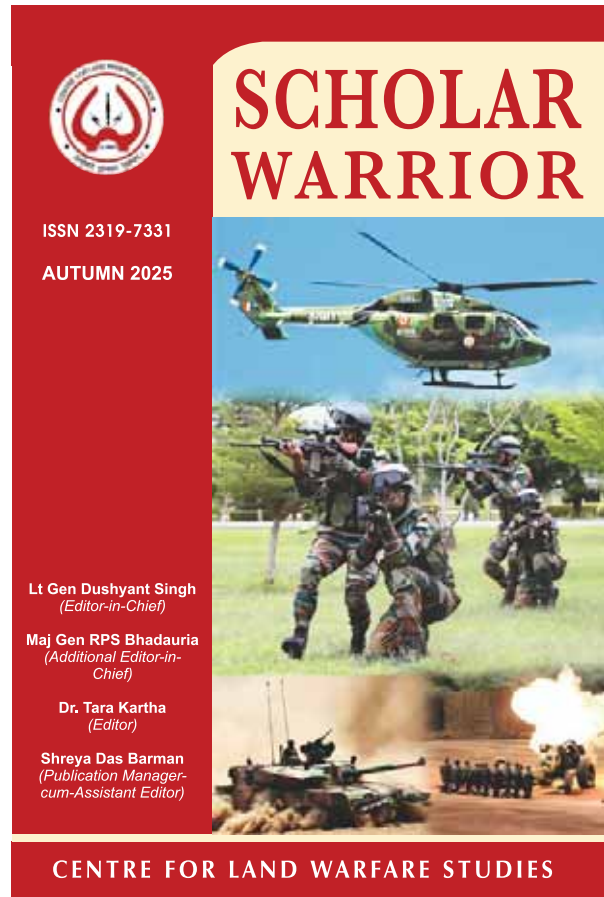
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China is the biggest challenger to India's rise and rightful positioning in the global pecking order. While there is space for both China and India to grow and prosper, side by side in the spirit of mutual accommodation and mutual respect, the posturing by China has conveyed an attitude centred on curtailing India's growth and confining it within the South Asian region. String of Pearls, unsettled borders, support to Pakistan's anti-India designs, anti-India stand on many issues in UN bodies, etc., are all pointers to this grand strategy. The principal facilitator of China's India strategy, Pakistan, has always harboured intense anti-India feelings. Pakistan is ready to suffer, provided India suffers more. The pathological hatred that religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh have for India provides an easily accessible yet powerful vehicle for China and Pakistan to work on their plans. With Hasina and Awami League becoming politically irrelevant, the danger is clear and present. BNP, though politically opposed now, has been aligned in the past with Islamists parties, the second largest group in Jatiya Sangsad. Overall, the political situation and ground reality in Bangladesh is extremely enabling for the manifestation of anti-India subversive designs by those inimical to India's interests. India should be concerned and evolve policies for securing itself and retaining the position of prominence in the South Asian region.

The study focuses on reviewing the rapid enhancement in China-Bangladesh relations, including that in strategic space like military hardware, military training, energy, and critical infrastructure, all of which provide China with immense influence over Bangladesh's policy-making apparatus, and suggesting some options to bolster India's engagement with Bangladesh. Of late, India appears to be vacating spaces long held by it. These will be quickly occupied by China and Pakistan. Bangladesh, often called 'India locked' should be coaxed into treating our geographical proximity as 'India linked' and given the kind of assurance and confidence that a smaller neighbour expects. India has generally done the right things. Most of these must be continued with the initiation of a few new beginnings, as suggested in the paper.

Bangladesh is a neighbour and will remain so. Our differences should not be allowed to dictate our discourse. On the contrary, our many commonalities must be harnessed to create an environment of cordiality, cooperation, collaboration, and creativity.

...



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