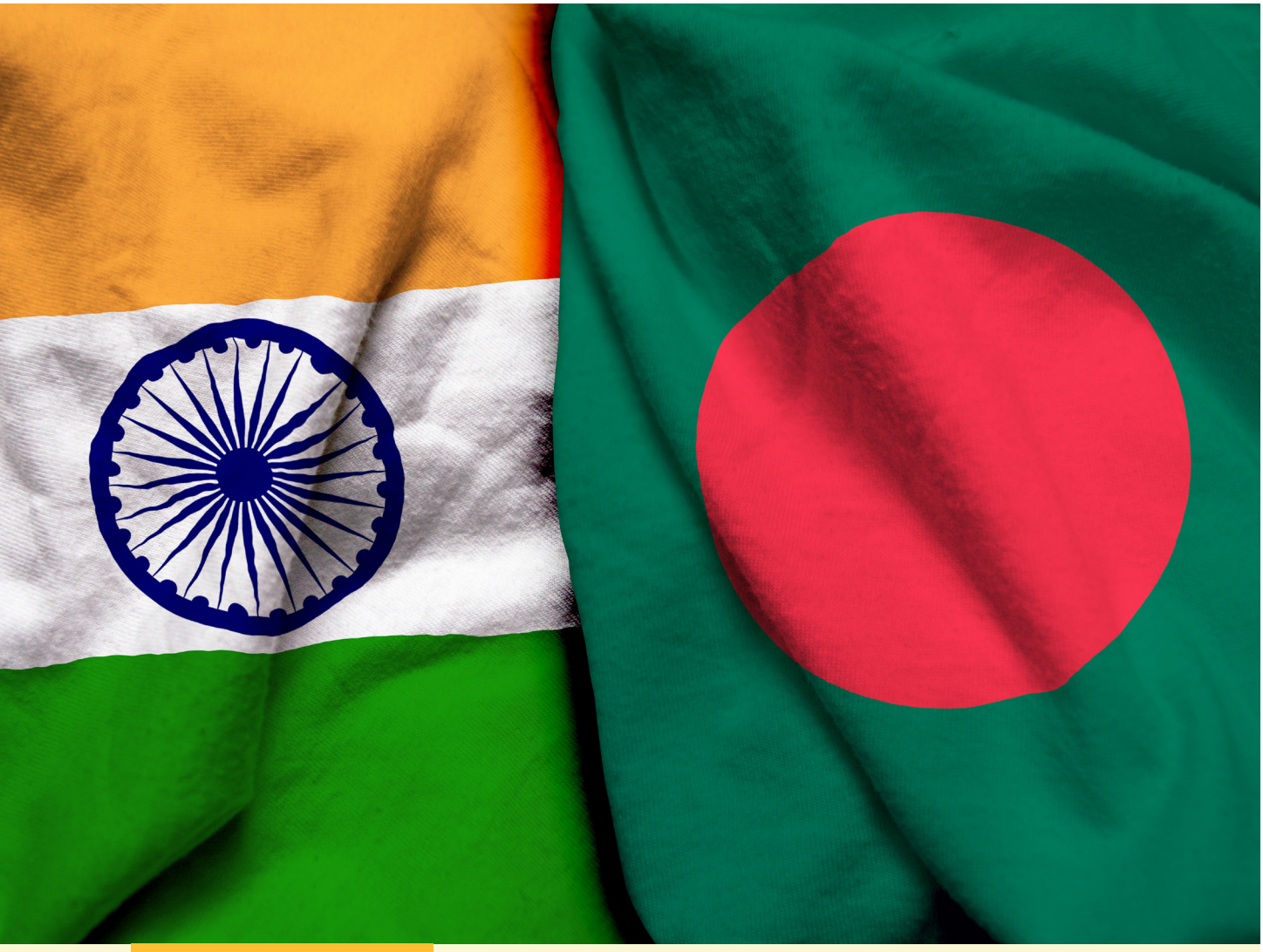
Chintan Research Foundation

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EMPOWERING PEOPLE



EVENT REPORT

Roundtable Discussion

INDIA–BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Recalibrating Bilateral Partnerships in Times of Transition

21 August 2026, New Delhi

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FOREWORD



India–Bangladesh relations occupy a distinctive place in South Asia, shaped by geography, history, economic interdependence, security concerns, and deep societal connections. Yet, bilateral relationships of such complexity cannot remain insulated from domestic political transitions or wider geopolitical shifts. Bangladesh's recent political transformation has ushered in a period of reassessment in its engagement with India, bringing longstanding assumptions, perceptions, and policy approaches under renewed scrutiny.

While political developments and changes in government often dominate public discourse, the foundations of India–Bangladesh relations extend far beyond individual leaders or political parties. The relationship encompasses trade and connectivity, transboundary water governance, border management, defence and security cooperation, healthcare, education, and extensive people-to-people ties. At the same time, changing public perceptions, generational shifts within Bangladesh, and the growing involvement of external actors have added new dimensions to the bilateral relationship. These developments underline the need for India and Bangladesh to engage with greater sensitivity to their evolving domestic realities while preserving the institutional mechanisms that have sustained cooperation over the years.

It was against this backdrop that the Chintan Research Foundation (CRF) convened a closed-door roundtable discussion on 'India–Bangladesh Relations: Recalibrating Bilateral Partnerships in Times of Transition', bringing together distinguished diplomats, academics, journalists, strategic affairs experts, and members of the defence community to examine the changing political, economic, security, and societal dimensions of the relationship. This report presents the principal observations and recommendations emerging from these deliberations. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing policy conversation on how India and Bangladesh can navigate a period of political transition without allowing short-term uncertainties to weaken the deeper foundations of their partnership. As the regional strategic environment becomes increasingly complex, the challenge before both countries is not merely to manage differences but to build institutional resilience, deepen mutual trust, and identify areas of cooperation that generate visible benefits for their citizens. Sustained dialogue, institutional continuity, and a willingness to adapt to changing political and societal realities will remain essential to ensuring that the relationship continues to contribute positively to regional stability, prosperity, and connectivity.

Warm regards,

Mr Shishir Priyadarshi
President, Chintan Research Foundation

INTRODUCTION AND OPENING REMARKS



AMB. ANIL TRIGUNAYAT
Distinguished Fellow,
Vivekananda International
Foundation (VIF)

A closed-door roundtable discussion was convened at the Chintan Research Foundation (CRF) to examine the evolving dynamics of India–Bangladesh relations in the wake of significant political changes in the neighbourhood. The session was chaired by Ambassador Anil Trigunayat, who brought decades of diplomatic experience to the table, including his tenure as a diplomat serving in Bangladesh during the turbulent period of 1986–1989. The event featured an array of distinguished speakers from academia, journalism, the military, and the diplomatic service, each offering a distinctive take on the complex bilateral relationship.

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat opened the proceedings by drawing on his diplomatic experience in Bangladesh and tracing the evolution of India–Bangladesh relations over the decades. Recalling his tenure during General Ershad's regime, he noted that the political environment was often hostile, including an attack on the Indian Embassy and suspicions in some quarters regarding the extent of his contacts in Bangladesh. At the same time, he emphasised that the personal relationships he forged with Bangladeshi industrialists, political figures, and other influential members of society proved invaluable in navigating a complex political landscape. He also recalled that Dr M. A. Wazed Miah, husband of former Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina, frequently sought his help with his children's education in India. These experiences, he observed, reflected the importance of personal connections and people-to-people ties in sustaining India–Bangladesh relations even through periods of political difficulty.

Ambassador Trigunayat also drew attention to a significant shift in India's political engagement with Bangladesh over the years. He observed that New Delhi became increasingly invested in Sheikh Hasina's Awami League while maintaining comparatively limited engagement with other political actors, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This, he noted, contributed to a perception that India was inherently anti-BNP, a narrative that New Delhi did little to dispel. Even during periods when Bangladesh's opposition faced considerable political pressure, India largely refrained from taking a more visible position. He therefore underlined the importance of maintaining channels of communication with opposition parties in neighbouring countries, irrespective of the government in power. While BNP leaders did interact with the Indian High Commission, and members of Jamaat-e-Islami also remained in contact, such engagements were often handled with considerable caution. Recalling earlier periods of mistrust, Ambassador Trigunayat also referred to instances of strained treatment of Indian diplomatic representatives, including an eviction notice served on the High Commissioner's residence on the grounds that the property belonged to persons who had left the

country. Such episodes, he suggested, exposed the depth of political suspicion that has at times characterised India–Bangladesh relations.

The Ambassador articulated a powerful framing of the bilateral challenge, observing that neighbours are the gift of geography yet the pains of history, and India must deal with them accordingly. He noted that Sheikh Hasina's continued presence in India remains an irritant, though Bangladesh does not actually want her back. He sounded a stark warning about the dangers of imprisonment or political assassination of Hasina, drawing parallels with Indira Gandhi's political resurrection after her arrest, and cautioned that any attempt to harm Hasina would be politically suicidal for whoever attempted it. The Ambassador also highlighted Pakistan's deep entrenchment in Bangladesh, with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) having opened seven to eight offices, and the growing alignment of Bangladeshi military and Islamic leadership with the Sino-Pak axis, supported by the United States. Despite these challenges, he noted, India's current leadership has adopted a pragmatic approach, with Dr Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka in December last year hailed as a positive move and repeated efforts to normalise relations through various channels.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROUNDTABLE

I. DOMESTIC POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN BANGLADESH



PROF. SREERADHA DATTA
Professor, Jindal School of International Affairs, O. P. Jindal Global University

Professor Sreeradha Datta, a distinguished academic specialising in Bangladeshi politics, offered a detailed assessment of Bangladesh's domestic political transformation following the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government. She described the present phase as one of the most consequential shifts in Bangladesh's parliamentary politics in the past three decades. For the first time since 1991, she argued, the country is witnessing what she termed a 'changed grammar of politics'. This is reflected in a greater degree of parliamentary civility, with opposition and government representatives engaging in dialogue and debate – a sharp departure from the previous period, when parliament was often criticised for functioning largely as a rubber-stamp institution. While Bangladesh cannot yet be regarded as a fully consolidated democracy, she suggested that the foundations for a more competitive parliamentary culture may be taking shape.

Professor Datta then turned to the growing political clout of Jamaat-e-Islami, which she identified as one of the most significant developments in contemporary Bangladesh. She observed that Jamaat has developed a particularly strong organisational base, reaching deep into districts and local communities. Over the years, the party has strengthened its grassroots networks through social welfare activities, including the provision of healthcare, education, and other essential services. Recalling an experience from the 1980s, she noted how a Jamaat leader had arranged for the installation of a hand pump for a Hindu community during Durga Puja, illustrating the party's ability to win local goodwill through community work.

At the same time, Professor Datta cautioned against interpreting Jamaat's growing parliamentary participation as evidence of an ideological transformation. In her assessment, the party's core political outlook remains largely unchanged, and its participation in democratic institutions should be understood partly as a tactical route to wider political influence. From India's perspective, the strengthening of Jamaat therefore requires careful attention, particularly given the party's historical stance towards India and its longstanding ideological affinities with Pakistan.

Professor Datta also laid out the range of political, economic, and governance challenges confronting the Tarique Rahman-led BNP government. She pointed to concerns over corruption and rent-seeking involving political actors, including BNP members, which could undermine governmental legitimacy and weaken institutional capacity. Persistent economic pressures, including unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities, further complicate the government's ability to consolidate political stability.

Another issue she emphasised was the increasing intersection between India's domestic politics and its policy towards Bangladesh, particularly in politically sensitive border states such as Assam and West Bengal. She stressed that New Delhi should exercise greater caution in its public messaging, as rhetoric born of India's domestic politics can have significant diplomatic consequences and may be interpreted very differently in Dhaka.

The presence and political activities of Sheikh Hasina in India emerged as a particularly sensitive bilateral issue. Professor Datta noted that Hasina's virtual press conference on 5 August 2026, coinciding with commemorations of Bangladesh's 'Second Freedom Revolution', was widely perceived in Dhaka as politically provocative. In her assessment, allowing Hasina to make a high-profile public intervention from Indian territory on such a symbolically charged date reinforced perceptions that New Delhi remained politically invested in the Awami League and undercut India's efforts to project neutrality towards the new political dispensation in Bangladesh. She further observed that Hasina's subsequent public appearances and interviews from India risk stoking anti-India narratives among sections of the Bangladeshi political establishment and public.

Against this backdrop, Professor Datta argued that India must widen its political outreach beyond the Awami League. Deeper dealings with the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and other emerging political actors, she maintained, should be viewed as a pragmatic requirement rather than an endorsement of their respective ideological positions. India's long-standing over-investment in the Awami League, in her view, has limited New Delhi's political leverage with other important constituencies in Bangladesh. Building working relationships across the political spectrum would therefore be essential to safeguarding India's long-term strategic interests.

She also underlined the declining salience of the 1971 Liberation War narrative among younger Bangladeshis. While the historical legacy of 1971 remains important, younger generations do not necessarily share the same emotional or political bond with it as earlier generations. India, she argued, cannot bank indefinitely on historical goodwill or expectations of political indebtedness. Instead, bilateral relations must increasingly be anchored in contemporary interests, mutual benefits, and forward-looking cooperation.

In this vein, Professor Datta called for a reassessment of India's Neighbourhood First Policy and a more realistic appraisal of India's changing position in South Asia. Acknowledging the region's evolving political and strategic landscape, she argued, is essential for developing a more effective and adaptive approach towards Bangladesh. Above all, she stressed that sustained engagement remains indispensable. Given the geographical proximity, economic interdependence, and deep societal linkages between the two countries, continuous dialogue and broad-based engagement remain the most practical and durable way forward for India–Bangladesh relations.

II. WATER GOVERNANCE: A PIVOTAL CHALLENGE



PROF. MEDHA BISHT
Associate Professor (Senior Grade), South Asian University

Professor Medha Bisht presented a compelling analysis of water governance as the central factor shaping India–Bangladesh relations over the long term. She structured her argument around three critical factors that together create a challenging environment for cooperation. The first is the allocation deadlock, as both countries have adopted rigid positions on water sharing, making compromise increasingly difficult. The second is the persistence of hegemonic narratives, with India routinely characterised as a water hegemon in the dominant discourse, a perception that shapes policy positions and public attitudes in Bangladesh. The third is the emerging focus on climate mitigation and green energy, which may have disastrous consequences for transboundary water management by altering state priorities and reducing water to a mere bargaining chip.

Professor Bisht examined the current treaty landscape between the two countries. The 1996 Ganga Water Treaty expires in December 2026, and negotiations have not yet commenced, with Bangladesh indicating it will seek higher volumes and more favourable terms in the renegotiation. The Teesta Agreement remains stalled due to West Bengal's domestic veto, though the change in government in West Bengal provides a potential opening for revival. Meanwhile, Bangladesh is actively seeking Chinese support for the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project, which raises significant concerns for India. The 2022 Kushiyara Water Sharing Agreement, while technically sound and workable, foundered on implementation, as the promised irrigation for 5,000 hectares of farmland has never materialised. This pattern exemplifies the persistent implementation gap that plagues India–Bangladesh water cooperation, where technically sound agreements repeatedly fail to deliver results on the ground.

To address these challenges, Professor Bisht proposed a comprehensive Three-P Framework for advancing India–Bangladesh water cooperation. The first 'P' refers to a piecemeal approach. Rather than concentrating primarily on large and politically contentious treaties, India and Bangladesh could focus on medium and smaller transboundary rivers, where progress may be easier to achieve. Professor Bisht suggested negotiating sequential agreements for periods of five to ten years and prioritising specific, technical, and implementable arrangements. In this regard, the Kushiyara model was highlighted as a useful example of an issue-specific and workable approach that could potentially be replicated elsewhere. The second 'P' stands for a pollution agreement, based on the recognition that water quality is an area in which both countries share substantial common interests. While Bangladesh faces challenges such as salinity intrusion, India is affected by toxic accumulation and sedimentation, and both countries suffer from untreated sewage and industrial runoff. Professor Bisht therefore recommended establishing joint monitoring stations along the Ganges and Teesta, regularly publishing water-quality data, setting measurable targets for reducing salinity and pollution, and undertaking joint investments in sewage-treatment and related infrastructure. She also suggested exploring financing opportunities through institutions such as the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility. The third 'P' refers to a protocol on floods. Professor Bisht observed that climate change has eroded the reliability of historical hydrological patterns, making floods increasingly severe and unpredictable. She suggested drawing lessons from the Mekong model, particularly its emphasis on advance warning, coordinated dam operations, and institutionalised information-sharing. Possible measures could include providing up to 72 hours' advance notice of major dam releases, establishing a joint operations centre, coordinating gate openings to distribute large water flows more effectively, and developing monsoon recharge mechanisms to capture excess water for use during the dry season. Together, these measures could shift bilateral water cooperation from politically contentious allocation debates towards more practical, adaptive, and mutually beneficial water governance.

Professor Bisht further raised concerns regarding border operating procedures, particularly the management of water intake points in sensitive border areas. She questioned whether these would involve joint oversight by the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and how implementation would proceed in cases where border authorities raise security-related objections. She concluded with the strategic insight that December 2026 is an opportunity to open a conversation between the two countries, but if both countries fixate on allocation formulas, they will remain in stalemate. The focus must therefore shift towards broader aspects of water governance, including ecosystem management and adaptation strategies, rather than narrow allocation disputes.

III. SECURITY AND DEFENCE RELATIONS



BRIG. RAHUL BHONSLE
Director,
Security Risks Asia

Brigadier Rahul Bhonsle offered a detailed assessment of India–Bangladesh security and defence relations, beginning with the observation that Bangladesh deserves to be counted among India's most important neighbours. In his view, India has not always adequately internalised the strategic significance of Bangladesh, and this has at times constrained the development of a more coherent and forward-looking security relationship.

He noted that defence cooperation between the two countries remained relatively limited even during former PM Sheikh Hasina's tenure. Bangladesh's continued dependence on Chinese-origin military equipment, the presence and operation of Chinese submarines from Bangladeshi facilities, and Chinese involvement in developing software for military-related institutions were identified as important structural concerns. He also pointed to the continuing presence of Pakistan's ISI in Bangladesh and its reported influence within certain institutions as an abiding security challenge from India's perspective.

Yet Brigadier Bhonsle emphasised that the Bangladesh Army remains a significant national institution, while cautioning against conflating its political role with that of the military in Pakistan. He pointed to the army's conduct during the July–August 2024 political upheaval, particularly its decision to refrain from firing on protesters, as an example of institutional restraint.

Importantly, he observed that several channels of practical security cooperation between India and Bangladesh continued even during the interim government led by Dr Muhammad Yunus. These included naval interactions, intelligence cooperation between the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and continued border coordination. In his assessment, this demonstrated that institutional security mechanisms could remain functional even amid considerable political turbulence.

Turning to the security outlook under Tarique Rahman, Brigadier Bhonsle noted that Rahman's past political trajectory has generated concerns in India. He referred to Rahman's close association with the military establishment, including his own description of himself as a 'boy of the cantonment', and observed that the army had played an instrumental role in his political rise.

He also highlighted the consolidation of Jamaat-e-Islami and the reported regrouping of militant organisations along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border, which he described as an increasingly permissive environment for radical elements. These developments, he argued, further complicate India's security calculations. Brigadier Bhonsle cautioned that a serious deterioration in India–Bangladesh relations could create opportunities for Pakistan to revive efforts to destabilise India's Northeast, potentially contributing to a wider two-front security challenge.

Despite these concerns, Brigadier Bhonsle identified several areas in which bilateral security cooperation could be strengthened. He called for the resumption of the annual defence dialogue, which has remained suspended since 2023, as well as the revival of naval exercises, bilateral military visits, and deeper engagement through multilateral and minilateral security frameworks, including the Colombo Security Conclave.

He placed particular emphasis on sustaining cooperation between the BSF and the BGB, describing this institutional relationship as one of the central pillars of bilateral security cooperation. Such mechanisms, he argued, should be insulated as far as possible from short-term political fluctuations. India could consider offering suitable defence platforms and technologies to Bangladesh on competitive terms, thereby providing Dhaka with credible alternatives to other external suppliers.

Finally, Brigadier Bhonsle cautioned against allowing relatively limited border-related disputes to acquire disproportionate significance in the wider bilateral relationship. Referring to reports of the pushback of around 6,000 people across the border from West Bengal, he argued that such issues should be managed through established institutional and diplomatic channels rather than being allowed to undermine relations with a strategically important neighbour. In his assessment, a measured and long-term approach to border management would better serve India's broader security and strategic interests vis-à-vis Bangladesh.

IV. CHANGING DYNAMICS OF BANGLADESH–PAKISTAN RELATIONS



DR DHRUBAJYOTI BHATTACHARYA
Sr. Research Fellow, ICWA

Dr Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee highlighted the significant transformation in Bangladesh–Pakistan relations following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. He observed that the political hesitation which had previously constrained engagement with Pakistan during the Awami League era has largely receded. While open engagement with Islamabad once carried considerable political costs in Bangladesh, changes introduced during the interim government period – ncluding a reduced emphasis on the 1971 genocide narrative in sections of official discourse and educational materials – have created greater political space for the current government to pursue a more positive and visible relationship with Pakistan.

Dr Bhattacharya noted that this growing engagement is reflected in a number of concrete developments. Since 2024, several official Pakistani delegations have visited Dhaka, while Bangladeshi delegations have also travelled to Islamabad. Air connectivity has expanded through Karachi–Dhaka services operated by Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Fly Jinnah, both of which interestingly use Indian airspace. He also pointed to a noticeable increase in the number of Bangladeshi students travelling to Pakistan, marking a shift from the greater reluctance observed in earlier years. At the same time, frequent visits by Pakistani trade delegations to Bangladesh indicate Islamabad's growing effort to deepen commercial and economic ties.

Turning to Pakistan's strategic objectives, Dr Bhattacharya argued that Islamabad has historically sought to cultivate influence among fringe political, cultural and radical groups in Bangladesh, a pattern he traced back to the Ziaur Rahman period. In his assessment, this engagement is now evolving into a more structured strategic relationship. He pointed to expanding cooperation in areas such as intelligence sharing, technology exchanges and joint training programmes, while also drawing attention to the reported growth of Pakistan ISI's activities and institutional contacts in the India-Bangladesh border areas.

Dr Bhattacharya identified the emerging convergence among Bangladesh, Pakistan and China as an important strategic concern for India. He argued that Pakistan increasingly sees Bangladesh as a potential source of strategic depth on India's eastern flank, raising concerns over the possibility of a broader two-front security

challenge. He also referred to the release and reorganisation of radical elements within Bangladesh, as well as reported Pakistani support for fringe groups, as developments that could further complicate the regional security environment.

With regard to India's response, Dr Bhattacharya cautioned against relying excessively on political outreach that does not produce reciprocal movement or tangible outcomes. Referring to New Delhi's efforts to invite Tarique Rahman to India, he argued that such outreach should be calibrated and linked to substantive progress in the bilateral relationship.

At the same time, he emphasised that Bangladesh's present economic challenges, particularly those relating to energy security and inflation, cannot be addressed by China or Pakistan alone. India therefore continues to retain significant economic relevance and leverage in its relationship with Bangladesh. In his view, this advantage should be exercised carefully and strategically – not as a means of coercion, but as an instrument for stabilising the relationship, encouraging constructive engagement and safeguarding India's long-term interests.

V. TRADE, CONNECTIVITY, AND NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY



DR SMRUTI PATTANAIK
Research Fellow (SS) MP-IDSA

Dr Smruti Pattanaik, a well-known strategist on Bangladesh, examined the economic dimensions of India–Bangladesh relations, highlighting the persistent trade imbalance between the two countries. She noted that India exports approximately US$12 billion worth of goods to Bangladesh while importing only around US$2 billion, an imbalance that is frequently politicised in Bangladesh and often fuels anti-India sentiment. She also drew attention to the strong overlap between business and politics in Bangladesh, observing that a large proportion of parliamentarians are themselves businesspeople in the country. According to her, this has created an influential business constituency with considerable influence over policy formulation, illustrating the extent to which commercial interests are embedded in political decision-making.

Dr Pattanaik identified several relatively achievable measures to boost trade and connectivity between the two neighbours. She recommended restoring elements of the trade framework in place during the Hasina period, reconsidering restrictions on designated ports, and facilitating third-country exports through additional airports, describing these as 'low-hanging fruits' that could be addressed relatively quickly. She also highlighted persistent connectivity bottlenecks. Despite high-level commitments, including Bangladesh's proposal to charge India 192 Bangladeshi Taka per metric ton for transporting cargo and goods through its territory to India's landlocked northeastern states, implementation has remained constrained by insurance-related issues and cumbersome documentation requirements for truckers. She stressed the need to streamline these procedures and remove bureaucratic obstacles to enable smoother cross-border movement and trade.

She also argued that restrictions on land-port access imposed by India were met with reciprocal measures from Bangladesh, prompting both sides to reroute cargo, with some Bangladeshi goods now moving through Mumbai port despite the continued importance of land ports for Bangladesh's trade. Dr Pattanaik emphasised the need to recognise the uneven levels of dependence within the relationship, pointing out that states such as Tripura rely heavily on connectivity through Bangladesh, while Bangladesh's dependence on India for imports

challenge. He also referred to the release and reorganisation of radical elements within Bangladesh, as well as reported Pakistani support for fringe groups, as developments that could further complicate the regional security environment.

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VI. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



MS NAYANIMA BASU
Independent Journalist & Adjunct Fellow, Gateway Foundation: Indian Council on Global Relations

Ms Nayanima Basu, a renowned journalist with extensive experience covering Bangladesh, offered a candid assessment of India's image and perception challenges in the country. She argued that India has lost much of the goodwill and respect it once enjoyed among ordinary Bangladeshis, who now increasingly view it with suspicion. In her view, this decline is linked to a wider 'big brother' perception of India across South Asia, including in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where New Delhi is often seen as an overly domineering or intrusive actor in regional and bilateral affairs.

Ms Basu identified Sheikh Hasina's public appearance in India on 5 August 2026 as a particularly damaging development. She argued that allowing Hasina to hold a live press conference in the national capital on a politically sensitive date in Bangladesh undermined India's claims of neutrality towards the new government. Meanwhile, New Delhi's efforts to encourage Tarique Rahman to visit India create a difficult political situation for him domestically, particularly when India is simultaneously perceived as handing a platform to his principal political rival.

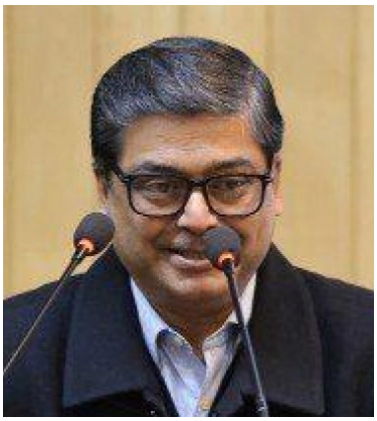
She also drew attention to the changing political and social landscape in Bangladesh. Jamaat-e-Islami, she observed, has successfully rebranded itself through social media outreach and welfare activities, gradually expanding its appeal. Equally important is the generational shift within the country. Bangladesh's younger generation does not necessarily share the same emotional attachment to the 1971 Liberation War as earlier generations and is increasingly less inclined to view India primarily through the historical lens of liberation. This generation is also more globally connected and has wider options for education and employment abroad, reducing its dependence on India. Referring to Afghanistan, she cautioned that India's restrictive visa policies after the Taliban takeover in August 2021 had dented goodwill among the younger generation of Afghans and warned against allowing a similar erosion of ties with Bangladeshi youth to set in now.

Ms Basu expressed particular concern over political rhetoric in India, including references to Bangladeshis as

'termites', narratives about migrants taking away jobs, and the discourse surrounding pushbacks at the border. Such language, she argued, deeply affects perceptions of India in Bangladesh. Yet she pointed to the everyday interactions along the border, including in Meghalaya, where Indian and Bangladeshi communities continue to engage through trade and tourism, as evidence that grassroots relations are often more cooperative than political narratives suggest.

As a way forward, Ms Basu emphasised the importance of respect and dignity in India's approach towards Bangladesh. She argued that New Delhi must recognise Bangladesh as a sovereign country with its own domestic politics and foreign-policy choices. She also called for stronger strategic communication, greater cultural outreach through films, books and other media, and deeper youth engagement through educational exchanges. In her view, shared linguistic and cultural ties, particularly the Bengali language, provide India with a firm foundation for rebuilding long-term people-to-people ties.

VII. REGIONAL AND EXTRA-REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS



MR JAYANTA ROY CHOUDHURY
Editor,
United News of India (UNI)

In his presentation, Mr Jayanta Roy Choudhury identified the recently concluded Mecca Joint Defence Agreement as a significant development in the emerging regional security architecture. Signed on 7 August 2026 by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan, the agreement establishes a collective-defence framework under which an armed attack against one signatory would be regarded as an attack against all. Bangladesh is not currently a party to the agreement, but Dhaka has been invited to consider joining it, a possibility that Mr Choudhury viewed as strategically significant for India.

He argued that Bangladesh's possible participation could have wider security implications for South Asia, particularly given Pakistan's role in the arrangement and the expanding defence relationship between Dhaka and Islamabad. From India's perspective, closer Bangladesh–Pakistan security cooperation, including intelligence exchanges, military training and technology cooperation, could further complicate the security environment on India's eastern flank. He also highlighted the broader significance of Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, with Türkiye contributing considerable defence-industrial capabilities and Saudi Arabia lending substantial economic and financial weight to the emerging arrangement.

Mr Choudhury also examined China's growing strategic footprint in Bangladesh. China remains Bangladesh's principal supplier of military hardware, accounting for more than two-thirds of its arms imports in recent years, while the Bangladesh Navy operates two Chinese-built Ming-class submarines and a submarine base at Pekua, Cox's Bazar, constructed with Chinese assistance. He further pointed to Beijing's expanding economic and infrastructure engagement, including its involvement around Mongla and its growing interest in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. Bangladesh formally sought Chinese support for the Teesta project in 2026, and Beijing subsequently expressed willingness to assist with the project and wider river-management cooperation.

On nuclear cooperation, he underlined the importance of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant for India's security interests. The project rests on a trilateral cooperation arrangement involving Bangladesh, Russia and India,

under which India provides technical expertise, consultancy and capacity support. Given Bangladesh's high population density and the plant's geographical proximity to India, he stressed that New Delhi has a strong interest in ensuring continued cooperation on nuclear safety and related technical matters in Bangladesh.

Mr Choudhury also drew attention to instability along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border, particularly the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in Rakhine. Continued conflict involving the Myanmar military, the Arakan Army and the Rohingya population has increased pressures along Bangladesh's southeastern frontier, adding another layer of uncertainty to the regional security environment.

Taken together, he argued that the expanding roles of Pakistan, Türkiye and China in Bangladesh require careful attention from New Delhi. Bangladesh's possible participation in the Mecca Agreement could also provide Dhaka with greater strategic options in its dealings with India. Rather than viewing these developments solely through the prism of rivalry, however, India would need to assess how emerging defence alignments, economic dependencies and Bangladesh's own strategic choices are reshaping the balance of influence in its eastern neighbourhood.

VIII. SECURITY ARCHITECTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS



MAJOR GENERAL J.S. NANDA
Distinguished Fellow,
USI

Major General J.S. Nanda, who was India's Defence Adviser to Bangladesh, provided a detailed assessment of the institutional dynamics shaping India–Bangladesh security relations, beginning with the political legacy of the Awami League. He argued that the Awami League should be understood not merely as a political party but as a broader political structure that gradually came to monopolise the narrative of Bangladesh's Liberation War. According to him, this process began as early as 1974–75, when other political forces were also present but were increasingly overshadowed by the Awami League. This monopolisation of the 1971 narrative, he argued, contributed to a growing correlation between anti-Awami League and anti-India sentiment, while India's continued identification with the Awami League reinforced this perception. He further referred to 5 August 2026, arguing that India's decision to provide Sheikh Hasina with a platform at a time when Bangladesh was commemorating what many described as its 'second liberation' sent a damaging political signal.

General Nanda also cited a widely discussed but classified report based on interactions with ten well-known Bangladeshis. According to him, their central message was that Bangladeshis wanted India to respect their country's sovereignty, its independence in managing domestic politics, and its autonomy in conducting foreign policy. The underlying message, he stressed, was that New Delhi should avoid being perceived as interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs. He highlighted this as a crucial indicator of the broader perception challenge India currently faces in Bangladesh.

Turning to the Bangladesh Army and the question of Islamisation, General Nanda warned that orthodox Islamic influences have been seeping into sections of the army, a process he traced back to the 2000s. He argued that this tendency is particularly visible among the rank and file, while sections of the middle-ranking officer corps may also be susceptible to it. According to him, the Air Force and Navy remain largely unaffected by this trend for now. He emphasised the pivotal role played by the current army chief during political transition. In this

context, he described the current Chief of Army Staff, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, as balanced and mature and noted his support for Tarique Rahman. However, with a new army chief expected in 2027, he cautioned that India would need to monitor developments surrounding the succession closely. He similarly stressed that the Bangladesh Army remains an institution capable of functioning with considerable autonomy.

On Jamaat-e-Islami, General Nanda observed that the party contested only 223 of Bangladesh's 300 parliamentary seats because, in his assessment, it did not necessarily seek to dominate the political contest and instead preferred to hold a strategically advantageous position as the official opposition. He argued that Jamaat does not regard democracy as its ultimate ideological objective and that its longer-term aspiration remains the establishment of an Islamic political order.

General Nanda placed considerable emphasis on sustaining institutional security cooperation irrespective of political fluctuations. He argued that intelligence and security engagement must continue and that cooperation between the BSF and Bangladesh's border guarding forces should be maintained even if the wider bilateral relationship deteriorates. He also called for greater infusion of technology into border management. Although indigenous technological solutions are available, he observed that knowledge and familiarity with such systems among relevant stakeholders remain limited. Technology-based cooperation could therefore serve operational ends and double as a confidence-building measure. He also described the RAW–DGFI channel as critical, emphasising that continuing contacts between RAW and Bangladesh's DGFI provide an important backchannel for managing bilateral crises.

The question of asymmetry formed another central element of General Nanda's assessment. He argued that India has at times overplayed its structural advantages in the relationship, including through what he described as the weaponisation of the BSF, the personalisation of political relationships, and the use of water as leverage. Such practices, he cautioned, have bred considerable resentment in Bangladesh. As a way forward, he called for greater recognition of mutual dependence between the two countries, arguing that India should avoid weaponising its advantages and instead use its asymmetry constructively. In his assessment, a more sustainable India–Bangladesh relationship must ultimately rest on a greater sense of equality, not dominance.

In this context, General Nanda also singled out healthcare, agriculture and education as practical areas for early cooperation where India and Bangladesh could deepen cooperation relatively easily and generate visible benefits for ordinary citizens. Greater investment in healthcare, agricultural technology and food security, educational exchanges, skills development and institutional partnerships could help create positive constituencies for the bilateral relationship. Such sectors are less politically contentious and therefore offer practical avenues for rebuilding trust while strengthening people-to-people and institutional ties.

CRITICAL ISSUES, POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

The roundtable identified several interrelated political, security, economic, institutional, and societal challenges shaping India–Bangladesh relations. The discussions drove home the need for India to recalibrate its approach towards Bangladesh through broader political engagement, stronger institutional mechanisms, better perception management, and sustained cooperation in security, water governance, connectivity, and people-to-people relations.

1. Diversify Political Engagement and Move Beyond Regime Preferences

A central theme to emerge from the discussion was the need for India to broaden its political engagement in Bangladesh. Participants observed that New Delhi has historically invested heavily in the Awami League, while its engagement with other political actors, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami and emerging political forces, has remained comparatively limited. Such dependence on a single political party has become a structural weakness in India's Bangladesh policy. India should therefore cultivate sustained relationships across the Bangladeshi political spectrum, including with parties and groups whose political positions may sometimes sit uncomfortably with New Delhi. The possibility that opposition parties may form governments in the future must be factored into long-term policy planning. A common minimum approach towards Bangladesh should prioritise bilateral stability and India's long-term strategic interests over preferences for particular political parties or governments.

Equally, India needs to acknowledge the changing regional environment and recalibrate its neighbourhood policy accordingly. Bangladesh today has multiple external partnerships and greater strategic choices. India should therefore approach Dhaka as a sovereign and important regional partner rather than presume political predominance. Invitations and high-level visits should continue, but New Delhi should avoid appearing overly dependent on their optics. The emphasis should instead fall on substantive outcomes and clearly identifiable deliverables from every high-level engagement.

2. Manage the Sheikh Hasina Issue with Greater Discretion

The presence and political activities of former PM Sheikh Hasina in India were identified as a major irritant in the bilateral relationship. Participants noted that Bangladesh may not necessarily seek her immediate return, contrary to earlier assumptions, but her continued public political visibility from Indian territory contributes to perceptions that New Delhi remains unable to move beyond its longstanding association with the Awami League. The 5 August 2026 press conference was viewed as particularly counterproductive. Allowing Hasina political platforms in India while simultaneously seeking closer engagement with the Tarique Rahman government risks creating a sense of maan-abhiman – a perception of pride, hurt and political insensitivity – in Dhaka.

India should consequently curb Hasina's media and political visibility, withhold platforms that could be interpreted as facilitating political intervention in Bangladesh, and seek out discreet diplomatic channels for managing the issue. The objective should be to prevent the Hasina question from overshadowing broader bilateral relations while recognising that her presence in India may increasingly carry greater diplomatic costs than strategic benefits.

3. Develop a Coherent Strategy for Perception and Strategic Communication

India faces a serious perception challenge in Bangladesh. Participants highlighted resentment towards what is often perceived as a 'big brother' attitude, while rhetoric surrounding 'infiltration', 'termites', and similar terms has soured public opinion. Political leaders and public institutions should avoid language that can be read as insulting or dehumanising towards Bangladeshis.

India currently lacks an adequately coordinated strategic communication policy towards Bangladesh. New Delhi should therefore develop a coherent communication strategy based on respect for Bangladesh's sovereignty and political sensitivities. Strategic communication should focus instead on India's contribution to trade, connectivity, education, healthcare, development cooperation and regional stability. Cultural and linguistic affinities, particularly the shared Bengali heritage, should be used more effectively to rebuild trust and reinforce the societal foundations of the relationship.

4. Expand Youth and People-to-People Engagement

The fading resonance of the 1971 narrative among younger Bangladeshis was identified as an important generational shift. Bangladesh has a large young population that is increasingly modern, globally connected, and less inclined to view India through the historical lens that shaped earlier generations. Younger Bangladeshis are also less receptive to assumptions of India as the region's 'big/elder brother'.

India should accordingly expand educational exchanges, scholarships, university partnerships, professional exchanges and youth-oriented cultural programmes. Social media and digital platforms should be harnessed more systematically to communicate directly with younger audiences.

A network of Bangladeshi alumni of Indian universities, training institutions, civil services programmes and defence institutions should be built up as long-term partners and potential 'brand ambassadors' for India–Bangladesh relations. India should also seek greater cultural access for Indian films, books, magazines and other creative industries in Bangladesh, while leveraging the shared Bengali language and cultural traditions. Such engagement would also help offset the growing cultural influence of Pakistan and other external actors.

5. Preserve Institutional Security and Defence Cooperation

The discussions emphasised that institutional relationships are generally more durable than political or personal relationships and should therefore remain at the centre of India–Bangladesh security cooperation. India should work towards resuming the annual defence dialogue, which has not been held since 2023, while maintaining intelligence cooperation, including RAW–DGFI contacts, and sustained engagement between the BSF and Bangladesh's border forces. Naval cooperation should also be revived through bilateral visits, exercises and professional exchanges. Engagement with Bangladesh should continue within multilateral security arrangements such as the Colombo Security Conclave. India can further strengthen defence ties by offering appropriate Indian defence platforms, maritime and aerial surveillance technologies, technical assistance and joint training programmes.

Close attention should be paid to developments surrounding the Mecca Agreement and any arrangements that could alter the regional security balance or generate a potential two-front strategic challenge for India. Rather than relying exclusively on pressure, India should offer credible alternative security partnerships and deepen professional engagement with Bangladesh's armed forces.

6. Strengthen Border Management and Counter-Radicalisation Mechanisms

Border management should move away from unilateral or ad hoc practices towards institutionalised cooperation. Participants cautioned against practices such as indiscriminate 'pushbacks', which can aggravate political tensions without resolving the underlying problems.

India and Bangladesh should develop joint border patrol protocols, strengthen local coordination mechanisms and explore joint operations or coordination centres where appropriate. Border operating procedures should clearly define responsibilities and establish mechanisms to defuse crises before they escalate.

At the same time, concerns over fundamentalist and radical influences within Bangladesh require sustained attention. India should maintain communication with Bangladesh's political and military leadership, closely monitor extremist networks and explore joint counter-radicalisation and counter-extremism initiatives. The underlying socioeconomic and political causes of radicalisation should also feature in the bilateral security dialogue.

7. Reframe Water Cooperation through a Practical Three-P Approach

Water governance emerged as one of the most consequential dimensions of the bilateral relationship, particularly with the Ganga Water Treaty approaching its December 2026 expiry and the Teesta agreement still unresolved. Rather than focusing exclusively on major river treaties, India and Bangladesh should adopt a practical Three-P Framework comprising:

- a piecemeal approach focused on cooperation over smaller and less politically contentious rivers;
- a pollution framework built on joint monitoring, data-sharing and agreed pollution-reduction targets; and
- a protocol on floods, including a joint coordination mechanism and Mekong-style early-warning systems.

Joint investment in water-related infrastructure, river management and environmental protection should complement these arrangements. For the renewal of the Ganga Water Treaty, negotiations should not become fixated solely on water-allocation formulas. The treaty's expiration should instead be used as an opportunity to broaden the conversation to include pollution, sediment management, ecology, flood coordination, and border operations. A shorter-term extension incorporating specific operational protocols could offer greater flexibility. On the Teesta issue, New Delhi should intensify consultation with the West Bengal government while examining whether technical or incremental arrangements can proceed even in the absence of a comprehensive agreement, drawing lessons from the approach taken in the Kushiyara case.

8. Address the Implementation Deficit

Several participants stressed that India and Bangladesh often possess adequate agreements but face persistent gaps in implementation. Strengthening implementation therefore requires clearly defined standard operating procedures, clarification of security and administrative responsibilities, stronger local-level coordination and regular institutional reviews. Crisis-management protocols should be drawn up to prevent local border, security, water or political disputes from escalating into broader diplomatic rows. Institutional mechanisms should continue functioning regardless of changes in government in either country.

9. Restore and Expand Trade and Connectivity

Economic engagement should remain a stabilising pillar of bilateral relations. India should consider restoring trade and transit arrangements that existed before recent political disruptions, including reviewing restrictions affecting Bangladeshi third-country exports through Indian ports. The bilateral trade imbalance should be addressed strategically by expanding market access, reducing non-tariff barriers and smoothing the path for Bangladeshi exports rather than viewing trade primarily through the lens of Indian exports.

Connectivity should be upgraded by simplifying documentation requirements for truckers, addressing cross-border insurance problems, restoring the full functioning of land ports and expanding inland-waterway connectivity. Efficient transport and logistics arrangements would produce constituencies on both sides with a direct stake in stable bilateral relations.

10. Facilitate Medical and Societal Connectivity

Medical tourism has historically constituted an important component of India–Bangladesh people-to-people relations. India should streamline visa procedures for Bangladeshi medical patients and their attendants and recognise the economic and diplomatic value of healthcare connectivity.

India should, however, avoid assuming that Bangladesh will remain permanently dependent on Indian healthcare or other services. The advantages of geographic proximity, linguistic familiarity and relatively affordable treatment need to be shored up through improved service delivery and easier mobility. Agriculture and education should likewise be identified as practical areas for early cooperation between the two countries.

11. Strengthen Institutional Coordination within India

A more effective Bangladesh policy also requires stronger institutional coordination within India. Participants highlighted the need for closer coordination among the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Defence, particularly because border management, security and neighbourhood diplomacy frequently intersect.

Centre–state coordination is equally important, especially on issues such as water sharing, border management, connectivity and migration, where state governments are key stakeholders.

Greater investment should also be made in training diplomats, officials and security personnel dealing with Bangladesh and the wider neighbourhood. Such training should be systematically evaluated to ensure that institutional investment yields long-term diplomatic and strategic dividends.

12. Build Long-Term Institutional and Ambassador Networks

India should create enduring networks of Bangladeshi officials, diplomats, military officers, civil servants, academics and professionals who have studied or received training in India. Rather than allowing such relationships to wither after individual programmes conclude, India should maintain structured alumni networks through annual interactions and periodic five-year and ten-year reunions.

These networks can serve as informal bridges between the two countries and contribute to a broader constituency supportive of sustained bilateral engagement. Over the long term, such institutional relationships may prove more resilient than personal political ties and can help ensure continuity even during periods of political transition.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS & VOTE OF THANKS

In her closing remarks, **Dr Anchita Borthakur** conveyed CRF's sincere appreciation to all the participants for their valuable insights and thoughtful contributions, which enriched the discussion. The roundtable concluded with the recognition that while the challenges are formidable, there are also significant opportunities for a reset in India-Bangladesh relations based on mutual respect, pragmatic engagement, and a clear-eyed understanding of each country's interests and sensitivities. She expressed the hope that the insights and recommendations emerging from the roundtable would receive due consideration from policymakers and contribute to the process of recalibrating India–Bangladesh relations.

The discussion underscored that the key challenges confronting the bilateral relationship are broadly understood; the more important task now is to translate this understanding into practical and sustainable policy measures. Participants emphasised that with sufficient political will, strategic vision and sustained institutional engagement, India and Bangladesh can build a more resilient relationship that serves the interests of both countries and the wider region. Looking ahead, this would require India to recognise the changing strategic landscape of South Asia and engage Bangladesh and its other neighbours on the basis of sovereign equality, mutual respect and shared interests, rather than assumptions of regional predominance. The way forward therefore lies in breaking free of personality- and regime-centric engagement and moving towards a more balanced, broad-based, and mutually beneficial partnership.


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