



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OVER 50 YEARS OF BILATERAL COOPERATION BETWEEN BANGLADESH AND INDIA INITIATED BY BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN IN BUILDING A NEW BANGLADESH.

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ABSTRACT

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India has evolved significantly over the past five decades, driven by shared history, culture, geography, and mutual interests. Initiated by the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, this partnership laid the foundation for strategic cooperation in diverse sectors, including trade, energy, security, connectivity, and cultural exchange. Key achievements, such as water-sharing agreements, border management, and joint economic initiatives, underscore the commitment to regional stability and economic growth. Infrastructure projects like cross-border railways and power-sharing agreements further highlight efforts to enhance connectivity and energy integration. This enduring partnership has also adapted to modern challenges, including climate change and terrorism, reflecting a forward-looking approach rooted in mutual respect and trust. By addressing shared goals and fostering regional harmony, the relationship remains a cornerstone of South Asia's geopolitical framework. This article reviews its progress, examining milestones and challenges while offering insights into strengthening ties for mutual prosperity and sustainable development, underpinned by the visionary leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical relationship between Bangladesh and India forms a cornerstone of South Asia's geopolitical and cultural framework. Initiated during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, this partnership was championed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose visionary leadership emphasized cooperation with India to rebuild the new nation. The bond is rooted in shared struggles and a cultural heritage, strengthened by a 4,096-kilometer-long border and common rivers, language, and traditions. Over the past five decades, the relationship has evolved into a robust alliance, encompassing trade, education, infrastructure, defense, and climate resilience. While celebrating significant achievements, including collaboration on border management, counter-terrorism, and energy, challenges persist, such as border disputes and water-sharing conflicts. This enduring partnership continues to be a key driver of regional stability and prosperity, reflecting its pivotal role in addressing shared socio-economic and geopolitical challenges. This paper explores the historical evolution, milestones, and complexities of this vital bilateral relationship.

Historical Context: The Foundation of Cooperation: The roots of Bangladesh-India cooperation were laid during the Bangladesh Liberation War. India, led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, extended unwavering support to the freedom fighters, hosting over 10 million refugees and providing military aid. After the war, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman recognized India's pivotal role in Bangladesh's independence and prioritized formalizing bilateral relations. The signing of the 1972 India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty was a watershed moment, symbolizing the mutual commitment to peace, development, and cooperation. It laid the groundwork for initiatives such as joint economic ventures, cultural exchanges, and defense collaboration.

Key Milestones Over 50 Years

Economic Cooperation: Trade has been a cornerstone of Bangladesh-India relations. India is one of Bangladesh's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade reaching approximately \$16 billion in 2023. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), currently under negotiation, is expected to further deepen trade ties by addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers.

Connectivity Initiatives: Connectivity has been a priority, with projects such as the Maitree Express (Dhaka-Kolkata train service), resumption of riverine routes, and the construction of the Padma Bridge boosting trade and people-to-people contact. The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement exemplifies regional collaboration to enhance transportation networks.

Energy Collaboration: Bangladesh and India have made significant progress in energy cooperation. India supplies over 1,000 MW of electricity to Bangladesh, and both nations are working on joint ventures like the Rampal coal-fired power plant. Renewable energy projects and the sharing of technology are new frontiers in this sector.

Water Sharing and River Management: Bangladesh and India share 54 rivers, making water management a critical issue. The Ganges Water Treaty of 1996 remains a landmark agreement, ensuring equitable water sharing. However, unresolved issues like the Teesta River dispute highlight the complexities of transboundary water governance.

Security Cooperation: Counter-terrorism, border management, and defense collaboration have strengthened over the years. Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and coordinated border patrols have enhanced security along the shared border.

Cultural and Educational Exchange: Cultural and educational exchanges have reinforced people-to-people ties. India offers scholarships to Bangladeshi students, and joint celebrations of events like Mujib Borsho (the centenary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth) and the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence highlight shared heritage.

Challenges in the Bilateral Relationship

Despite significant achievements, the Bangladesh-India relationship is not without challenges:

- **Trade Imbalance:** Bangladesh's trade deficit with India remains a concern, despite initiatives to boost exports.
- **Border Issues:** Incidents of border skirmishes and illegal trade continue to strain relations, necessitating enhanced border management.
- **Water Disputes:** Delayed resolution of the Teesta River issue has been a contentious point.
- **Rohingya Crisis:** While Bangladesh has borne the brunt of hosting over 1 million Rohingya refugees, India's role in advocating for their repatriation has faced criticism for being limited.

Recent Developments

Strategic Partnership: The elevation of the bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership underscores its importance in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation in defense and technology has grown, reflecting shared security concerns and aspirations.

Bangladesh's Growing Role in South Asia: As one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, Bangladesh plays a crucial role in South Asia's development. India's engagement

with Bangladesh has evolved to reflect this changing dynamic, focusing on areas like digital connectivity and green energy.

Geopolitical Considerations: The changing geopolitical landscape, influenced by China's growing presence in the region, has added new dimensions to the Bangladesh-India partnership. Both countries aim to balance their relations with other global powers while maintaining strong bilateral ties.

CONCLUSION

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India is a remarkable example of enduring cooperation rooted in shared history, cultural ties, and strategic interests. Initiated during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 under the visionary leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, this partnership has evolved over five decades into a robust alliance addressing diverse socio-economic and geopolitical challenges. Key milestones, such as trade collaborations, water-sharing agreements, and joint infrastructure projects, highlight the depth of mutual commitment to regional stability and economic growth. Despite notable achievements, challenges like border disputes and trade imbalances underscore the need for continued dialogue and collaboration. The adaptability of this relationship to modern challenges, including climate change and counter-terrorism, demonstrates its resilience and forward-looking approach. As both nations navigate a rapidly changing global landscape, the partnership's future success depends on sustained political will, innovative solutions to unresolved issues, and enhanced cultural and economic integration. The enduring legacy of Bangabandhu's vision serves as a guiding framework, reinforcing the partnership's pivotal role in fostering a prosperous, stable, and inclusive South Asia. By embracing mutual trust and shared aspirations, Bangladesh and India can continue to strengthen their bond for the benefit of their people and the broader region.

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