



PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: EXPLORING THE FLOURISHING PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT India and Bangladesh share a dynamic and multifaceted bilateral relationship characterized by historical ties, cultural affinity, and strategic cooperation. This partnership spans various domains, including trade, defence, energy, infrastructure, and cultural exchange. Over the years, both countries have strengthened their ties through mutual respect, trust, and understanding, evolving into a model for regional cooperation. Key aspects of their partnership include robust economic collaboration, joint efforts in defence and security, initiatives for energy and infrastructure development, and vibrant cultural exchanges. Despite challenges such as trans boundary river disputes and illegal migration, India and Bangladesh continue to engage in constructive dialogue and collaboration to address shared concerns and promote regional stability. Through their proactive engagement in multilateral forums and bilateral mechanisms, they strive to foster peace, prosperity, and sustainable development in the South Asian region and beyond.

KEYWORDS : Bilateral Trade and Cooperation, Defence and Energy and Connectivity

Introduction

India and Bangladesh share a bond that is both deep-rooted and multifaceted, encompassing historical, cultural, linguistic, and economic dimensions. This unique relationship has matured into a model for bilateral cooperation in South Asia, reflecting mutual trust, respect, and a shared vision for regional prosperity and stability. As neighbors with intertwined destinies, India and Bangladesh continue to collaborate across various sectors, fostering a partnership that benefits not only their own citizens but also sets a precedent for regional cooperation.

The recent 14th Joint Group of Customs (JGC) meeting in New Delhi marked significant advancements in customs cooperation between India and Bangladesh. A key focus was on the expansion of land customs stations, which are essential for streamlining the movement of goods, reducing delays, and enhancing economic interaction between the two countries. Additionally, the potential for a bilateral agreement on customs cooperation was explored, aiming to create a comprehensive framework for future collaboration and ensuring more efficient and transparent customs processes. Simplifying port restrictions to enhance the efficiency of port operations and reduce trade barriers was another critical topic, with the goal of facilitating faster and more cost-effective trade. India also commended Bangladesh for completing trial runs and operationalizing the Agreement on Use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports (ACMP), a significant step agreed upon in the 13th JGC meeting, marking a milestone in enhancing regional trade connectivity. Discussions on electronic connectivity of transit modules under the ACMP signified a move towards digital collaboration, aiming to streamline customs procedures and promote efficient trade. Furthermore, talks on the pre-arrival exchange of customs data were initiated to expedite the customs clearance process, enabling authorities to prepare in advance, thereby reducing delays and enhancing trade efficiency.

Major Areas of Cooperation Between India and Bangladesh Historical and Strategic Importance

India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh as an independent state, establishing diplomatic relations immediately after its independence in December 1971. This early recognition laid the foundation for a deep and enduring partnership, underscoring the historical and strategic importance of their relationship.

Bangladesh's geographical location as India's eastern neighbour is of immense strategic importance, providing India with access to the Bay of Bengal and serving as a critical route for trade and connectivity with Southeast Asia. The civilizational, cultural, social, and economic links between the two countries further solidify their bond.

Economic Cooperation

Economic collaboration serves as the bedrock of the enduring relationship between India and Bangladesh, fostering a dynamic exchange of goods and services that bolsters both nations' economies. The bilateral trade between the two countries has surged, with India's exports to Bangladesh reaching a substantial USD 8 billion during the period from April to November 2022 alone, showcasing the magnitude

of commercial interactions. This robust trade volume underscores the mutual economic benefits derived from the partnership. India's commitment to fostering trade facilitation and regional economic integration is evident through its provision of duty-free and quota-free access to Bangladesh on nearly all tariff lines under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) since 2011, except for certain restricted items like tobacco and alcohol. This preferential trade agreement has been instrumental in deepening economic ties and promoting cross-border commerce.

Moreover, India's efforts to enhance logistical connectivity through inland waterways have been instrumental in streamlining cargo movement between the two countries. Enabling the export of cargo from Inland Container Depots (ICDs) within India to Bangladesh via inland waterways has not only reduced transportation costs but also expedited trade processes, contributing to the efficiency of supply chains and trade routes. The recent initiative to conduct trade transactions in rupees, launched in July 2023, represents a significant milestone in strengthening regional currency ties and reducing dependency on the US dollar. This move not only fosters financial autonomy but also promotes greater stability and resilience in bilateral trade relations, paving the way for enhanced economic cooperation.

Furthermore, the burgeoning tourism exchange between India and Bangladesh highlights the multifaceted nature of their relationship. The fact that Bangladesh ranked as the second-largest tourist-generating market for India in 2021, as per the India Tourism Statistics Report 2022, underscores the deep-seated people-to-people connections and cultural affinity between the two nations. This tourism exchange not only contributes to economic growth but also fosters greater understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures and heritage. In essence, the economic partnership between India and Bangladesh is characterized by mutual respect, shared benefits, and a commitment to fostering sustainable growth. By leveraging their complementarities and synergies, both countries can further deepen their economic engagement and unlock new avenues for prosperity and development.

Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation between India and Bangladesh is pivotal given their shared 4,096.7 km border, the longest land boundary India shares with any of its neighbours. This geographical proximity underscores the importance of robust collaboration in defence and security matters. To bolster their defence capabilities and foster mutual understanding, both countries engage in joint military exercises such as "Exercise Sampriti" for the Army and "Exercise Bongosagar" for the Navy. These exercises serve as platforms for enhancing interoperability, tactical skills, and strategic coordination between their armed forces. Additionally, both nations prioritize effective border management to address transnational threats. Active cooperation among various agencies facilitates efforts to combat illicit activities such as drug trafficking, counterfeit currency circulation, and human trafficking along the border. Mechanisms such as DG Level talks between Border Guarding Forces and nodal Drugs Control Agencies provide avenues for regular dialogue and coordination, ensuring a concerted approach

to safeguarding the international border and maintaining peace and security in the region. This collaborative defense framework underscores the commitment of India and Bangladesh to addressing shared security challenges and promoting stability along their borders.

Energy and Connectivity

Energy and infrastructure development stand as vital pillars of cooperation between India and Bangladesh, reflecting their commitment to enhancing connectivity and fostering regional integration. One prominent initiative in this regard is the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, which links Siliguri in West Bengal to Parbatipur in Dinajpur, Bangladesh. This pipeline, designed to transport one million Metric Tonnes Per Annum (MMTPA) of High-Speed Diesel, significantly enhances Bangladesh's energy security by ensuring a reliable supply of fuel. Moreover, collaborative infrastructure projects such as the Akhaura-Agartala rail link and Maitri Setu (Friendship Bridge) further underscore the joint efforts to improve connectivity between the two nations. These projects not only facilitate smoother transportation of goods and people but also contribute to economic growth and regional development.

Furthermore, the operationalization of the Agreement on Use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports in 2023 marks a significant milestone in bilateral cooperation. This agreement allows India to utilize these ports for transit cargo between Northeast and mainland India, offering a cost-effective and time-efficient route for transportation. By leveraging the strategic location of these ports, both countries aim to reduce transportation costs and enhance trade efficiency, thereby bolstering economic ties and promoting regional prosperity. Overall, these collaborative endeavors in energy and infrastructure underscore the deepening partnership between India and Bangladesh and pave the way for sustained growth and development in the region.

Multilateral Cooperation

India and Bangladesh actively engage in regional cooperation through several key multilateral forums, enhancing their collaborative efforts on a range of issues. One such forum is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which provides a platform for both nations to work together with other South Asian countries on promoting regional integration, economic growth, and social progress. SAARC initiatives cover a broad spectrum, including trade liberalization, regional connectivity, poverty alleviation, and cultural exchange, thereby fostering a sense of regional solidarity and collective progress. Another significant multilateral forum is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This organization connects South Asia with Southeast Asia, promoting technical and economic cooperation among its member countries. For India and Bangladesh, BIMSTEC is crucial in enhancing cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, energy, and transportation. The initiative also focuses on combating shared challenges like terrorism, climate change, and natural disasters, ensuring that the Bay of Bengal region becomes a zone of peace, stability, and prosperity.

Additionally, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) plays a vital role in the multilateral engagement between India and Bangladesh. IORA's mandate includes promoting sustainable development and regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Through IORA, India and Bangladesh collaborate on maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, and academic, science and technology exchanges. The association's emphasis on blue economy and marine resources management aligns with the strategic interests of both nations, leveraging their geographical positions to boost economic growth and regional stability.

These multilateral platforms—SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA—not only facilitate bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh but also enable them to contribute to broader regional and global goals. By participating actively in these forums, both countries are able to address common challenges, leverage shared opportunities, and promote sustainable development. This collaborative approach enhances their diplomatic outreach and fortifies their standing in the international community, demonstrating their commitment to regional harmony and collective progress.

Current Major Issues and Challenges

Despite the robust bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh, several significant challenges persist that require ongoing attention and

resolution. One of the foremost issues is the management of transboundary river waters. India and Bangladesh share 54 common rivers, but to date, only two treaties—the Ganga Waters Treaty and the Koshiyara River Treaty—have been successfully signed. Negotiations continue over other major rivers, such as the Teesta and Feni, which are crucial for both countries' water needs and agricultural activities. The lack of comprehensive agreements on these rivers often leads to disputes and tension, underscoring the need for sustained diplomatic efforts to reach mutually beneficial solutions. The equitable distribution and sustainable management of these shared water resources are essential for the livelihoods of millions of people and for maintaining ecological balance in the region. Given the critical nature of these water sources for irrigation, drinking water, and hydropower generation, finding a long-term resolution is imperative for fostering regional stability and cooperation.

Illegal migration is another pressing challenge, with significant numbers of refugees and economic migrants crossing from Bangladesh into India. This influx places a substantial strain on the resources and security infrastructure of Indian border states, exacerbating socio-economic pressures and sometimes leading to local tensions. The implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in India, aimed at curbing illegal migration, has further raised concerns in Bangladesh about its potential impact on people of Bengali origin residing in India, complicating the bilateral dynamic. The demographic changes and the humanitarian aspect of migration add layers of complexity to this issue, necessitating a humane yet effective policy approach that balances security concerns with compassion and regional cooperation. Cross-border drug smuggling and human trafficking, particularly involving vulnerable groups such as children and women, continue to pose serious security and humanitarian challenges. These illicit activities not only undermine law and order but also inflict severe social harm. Effective collaboration between India and Bangladesh is essential to combat these issues, requiring joint operations, intelligence sharing, and stringent enforcement measures. The intricate networks of smugglers and traffickers exploit the porous borders, making it imperative for both nations to enhance their surveillance capabilities and legal frameworks. By strengthening bilateral cooperation in law enforcement and judicial processes, India and Bangladesh can more effectively dismantle these criminal networks and protect their citizens from exploitation and harm.

Furthermore, the growing influence of China in Bangladesh, marked by its active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), presents a strategic challenge for India. China's increasing economic and infrastructural investments in Bangladesh could potentially undermine India's regional standing and strategic aspirations. This development necessitates a nuanced approach from India to balance its own interests while fostering a positive relationship with Bangladesh. The strategic importance of Bangladesh, with its access to the Bay of Bengal and its role as a gateway to Southeast Asia, makes it a key player in regional geopolitics. India's engagement with Bangladesh must therefore be multifaceted, addressing economic cooperation, security concerns, and cultural ties to counterbalance the Chinese influence effectively. Enhanced economic partnerships, investment in infrastructure, and collaborative projects in technology and education can strengthen the bilateral relationship and ensure that both countries benefit from a balanced and equitable partnership.

These challenges, while formidable, also present opportunities for deepening cooperation and finding innovative solutions that can enhance the bilateral relationship. By addressing these issues with a strategic and comprehensive approach, India and Bangladesh can further solidify their partnership, contributing to regional stability and prosperity.

Way Forward: Strengthening Bilateral Ties

To address these challenges and further strengthen their partnership, India and Bangladesh can focus on several key areas:

Establishing joint task forces comprising law enforcement agencies from both India and Bangladesh can significantly enhance efforts to combat cross-border drug smuggling and human trafficking. These joint task forces can operate with a mandate to share intelligence, conduct coordinated operations, and dismantle illegal networks operating across the border. By pooling resources and expertise, they can improve the effectiveness of border security measures and ensure that both countries are better equipped to tackle these transnational

crimes. The coordinated approach can also involve regular joint training exercises and the development of common operational protocols to ensure seamless collaboration.

Implementing smart border management solutions that utilize artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics is a forward-looking strategy to streamline cross-border movements while maintaining security and efficiency. AI can be used to monitor border areas in real-time, analyze patterns of movement, and identify suspicious activities. Data analytics can help in predicting and preventing potential security breaches by processing large volumes of data and generating actionable insights. Technologies such as biometric verification, automated surveillance systems, and electronic customs clearance can further enhance the speed and accuracy of border control procedures, making them more efficient and less prone to human error.

Creating a digital connectivity corridor between India and Bangladesh, focusing on high-speed internet connectivity, digital services, and e-commerce, can revolutionize trade and collaboration between the two nations. High-speed internet infrastructure will support a range of digital services, from online banking and telemedicine to educational platforms and government services. E-commerce can thrive with improved digital connectivity, enabling businesses to reach new markets and consumers to access a wider range of products and services. This digital corridor can also facilitate technological exchange and innovation, allowing both countries to leverage each other's strengths in the tech industry and create new opportunities for start-ups and entrepreneurs.

Continuing to develop and operationalize key infrastructure projects such as rail links, highways, and ports will further enhance connectivity and economic integration. Projects like the Akhaura-Agartala rail link and the expansion of port facilities at Chattogram and Mongla are critical for improving the efficiency of trade routes and reducing transportation costs. These infrastructure developments will not only support the movement of goods but also facilitate greater people-to-people contact, boosting tourism and cultural exchange. Enhanced infrastructure will also attract foreign investment, as better connectivity makes it easier for businesses to operate across borders.

Expanding cultural and educational exchange programs is crucial for deepening the bonds between the people of India and Bangladesh. Programs such as the Bangladesh Youth Delegation and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre's various activities foster mutual understanding and respect by allowing participants to experience each other's cultures firsthand. Educational exchanges, including scholarships and joint research initiatives, can enhance academic collaboration and create a pool of skilled professionals who are familiar with both countries' socio-economic contexts. These exchanges can also help in addressing common challenges through shared knowledge and expertise. Collaborating on regional stability initiatives through multilateral platforms such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) can enhance collective security and economic development. By working together on issues like disaster management, climate change, and maritime security, India and Bangladesh can contribute to a more stable and prosperous region. Such cooperation can also help in resolving transboundary issues, such as river water sharing, through dialogue and mutual agreement, benefiting the entire South Asian region. The comprehensive measures outlined above highlight the multifaceted approach required to strengthen the India-Bangladesh partnership and ensure its long-term success. By addressing security concerns, enhancing digital and physical connectivity, promoting cultural and educational exchanges, and working together on regional stability initiatives, both countries can build a robust and dynamic relationship that not only benefits their own citizens but also contributes to regional peace and prosperity.

Conclusion

The India-Bangladesh relationship is a remarkable testament to the enduring power of shared history, mutual respect, and collaborative progress. Over the years, both nations have nurtured an all-encompassing partnership that transcends mere strategic interests, delving into the realms of cultural, economic, and social integration. The plethora of bilateral engagements in recent years underscores a deep and sustained commitment to enhancing cooperation across various sectors. In the domain of connectivity, the restoration of pre-1965 rail links and the operationalization of significant infrastructure

projects such as the Akhaura-Agartala rail link and the Maitri Setu bridge highlight the concerted efforts to improve regional accessibility and economic integration. The India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline further underscores the strategic energy cooperation between the two countries, ensuring a steady and efficient supply of energy resources.

Trade and economic relations have reached new heights, with Bangladesh emerging as India's largest trading partner in the subcontinent. Initiatives such as the introduction of trade transactions in rupees and the facilitation of inland waterways for cargo movement demonstrate innovative approaches to reducing trade barriers and fostering economic growth. The expansion of land customs stations and the easing of port restrictions, as discussed in the recent 14th Joint Group of Customs meeting, exemplify the proactive measures being taken to streamline and expedite cross-border trade. Defense cooperation has also seen significant strides, with regular joint military exercises and high-level visits underscoring the mutual commitment to regional security and stability. Collaborative efforts in combating transboundary challenges such as drug smuggling and human trafficking further reflect the shared determination to address security concerns. Cultural and educational exchanges continue to be a vital pillar of the bilateral relationship. Initiatives like the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre's programs and the Bangladesh Youth Delegation not only strengthen people-to-people ties but also foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's heritage and values.

Despite the robust progress, challenges remain, particularly in the areas of transboundary river water sharing and illegal migration. However, the willingness of both nations to engage in dialogue and negotiate solutions reflects a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to bilateral issues. Looking ahead, India and Bangladesh are well-positioned to continue building on their multifaceted partnership. By addressing existing challenges head-on and exploring new areas of collaboration, such as digital connectivity and smart border management, the two countries can set new benchmarks for regional and international relations. This dynamic and evolving partnership not only promises to contribute significantly to the prosperity and well-being of both nations but also serves as a beacon of peace and stability in the South Asian region. In conclusion, the India-Bangladesh relationship stands as a model of how shared history and mutual respect can evolve into a vibrant and dynamic partnership. Through continuous collaboration and an unwavering commitment to common goals, India and Bangladesh are poised to not only enhance their bilateral ties but also contribute positively to regional and global peace and prosperity.

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