



CURRENT AFFAIRS



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“ A NEW CHAPTER IN INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS”

This article covers “Daily Current Affairs” and details the topic of the INDIA -BANGLADESH relationship

Syllabus mapping: GS-2: International Relationship: India and its Neighborhood First policy.

For Prelims: India-Bangladesh Relations:

Key Facts: Overview of bilateral relations, historical context, recent developments, and important agreements or treaties.

Recent Developments: Key visits, bilateral agreements, and significant changes in the relationship.

For Mains: India-Bangladesh Relations:

Historical Context: Evolution of bilateral relations from independence to present.

Key Issues: Border management, water sharing, trade and economic cooperation, and cultural ties.

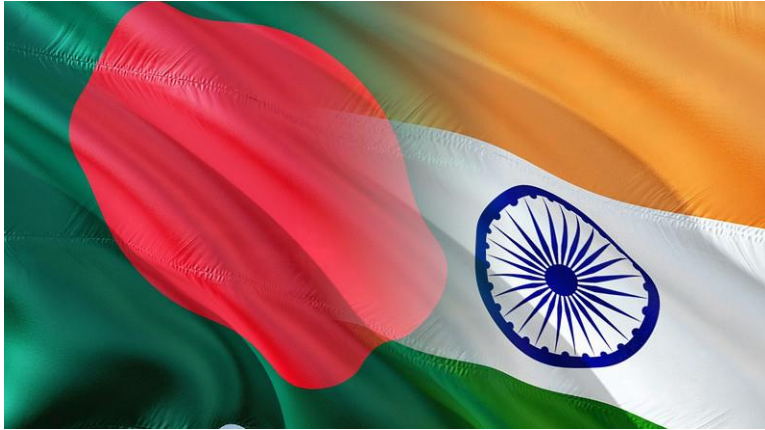
Recent Developments: Major agreements, high-level visits, and current challenges.

Future Outlook: Areas of potential growth and issues needing resolution.

Why In News

Sheikh Hasina Resigns Amidst Deadly Unrest

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had been in power for the past 15 years, resigned and left the country on Monday at noon via helicopter. Her departure follows weeks of intense unrest, during which over 300 people have been killed. The country is now preparing for the formation of an interim government to manage the ongoing crisis and navigate the path forward.



“India-Bangladesh Relations: A Multidimensional Partnership Flourishing Across Borders”

India and Bangladesh share profound historical, linguistic, and cultural ties, which have fostered a robust and enduring partnership. This relationship is characterized by mutual respect, sovereignty, equality, and a deep understanding, serving as a model for bilateral relations in the region and beyond.

Security and Border Management

Cooperation on Security Issues:

Border Management: The management of the 4,096 km international border is addressed through several mechanisms:

1. **Border Fencing:** Ongoing efforts to secure and manage the border with fencing where applicable.
2. **Joint Inspection and Demarcation:** Regular joint inspections of boundary pillars and demarcation of both land and riverine boundaries.
3. **Bilateral Mechanisms:** *DG Level Talks:* Discussions between Directors General of Border Guarding Forces. *Drugs Control Agencies:* Regular talks and coordination between nodal agencies handling drug control. *Working Level Meetings:* Ongoing engagement and information exchange at various levels to enhance border security and management.

Defence Cooperation

Bilateral Exchanges:

High-Level Visits: Significant exchanges took place in 2023-2024 involving senior military officials from both countries:

Indian Air Chief Marshal: Vivek Ram Chaudhari visited Dhaka from February 26 to March 1, 2024, where he met with Bangladesh’s Chief of Air Staff and visited key military institutions.

Annual Defence Dialogue and Tri-Services Talks: The 5th Annual Defence Dialogue and 4th Tri-Services Talks were held in Dhaka from August 20-21, 2023, focusing on ongoing defense cooperation.

Bangladesh Chief of Naval Staff: Visited India from September 12-15, 2023.

Victory Day Celebrations:

December 2023: A delegation of 30 Muktiyoddhas and 6 serving officers of Bangladesh Armed Forces participated in the 'Vijay Diwas 2023' celebrations in Kolkata.

Reciprocal Visits: A delegation of 30 Indian war veterans and 6 serving officers participated in Bangladesh's Victory Day celebrations.

Defense Infrastructure and Capability Building:

Lines of Credit: India has extended credit lines for the development of defense-related infrastructure in Bangladesh, enhancing its operational capabilities.

Joint Exercises and Training: Regular joint military exercises and training programs are conducted to build interoperability and enhance tactical and strategic capabilities.

Connectivity:

Railway Connectivity: Efforts to improve cross-border railway links have led to the rehabilitation of six pre-1965 rail connections. Notably, on November 1, 2023, Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the sixth cross-border rail link between Agartala (India) and Akhaura (Bangladesh), providing an alternate route to India's North-East. Earlier, the operationalization of the Haldibari (India) – Chilahati (Bangladesh) rail link on August 1, 2021, further advanced sub-regional connectivity. The other four operational rail links are:

- *Petrapole (India) – Benapole (Bangladesh)*
- *Gede (India) – Darshana (Bangladesh)*
- *Singhabad (India) – Rohanpur (Bangladesh)*
- *Radhikapur (India) – Birol (Bangladesh)*

Three railway services currently operate between the countries:

- *Maitri Express (since 2008, connecting Kolkata and Dhaka)*
- *Bandhan Express (since 2017, connecting Kolkata and Khulna)*
- *Mitali Express (since June 2022, between New Jalpaiguri and Dhaka)*

Road and Inland Water Connectivity: There are currently five bus routes operating between India and Bangladesh, linking Kolkata, Agartala, and Guwahati with Dhaka and Khulna. The Protocol on Inland Waterways Trade and Transit (PIWTT), active since 1972, facilitates trade and transit through the river systems of both countries. This protocol supports the movement of goods by barge and vessel and includes cruise services.

Port Connectivity: In 2023, India and Bangladesh operationalized the Agreement for using Chittagong and Mongla Ports. This agreement allows India to use these ports for transit cargo between Northeast India and the mainland, significantly reducing transportation costs and time.

Economic and Commercial: Bangladesh stands as India's largest trade partner in South Asia, while India ranks as the second-largest trade partner of Bangladesh in Asia. In the fiscal year 2023-24, Bangladesh exported goods worth USD 1.97 billion to India, with the total bilateral trade reaching USD 14.01 billion. New commercial collaborations have emerged, notably in the startup sector. The India-Bangladesh Startup Bridge, inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in March 2021, has fostered further engagement. A Bangladeshi startup delegation visited India in May 2023, followed by a reciprocal visit to Bangladesh in July 2023 for the Bangladesh Startup Summit 2023.

Power and Energy: Cooperation in the power and energy sector has become a cornerstone of India-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is currently importing 1,160 MW of power from India. The Joint Working Group (JWG) and Joint Steering Committee (JSC) on Power facilitate bilateral cooperation in cross-border electricity trade. The *Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant* has begun supplying electricity to the Bangladeshi grid. In March 2023, the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline, designed to transport High-Speed Diesel from India to Bangladesh, was inaugurated by both Prime Ministers. Additionally, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), in partnership with Oil India Limited, is involved in offshore oil exploration, while IOCL has been registered as a Government-to-Government (G2G) supplier in 2023, providing POL products to Bangladesh.

Development Partnership: Bangladesh has emerged as India's largest development partner, with India extending three Lines of Credit (LOC) over the past eight years totaling approximately USD 8 billion. These LOCs support infrastructure development in sectors such as roads, railways, shipping, and ports. Beyond LOCs, India has also provided grant assistance for various infrastructure projects, including the Akhaura-Agartala rail link, the dredging of inland waterways in Bangladesh, and the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline.

High-Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) form a significant part of India's development aid. India has funded 77 HICDPs, including student hostels, academic buildings, skill development and training institutions, cultural centers, and orphanages, with another 16 HICDPs underway. The total value of these 93 projects exceeds USD 50 million.

Cultural Cooperation: The Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre and the Indian Cultural Centre in Dhaka play pivotal roles in celebrating and nurturing the cultural ties between India and Bangladesh. These centers offer various training programs in *Yoga, Kathak, Manipuri dance, Hindi language, and Hindustani classical music*. They also host cultural programs featuring renowned artists from both countries, fostering deeper people-to-people connections. In June 2022, India revitalized the **Bangladesh Youth Delegation 2022** initiative to engage Bangladeshi youth talent.

Visas: To enhance people-to-people ties and streamline the visa process, the Government of India has expanded services across 16 Indian Visa Application Centres (IVAC) in Bangladesh to meet the rising demand for Indian visas. The demand for Indian medical visas is particularly high, with India implementing a liberalized policy that allows three medical attendant visas for each medical patient, a

unique provision extended specifically to Bangladesh. Indian visa operations in Bangladesh are the largest globally, both in terms of the number of application centers, the volume of applications processed daily, and the total number of visas issued.

Positive development during Sheikh Hasina's Era

Sheikh Hasina's tenure saw a marked improvement in India-Bangladesh relations:

Counteracting Extremism: Hasina's government took steps to combat extremism and limit anti-India activities, reducing the influence of groups like Jamaat-e-Islami.

Enhanced Cooperation: The relationship between India and Bangladesh strengthened significantly, marked by cooperation on border issues, trade, and regional security.

Development Projects: India supported various development initiatives in Bangladesh, contributing to economic growth and stability in the region.

Strong Partnership: Under Sheikh Hasina, India and Bangladesh enjoyed a robust relationship, characterized by cooperation on numerous fronts, including border issues, trade, and security.

Sensitive to Indian Concerns: Hasina was known for being attentive to India's security concerns, which included curbing anti-Indian activities within Bangladesh and addressing border issues.

Impact of recent developments in Bangladesh:

Sheikh Hasina's resignation and departure from office represent a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, with implications for India-Bangladesh relations and broader regional dynamics.

Strategic Implications for India:

Geopolitical Encirclement: India could find itself in a more precarious position if Bangladesh, under increased Chinese influence, aligns more closely with Beijing. This would add to India's strategic challenges, especially given its existing concerns about its other neighbors:

1. **China and Pakistan:** To the north and west, respectively, China and Pakistan have historically been strategic competitors for India.
2. **Nepal:** With a communist-led government in Nepal, India faces a nuanced relationship, occasionally strained by local political dynamics.
3. **Afghanistan:** The Taliban-controlled Afghanistan presents a complex situation, with its foreign policy likely influenced by Pakistan and potentially by China.
4. **Maldives:** An anti-India government in the Maldives further complicates India's regional security environment.

Economic and Strategic Challenges:

Ongoing Projects: Key infrastructure projects and trade agreements initiated during Hasina's tenure, such as rail links, energy cooperation, and development projects, may face delays or require renegotiation.

Trade Dynamics: The political transition could influence trade policies and economic cooperation, potentially affecting bilateral trade volumes and investment flows.

Local and regional challenges:

Jamaat-e-Islami Influence: With Hasina's departure, there is concern that Jamaat-e-Islami, which was involved in protests against her, might gain influence. This could complicate India's diplomatic relations, reminiscent of the tensions during the BNP-Jamaat government.

Potential for Increased Chinese Influence: China's growing interest in Bangladesh and its financial resources could bolster the new government, potentially at India's expense. This might impact India's strategic interests in the region.

Security and Diplomatic Challenges

Rhetoric by the BNP against India: The BNP used an anti-India stance as a key part of its political platform, which resonated with many Bangladeshis who felt that India was overly involved in their internal politics. This created a hostile environment for India and heightened tensions.

Perceptions of Bias: India's close ties with the Awami League, the BNP's main political rival, led to perceptions that India was favoring one party over the general well-being of Bangladesh. This perception further fueled anti-India sentiment.

Insurgent Groups: During the BNP period, several ethnic insurgent groups that troubled India's northeast, such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), operated from Bangladesh. These groups received support and refuge in Bangladesh, exacerbating India's security concerns. This group again can be resurface in Bangladesh.

Public Opposition: The 'India-Out' campaign, which involved public expressions of opposition to India, was another manifestation of the BNP's stance. While the BNP itself did not officially endorse this campaign, some of its leaders and supporters openly voiced anti-India sentiments, further straining bilateral relations.

Future Diplomatic Strategies

Engagement with New Leadership:

Diplomatic Adaptation: India will need to engage with whoever comes to power in Bangladesh, maintaining a diplomatic balance while addressing its strategic interests. Ensuring continued cooperation on shared issues like border security and trade will be crucial.

Continued Investments and Support:

Economic Support: India might continue to offer support for developmental projects in Bangladesh to strengthen bilateral ties and counterbalance Chinese influence.

Monitoring and Adaptation:

Diplomatic Flexibility: India will need to monitor the political situation in Bangladesh closely and be prepared to adapt its strategies in response to changes in Dhaka's governance and external influences.

Humanitarian and Development Support:

Aid for Development Projects: Continue to support development projects and humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh. This includes infrastructure projects, capacity-building programs, and disaster relief efforts.

Cultural and Educational Exchanges: Foster people-to-people connections through cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges. Support programs that promote mutual understanding and cooperation between the two countries.

Regional and Global Diplomacy:

Coordinate with Regional Partners: Engage with other South Asian countries to address any regional implications of the political changes in Bangladesh. Coordinate strategies to ensure regional stability and cooperation.

Leverage International Platforms: Use international platforms, such as the United Nations and multilateral organizations, to advocate for stability and cooperation in South Asia. Work with international partners to support Bangladesh's democratic process and economic development.

Conclusion

Sheikh Hasina's exit marks the end of an era of close cooperation between India and Bangladesh. While this transition introduces uncertainties, India's approach will likely involve diplomatic engagement with the new government, continued support for development initiatives, and a strategic focus on balancing regional influences.

PRELIMS QUESTION:

Q. Which of the following statements about 'Exercise SAMPRITI-2023' are correct?

1. This was a joint military exercise between India and Sri Lanka.
2. It commenced in Umroi, Meghalaya.
3. The emphasis of the exercise is to enhance interoperability, tactical drills, and shared best practices.
4. The RAJPUT Regiment of the Indian Army was part of this exercise.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

A. 1, 2 and 3

B. 2, 3 and 4

C. 1, 3 and 4

D. 1, 2 and 4

ANSWER: B

MAINS QUESTION:

With the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and the establishment of an interim government in Bangladesh, what should be India's strategic approach to maintain and enhance bilateral relations with Bangladesh?

(250 words 15 marks)

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