



Chintan
Research
Foundation

ELEVATING IDEAS
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EVENT REPORT



RoundTable Discussion

IMPROVING INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

28 JANUARY 2026



ABOUT CRF

Chintan Research Foundation is an independent think tank committed to shaping policy through rigorous research and thought leadership. With a strong focus on fostering collaboration between policymakers and industry, CRF aims to incorporate practical insights into its research and advocacy efforts. It conducts comprehensive research to support informed decision-making and engages with stakeholders through discussions, events, and workshops. By publishing research papers, articles, and op-eds, CRF seeks to address key challenges in India and the Global South, fostering diverse perspectives and contributing to impactful policy advocacy.

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FOREWORD

Political transitions and shifting strategic dynamics in South Asia have long produced effects that extend well beyond immediate diplomatic or security considerations. Within this broader context, the evolving trajectory of India–Bangladesh relations remains a critical pillar shaping regional stability, economic integration, and strategic balance in the Bay of Bengal region. In recent years, particularly in the wake of Bangladesh’s internal political transformation and shifting public narratives, the bilateral relationship has entered a phase of reassessment, marked by both emerging challenges and renewed opportunities.

While electoral developments, regime transitions, and public sentiment often dominate immediate discourse, the underlying dynamics of India–Bangladesh ties are far more complex. They are shaped by long-standing patterns of political engagement, economic interdependence, security cooperation, and deep-rooted societal people-to-people linkages. However, these foundations are increasingly being tested by evolving political dynamics within Bangladesh, external geopolitical pressures, and a perceptible trust deficit at both elite and public levels. In such a context, it becomes imperative to move beyond short-term developments and adopt a more structural and forward-looking approach to bilateral engagement.

It was against this backdrop that the Chintan Research Foundation convened a roundtable discussion on “Improving India–Bangladesh Relations,” bringing together senior scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the strategic and defence community to deliberate on pathways for strengthening the relationship. The discussion sought to generate practical, policy-oriented recommendations that respond to both immediate uncertainties and long-term strategic imperatives. This report presents a comprehensive account of those deliberations, offering nuanced insights into the political, economic, and strategic dimensions of India–Bangladesh relations. It aims to contribute to ongoing policy debates by outlining actionable recommendations that prioritise sustained engagement, institutional continuity, and adaptive diplomacy. In doing so, it underscores the importance of reinforcing the long-term resilience of the partnership while navigating the complexities of a rapidly evolving regional and geopolitical landscape.

Warm regards,

Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi

President, Chintan Research Foundation

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Bangladesh's political, economic, and social transition following the 2024 mass uprising and the establishment of an interim caretaker government, the Chintan Research Foundation (CRF) convened a roundtable discussion on "Improving India–Bangladesh Relations." The discussion brought together scholars, practitioners, academics, policymakers, and members of India's strategic and defence community to examine pathways for strengthening bilateral cooperation amid evolving domestic and regional dynamics. The roundtable featured an expert address by Lt Gen Kamal Davar, and was further enriched by the remarks of Ambassador Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty and Ambassador Riva Ganguly Das—former Indian High Commissioners to Bangladesh—whose diplomatic experience added depth and nuance to the deliberations. Further insights were offered by experts on the subject, including Prof. Sreeradha Datta, Mr. Shantanu Mukarji, Prof. Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, and Col. Jasbir Singh. The discussion centred on developing practical recommendations to reinforce India–Bangladesh relations in 2026, amid Bangladesh's continued political transition, evolving public sentiment, and a broader regional climate of uncertainty. Participants emphasised the importance of sustained political outreach, careful responsiveness to Bangladesh's domestic dynamics, and a forward-looking framework that integrates strategic, economic, and people-to-people priorities.

WELCOME ADDRESS



MR. SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI

President,
Chintan Research
Foundation

Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi, President of CRF, in his welcome address, underscored Bangladesh's significance for India across multiple domains, including geopolitics, transboundary water management, energy and power cooperation, and migration, while noting the growing strain in India–Bangladesh relations and the need for a deeper and sustained policy attention. Bangladesh's ongoing political transition—marked by leadership change and the approaching elections—has introduced uncertainty around governance, political inclusion, and institutional stability, with direct implications for bilateral ties. India's stakes remain substantial across security, connectivity, trade, and people-to-people engagement, with recent high-level outreach by India being seen as an effort to maintain different channels during the period of transition. The welcome address set the stage for the roundtable discussion aimed at examining pathways to improve India–Bangladesh relations amid a shifting domestic and regional environment.

SPECIAL ADDRESS



LT GEN KAMAL DAVAR

In the special address, Lt General Kamal Davar focused on contemporary geopolitical realities and described South Asia as one of the most geopolitically stressed regions. Acknowledging India's relatively strong military and economic capabilities, General Davar mentioned that India encounters adversarial pressures from both China and Pakistan, and their actions directly affect India's security environment. He noted that while India has historically extended assistance to neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, the reciprocity has varied across partners. He further warned that nations must retain long-term historical memory and strategic interest rather than be guided by short-term political interests.

General Davar characterised the post–August 2024 political shift in Bangladesh following the ousting of Sheikh Hasina from power as a major setback for India, producing unexpectedly strong anti-Indian sentiment. He recalled the 1970–71 crisis that culminated in the liberation of East Pakistan and the emergence of the independent state of Bangladesh, referring to reported mass killings and widespread atrocities—including violence against women—alongside the denial of office to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman despite his electoral victory in Pakistan's General election in the early 1970s. He also highlighted India's contribution in the Bangladesh's liberation struggle, including the loss of more than 3,800 Indian soldiers. Alongside those, General Davar reiterated sustained Indian economic and political support to Dhaka from then Prime Minister (PM) Indira Gandhi's tenure to the current PM Modi's ruling regime. The history was revisited with a view to underscore why present anti-India attitudes and the rise of Jamaat-linked radical elements are difficult to comprehend.

General Davar alleged that radical elements within Bangladesh, including a few student activists, and proxy actors linked to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are driving anti-Indian trends within the country. This raises the possibility of wider geopolitical manipulation, including potential external influence, which might have a devastating impact on India. He also asserted the long-standing linkages between ISI and Bangladesh's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), while questioning if India erred by relying too heavily on the Awami League rather than diversifying outreach across political lines in the last few decades. After the student agitation and the regime change, General Davar stated that the conditions of minorities have also worsened, citing repeated incidents of violence, while describing the interim government as ineffective in curbing the targeted attacks against them. It was mentioned that although the student protests have subsided,

radical propaganda appears to be on rise in the country, prompting some minority families to seek entry into India—developments that could place significant pressure on India's border and frontier states. Minority communities in Bangladesh constitute roughly 8% of the Hindu population and about 1% combined Buddhist and Christian populations, with a long-term declining trend and associated migration flows into India.

In addition, Lt Gen Davar pointed to indicators of symbolic estrangement, citing reports that the Bangladesh national cricket team had declined to play certain ICC Men's T20 World Cup matches in India. He further argued that Pakistan is seeking to shape Bangladesh's political, military, security, and even sporting choices in ways that widen the rift in India–Bangladesh relations. But General Davar had endorsed India's current wait-and-watch approach ahead of the February 12 elections, while also flagging the difficult choices surrounding engagement with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, and the banned Awami League figures.

On security preparedness, he emphasised the imperative of fortifying the Siliguri Corridor (“Chicken's Neck”)—India's narrow land bridge to the Northeast, roughly 22 km wide at its narrowest—and observed that its strategic salience has been repeatedly highlighted in recent discourse since the caretaker government in Bangladesh took office under the leadership of Dr. Muhammad Yunus. Therefore, an emphasis was laid on the expedited fencing of the 4,086-km India–Bangladesh border, noting that about 80 percent is fenced and roughly 800 km—largely riverine and difficult terrain—remains open. It is a well-known fact that irregular fencing contributes to illegal crossings and smuggling, which is a major problem between New Delhi and Dhaka. Citing efforts by China and Pakistan to expand defence cooperation with Bangladesh—the developments that could complicate India's security environment—General Davar advised strengthening preparedness through enhanced border management, tighter security coordination, and systematic scenario planning to manage potential contingencies. Providing comparative capability indicators, General Davar stressed that Bangladesh's armed forces total roughly 1.6–2.3 lakh personnel and possess around 320 multiple launch rocket systems. He added that the Bangladeshi navy operates 13 ships, 2 Chinese-origin submarines, and about 55 patrol vessels, while the air force has over 200 aircraft, including 44 fighter jets.

As bilateral trade stands at approximately USD 12 billion with a surplus in India's favour, he argued that economic interdependence can serve as strategic leverage for New Delhi. Past Indian accommodation on territorial and water-sharing arrangements, including enclave exchanges and Ganga/Padma water agreements, were also highlighted during his address. He stated that the Ganges water treaty is due for renewal in December 2026 and observed that both Bangladesh's needs and India's agricultural requirements—especially of West Bengal—will be pivotal in shaping negotiations on this treaty. Under such a backdrop, he suggested that water-sharing frameworks could become part of broader diplomatic leverage for India. In addition, preventing large-scale human migration into India was also emphasised, concerning the presence of substantial Bangladeshi migrant labours in Indian urban areas.

On the diplomatic front, General Davar viewed India's outreach to BNP leadership following Khaleda Zia's death and Tariq Rahman's return from exile after 17 years, including the External Affairs Minister's visit to Dhaka and engagement with BNP leaders, as a prudent cross-party approach. He suggested that India can seek to intensify diplomatic engagement with the United States, with an

aim to discourage Pakistan's interference and ensure greater sensitivity to Chinese regional strategy vis-à-vis India's neighbourhood. Among additional policy suggestions, people-to-people and cultural outreach missions led by prominent Indian Bengali figures, greater use of military diplomacy that includes officer-level exchanges, stronger narrative shaping and influence-building efforts, expanded Track-II dialogue, and closer coordination between India's central and West Bengal governments, were proposed. He concluded that India should pursue a multi-pronged strategy combining goodwill diplomacy, economic assistance, soft power, youth-focused engagement, and security preparedness to stabilise ties with Bangladesh and restore India's broader strategic influence in South Asia.

SALIENT POINTS DISCUSSED

- **Political Transition and Electoral Uncertainty in Bangladesh**

The discussion underlined significant uncertainty surrounding Bangladesh's political transition ahead of the forthcoming elections. Speakers described the political environment in Dhaka as fluid and difficult to predict. It was assumed that the BNP could emerge as the principal governing force, but maybe not with a clear majority in the much-anticipated election on 12 February. However, Jamaat-e-Islami is expected to strengthen its position and have a considerable electoral gain in the upcoming vote. Concerns were raised that such a coalition could strengthen hardline currents within the political system, prompting references to the 2001–2006 BNP–Jamaat-e-Islami alliance as a historical parallel. It was also observed that elections in Bangladesh have frequently been accompanied by violence, coercion, and allegations of irregularities. But the weakening of institutions and the deterioration of law and order over the past eighteen months were highlighted as additional factors that could further heighten these risks.

- **Role of Awami League and the Sheikh Hasina Factor**

Many of the most consequential India–Bangladesh agreements in the past few decades in the political, security, and economic domains were concluded under the Awami League government. Sheikh Hasina's tenure was also credited with addressing several Indian security concerns, particularly relating to insurgent safe havens in Bangladesh affecting India's Northeastern states. Therefore, Sheikh Hasina's political weakening in recent months was seen as a setback for bilateral strategic cooperation between the two states. It was also argued that domestic opposition to her leadership is often misread externally—or too readily interpreted—as anti-India sentiment. However, the anti-government protests during her last term were also driven by a range of policy grievances, including pension reforms, quota policies, unemployment, and broader youth discontent—particularly within universities and colleges. It was further argued that coercive state responses to the demonstrations fuelled backlash and wider mobilisation, ultimately contributing to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's downfall.

- **Rise of Anti-India Sentiment: Causes and Perceptions**

The panel observed that anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh is neither new nor sudden but cyclical and historically recurring. Reference was made to a similar sentiment that emerged even in the years following the 1971 liberation despite India's role in Bangladesh's freedom struggle. It was deliberated that domestic governance failures were often politically reframed as consequences of India's perceived backing of the so-called dictatorial regime in Bangladesh. However, rising prices,

electricity shortages, and public service gaps were cited as the primary drivers of resentment within Bangladesh during the Hasina government. Accordingly, organised campaigns—such as calls to boycott Indian goods—were flagged as potential instruments of political mobilisation. Participants also stressed the need to distinguish between Bangladeshi populations' criticism of the Indian government's policies vis-à-vis Dhaka and hostility towards India as a society or culture. In this view, public discontent in Bangladesh is often directed at the Indian government's perceived support for the former PM Sheikh Hasina's administration, while broader cultural affinity between the two countries continues to remain strong.

- **External Influence: Pakistan, China, and the United States**

The expanding role of external actors in Bangladesh's political and strategic space was highlighted during the discussion. Pakistan's historical networks and intelligence linkages with Bangladesh were cited as re-emerging sources of concern for New Delhi. It was noted that Pakistan-linked structures have, at different points, maintained a deeper operational footprint in Bangladesh, while China is likely to expand its influence further—potentially filling space created by the waning India–Bangladesh bilateral ties. The United States was discussed in the context of managing China's rise and sustaining strategic leverage in the Bay of Bengal, but concerns were also raised about the possibility of foreign strategic or military access arrangements in the wider maritime domain. Overall, the regional environment surrounding India and its neighbourhood (including Bangladesh) was described as increasingly shaped by intensifying great-power competition.

- **Security Concerns and Extremist Networks**

There were concerns about the presence of insurgent groups operating from Bangladesh, including elements accused of targeting India's Northeastern region. The bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh under the Hasina government was nurtured with the dismantling of many such networks. However, considering the recent transgressions, the discussants raised concerns that extremist and radical organisations may regain operational space under a different political dispensation. Moreover, reports of violence against minorities and the intimidation of moderate voices were underscored during the exchange. At the same time, it was emphasised that India should remain cautious of alarmist narratives, as portraying Bangladesh as undergoing a total extremist takeover would be inaccurate and analytically unsound.

- **India's Policy Options and Engagement Strategy**

There was broad agreement that India should maintain engagement with Bangladesh regardless of which political party assumes power. It was underlined that India has a long-standing record of working with governments in Dhaka across political transitions and should maintain this approach. In this context, sustained diplomatic dialogue and institutional engagement were considered essential. Disengagement with Bangladesh is seen as strategically counterproductive for New Delhi and risks enabling rival powers to exploit emerging gaps in the regional landscape. It was also suggested that India should support inclusive political processes within Bangladesh through diplomatic channels while keeping bilateral cooperation frameworks active and functional.

- **Trust Deficit and Narrative Management**

The widening trust deficit in Bangladesh towards India, at both elite and public levels, was examined during the deliberation. It was agreed that narratives portraying bilateral agreements between

both countries as one-sided were not substantiated by evidence. Discussants rejected this narrative and characterisation, while arguing that most agreements between the two states produced mutual gains for both New Delhi and Dhaka. In fact, the Land Boundary Agreement and Maritime Boundary settlement were cited as examples where India accepted outcomes favourable to Bangladesh. However, reservations were also voiced regarding Indian media portrayals of Bangladesh as overly negative or alarmist. It was suggested that more careful narrative management and stronger public diplomacy are needed to prevent negative perceptions from widening existing gaps between the two states.

- **Trade, Connectivity, and Economic Integration**

It was cohesively recognised that the economic and connectivity cooperation between both countries has produced tangible results, though integration remains incomplete. Passenger train services between India and Bangladesh were presented as a proven success, reflecting robust demand and a pipeline of expansion initiatives in the future. Energy cooperation was identified as another major pillar of the relationship, with Bangladesh importing significant power from India. Power supply arrangements from Indian producers were highlighted as increasingly critical to the functioning of Bangladesh's power sector, with direct implications for everyday life in the country and the wider socio-economic well-being of its people. At the same time, several Indian-backed infrastructure and Line of Credits (LOC) projects worth USD 8 billion were reported as stalled or slowed at the current juncture (after mid 2024). It was suggested that the implementation and delivery of these projects should be fast-tracked. Further, it was asserted that trade restrictions, connectivity barriers, and transit-related issues could be addressed expeditiously once political conditions stabilise.

- **Visa Policies and People-to-People Impact**

It was affirmed that the sudden fall in the number of Indian medical visas for Bangladeshi citizens after the mid-2024 uprising was a major source of public dissatisfaction within Bangladesh. Medical visas are humanitarian in nature and are observed to have a deep societal impact. Earlier high volumes had reportedly dropped drastically during the recent periods of tension, especially after the overthrow of the Hasina government. This disruption affected families directly and altered public perceptions regarding India. It was highlighted that as a result, many Bangladeshi patients began seeking treatment in alternative destinations, such as in China and the Southeast Asian countries, which might prove to be a strategic setback for New Delhi in the long term. The discussants agreed that people-to-people connectivity is a critical stabilising pillar of the New Delhi–Dhaka relationship and should be safeguarded even amid political uncertainty.

- **Water Sharing and River Management Disputes**

Water sharing was described as one of the most sensitive issues in India–Bangladesh relations, with repercussions that are felt across Bangladeshi society. The lack of sustained progress on river management commitments made in earlier joint statements was criticized by the speakers. However, competing agricultural and ecological needs on both sides of the border were also noted. It was suggested that basin-wide management, cropping adjustments, and technical cooperation could offer solutions for the two states. However, the absence of continuous dialogue on water governance was identified as a core problem that should be dealt with immediately.

- **Generational Change and Youth Politics**

The growing role of youth and Gen-Z political mobilisation in shaping Bangladesh's political trajectory was underlined during the discussion. It was deliberated that the political worldview of younger cohorts is evolving and increasingly detached from the liberation-era legacy that continues to shape mainstream political leadership in Bangladesh. Student-led movements and youth protests were identified as significant drivers of recent unrest. Accordingly, discussants emphasised that India's future engagement strategies must account for generational expectations and emerging communication gaps. Therefore, a more active, youth-centric outreach and policy approach was recommended to help bridge this divide.

FORWARD OUTLOOK

The cohesive outlook of the discussants were cautious but not pessimistic. Speakers agreed that rebuilding trust and stability in India–Bangladesh relations will take time. However, patience, sustained engagement, and flexible diplomacy were recommended, which are the need of the hour. Electoral outcomes were viewed as important but not determinative of the India–Bangladesh long-term cooperation. Therefore, constructive engagement with any incoming government is considered necessary. Given that the geopolitical environment is likely to remain fluid, India's Neighbourhood First policy will require adaptive and pragmatic regional diplomacy.

The roundtable concluded by arguing that India–Bangladesh relations are currently navigating a phase of political uncertainty, shifting public narratives, and strategic adjustment; however, the long-term foundations of cooperation are assessed as largely intact. The core pillars—including security collaboration, energy trade, connectivity, and people-to-people ties—were seen as continuing to provide resilience to the bilateral relationship. It was broadly agreed that India should pursue continuous, non-partisan, and multi-channel engagement with all legitimate stakeholders in Bangladesh, irrespective of the forthcoming electoral outcomes.

Vote of Thanks: Dr. Anchita Borthakur

In her closing remarks, Dr. Anchita Borthakur expressed sincere gratitude, on behalf of CRF, to all the participants for the depth of expertise and the range of perspectives shared during the discussion. She noted that the exchange helped sharpen the framing of key challenges and refine a set of actionable priorities to advance India–Bangladesh relations. Dr. Borthakur also thanked all participants for their thoughtful interventions and constructive feedback, and reiterated CRF's commitment to carry these deliberations forward through continued consultations, follow-up engagements, and collaborative outputs as the next steps are taken ahead.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic and Diplomatic Engagement

1. India should maintain continuous and calibrated engagement with Bangladesh regardless of political transitions.
2. Reactive or personality-driven diplomacy should be avoided, and instead, a long-term, institution-based engagement framework should be adopted.
3. A proactive neighbourhood policy—anchored in diplomacy, economic engagement, and security cooperation—is urgently needed.
4. Reclaiming India's strategic heft in South Asia shall be navigated through coordinated national efforts and consistent bilateral channels of dialogue.

Multi-Pronged Security Cooperation

5. There is a need to strengthen professional security cooperation between the two countries through intelligence-sharing and counter-insurgency coordination. Such cooperation should be insulated, to the extent possible, from domestic political fluctuations/volatility.
6. Revitalising institutional and professional channels — including intelligence and security Track-II engagements — is recommended to mitigate cross-border threats and manage emerging security risks through preventive and cooperative frameworks.

Economic Interdependence and Connectivity

7. Greater economic interdependence was identified as a key stabilising pillar for bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh. Key actionable recommendations included deepening trade integration, upgrading connectivity infrastructure, and optimising joint projects and logistics assets.
8. Strengthening port, transport, and energy cooperation is seen as a way to anchor bilateral ties in mutual economic benefit and reduce vulnerability to geopolitical disruption.

Water and Resource Cooperation

9. On transboundary water issues, the panel recommended shifting from politicised contestation to technical, evidence-based, and development-oriented problem-solving frameworks.
10. Basin-level cooperation, agricultural water management, efficiency measures, and scientific consultation mechanisms should be strengthened.
11. A depoliticised and technocratic approach to water governance is considered essential due to the high emotive and political salience of water-sharing between India and Bangladesh.

Track-2.0, Institutional, and Knowledge Partnerships

12. The discussion underscored the value of Track-2.0 and Track-1.5 platforms involving think tanks, academic institutions, former officials, and domain experts. These channels help sustain dialogue during periods of political uncertainty and support informed policy exchange.

13. Institutionalised knowledge partnerships and expert-level dialogues will contribute to continuity, trust-building, and policy innovation beyond formal diplomatic processes.
People-to-People and Youth Engagement
14. Greater emphasis was placed on people-centric diplomacy through visas, scholarships, cultural exchanges, and youth outreach.
15. Academic mobility, arts and cultural partnerships, and student linkages were identified as high-impact tools for rebuilding goodwill between the two countries.
16. Youth-focused engagement was seen as particularly important given rising political and social awareness among younger populations.

Narrative Building and Public Diplomacy

17. The panel argued that India must shift from episodic damage-control to sustained narrative shaping and perception management in Bangladesh.
18. India should strengthen public diplomacy efforts through sustained media engagement, intellectual/academic exchanges, and deeper civil society linkages.
19. Rather than reacting defensively, India should consistently project its inclusive values, developmental cooperation record, and non-territorial intent in Bangladesh. This approach would help counter misinformation and reinforce India's credibility as a reliable strategic partner.

Maintain Political Neutrality in Providing Refuge to former PM Sheikh Hasina

20. While granting refuge to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina can be framed as a humanitarian and stabilising gesture, New Delhi should maintain strict political and media neutrality by limiting any public political activity or press engagement by her on Indian soil.
21. Allowing her to participate in media outreach could be interpreted as political patronage and may become a liability whenever a new government assumes power in Bangladesh, potentially complicating bilateral diplomacy and widening the trust deficit.



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