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SECURITY COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND BANGLADESH: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Abstract

Since the 1990s, the global security environment has undergone rapid change, with substantial changes in threat perceptions. This has impacted South Asian countries, including India and Bangladesh. Some of these challenges are transnational in nature, which requires greater understanding and cooperation between states to overcome them. In this new security environment, South Asian countries can play a pivotal role in India's national security, and vice versa. This article illustrates the nature of security cooperation between India and Bangladesh and explain the existing common security concerns despite divergent viewpoints and sometimes setbacks like recent political unrest in Bangladesh. This article argues that despite all the mistrust, insecurity, and divergent viewpoints, India must put forth an effort to develop a relationship with the new interim government of Bangladesh. The article is based on an extensive review of primary sources and a diverse array of secondary sources, including works by retired military and diplomatic officers who have personally been involved in handling border-related issues.

Keywords: Security Cooperation, northeast India, Terrorism, illegal immigrations, India-Bangladesh Relations.

Introduction

India has realigned its foreign policy in the 1990s, placing a special priority on its relations with South Asian countries. South Asia played a pivotal role in terms of India's overall security. However, mistrust and hostility often define India's security relationship with these South Asian countries. India is the largest country in South Asia and shares an international border (both land and maritime) with all of them. Moreover, it is interesting to note that "India's vastness implies that it can exert influence in its neighbourhood and beyond and also be influenced by its neighbours".¹ Many analysts argued that India's predominant size, its rapidly growing economy, and its increasing military power with nuclear weapons make its neighbours apprehensive about India.

The South Asia has several security issues, ranging from insurgencies and terrorism to military conflict, all of which have a ramification for India's security. For instance, the exist of numerous terrorist groups in its neighbours worries India greatly, because these groups "have perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks in India, including the Mumbai terror attack of 2008 and the Pathankot airbase attack of 2016 and the attack on an army base in Uri the same year."² In addition, the ever-increasing non-traditional security risks and threats (terrorism, human trafficking, organised crimes, etc.) in the region, including India, make the entire South Asia vulnerable to these new security threats. However, many analysts opine that the current system for dealing with these difficulties is either weak or non-existent. In this regard, it is certain that India has been concerned about border instability and related security challenges since the late 1990s.

It is anticipated that security cooperation will be crucial to deal with an array of internal and national security concerns within its boundaries. Furthermore, it is essential for India, as an emerging power in Asia, to maintain peace and stability in South Asia. Only then will it be able to give India security. The security threats and challenges in South Asia are closely intertwined with India's security concerns. Henceforth, the government of India has expanded its defence and security ties with its neighbouring countries in the South and Southeast Asian regions.

1 Arvind Gupta, *How India Manages its National Security* (Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2018): 1-2.

2 Gupta, *India Manage its National Security*, 11.

In this regard, it is said that the recent realignment in India-Bangladesh relations not only strengthened the security cooperation between them but also enabled India to guarantee its national security as well. This is so because India's east and northeastern states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram share a long international border with Bangladesh. It has the most challenging borders because of its open and porous nature, which are very difficult to manage on their own. Within this framework, this article analyses areas of common concern and cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the security domain. The article is methodologically based on secondary literature, including works by retired military and diplomatic officers from both countries who have personally been involved in handling border-related issues between India and Bangladesh. The primary sources constitute the information gathered from bilateral and multilateral documents, annual reports (by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs), and joint official statements. Besides, the other main source of data for the study consists of secondary information collected from books, journal articles, websites, newspaper reports, etc.

An Overview of the India-Bangladesh Border

Before going into further discussion, it is essential to understand the India-Bangladesh border to know their security concerns and challenges in combating those threats. India and Bangladesh share an approximately 4096.7 km long international border (IB). It is known as Operation Zero Lines. It is the largest land boundary that India shares with any of its South Asian neighbours. Perhaps it is also the fifth longest and "the most complex land border anywhere in the world."³

The India-Bangladesh border runs through different topographical areas or terrains like agricultural lands, populated villages and towns, hilly or jungle areas, ponds, and riverine. Besides, there are hundreds of villages on both sides, some of which are located right up to the borderline. It is argued that many of these villages on Indian side consists of "migrants who have come from Bangladesh and settled down there."⁴ India's eastern state of West Bengal

3 V. K. Shashikumar, "The Subverted Indo-Bangladesh Border: I," *Indian Defence Review* 24, no. 2 (May 2009). <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/the-subverted-indo-bangladesh-border-i/>

4 Shri EN. Rammohan, "The Indo-Bangladesh Border," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* CXLI, no. 586 (October-December 2011): 549.

shares almost half of the total long international borders (IB) with Bangladesh, which stretches over a total of 2216.7 km, of which 600 km are riverine. The Indian northeastern states of Assam (263 km), Meghalya (443 km), Mizoram (318 km), and Tripura (856 km) share the rest of IB with Bangladesh.⁵ Whereas three districts of Assam (Dhubri, Cachar, and Karimganj) share a border with Bangladesh's districts of Kurigram, Sylhet, and Moulvibazar, respectively, with 20 km of riverine areas near Dhubri, while Meghalaya and Mizoram's IB have difficult hilly terrain with dense forest areas.

When it comes to their bilateral relationship, these borders are considered a cause of concern for many security problems that spread to neighbouring areas and have an impact on both countries. Despite having different topographies, these borders are essentially similar. For instance, these border areas are densely populated on both sides, and in numerous locations, the cultivation is carried out all the way to the boundaries. Furthermore, in many stretches, people on both sides belong to the same ethnicity, with similar cultural beliefs and kinship ties. People routinely cross the border in such circumstances without the necessary travel documentation. This condition provides advantages to transnational criminal organisations in conducting illegal activities (primarily smuggling and trafficking) between the two nations.⁶ These entire factors make the India-Bangladesh borderland areas highly contested, fragile, and porous, making border control tough for both governments and extremely difficult to sustain.

Strengthening Relations a way towards Security Cooperation

As we witness, the global security environment has undergone dramatic change since the end of the Cold War. The concept of security has evolved significantly, encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Thus, in this rapidly changing global security environment, the concept of national security is also broadened and focuses on comprehensive aspects of threats ranging from external military aggression, insurgency, and terrorism

5 Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, "India-Bangladesh Border Governance: Issues and Challenges," *International Studies* 50, no. 1-2 (2016):115.

6 Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "Integrated Check-Posts on the India-Bangladesh Border: A Field Survey and Brief Analysis," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Special Report No. 96* (August 2019): 4. <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230711181026.pdf>

to environmental crises and transnational organised crimes, etc. South Asia's security environment has also been greatly impacted by this.

The region is surrounded by conflict-ridden countries (both in the west and the east) and has close geographical proximity to two notorious illegal drug highways, such as the Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle. Therefore, the entire region is increasingly susceptible to new security threats arising from these issues. There are an array of transnational security issues that are closely linked to terrorism and other related issues that are now plaguing the region and the world. For South Asia, it is currently one of the main security issues. Hence, countering or combating such new security issues or challenges required cooperation and coordination among countries, as they cannot be handled alone by any individual country. However, governments cannot cooperate on security issues unless they have a common understanding of what constitute threats and instability. Nations will cooperate when it is to everyone's advantage to maintain security, stability, and prosperity.⁷ The security and development of India were seen by many scholars as being closely linked to Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, and vice versa. In his book title *How India Manages Its National Security*, Arvind Gupta argued that "India's immediate South Asian neighbours are central to its security calculus."⁸ He further said that India's security and development are closely entwined with those of its neighbours due to their proximity on the geopolitical stage.

Bangladesh's geographic location, as India's eastern neighbour, gives it strategic importance. It is also believed that South Asia's strategic locations for both India and Bangladesh coincide. Moreover, security-related issues have continued to be one of the most important parts of bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh since the 1970s. It should be mentioned that India's contribution to Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971 was critical to the latter's emergence as an independent state. The initial sign of cooperation appeared in the form of a defence pact under the *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace*, signed between India and newly established Bangladesh on 19 March 1972.⁹ India had

7. Sujan R. Chinoy, "Cooperative Security in South Asia: A Mirage?" *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Comment (October 2019). <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/cooperative-security-in-south-asia-a-mirage-sujanrchinoy-231019>

8. Gupta, *India Manage its National Security*, 18.

9. "Treaty of Peace and Friendship," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, accessed January November 14, 2022. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral->

signed other such treaties with other neighbouring countries, but the way in which this treaty was signed was likely distinct. The 1972 treaty has traditionally been seen as a defence treaty, primarily due to the precedent set by the support and assistance that India provided to Bangladesh during its independence struggle. It should be mentioned how the Indian army played a pivotal role in forcing Pakistani troops to surrender and ended the genocide committed by them (Pakistani troops) which resulted in massive exodus of refugees to India. Syed Muazzem Ali, a former Bangladeshi diplomat, also marked Bangladesh-independent war as the initial phase of India-Bangladesh's security cooperation.¹⁰

By 1972, India and Bangladesh government established the cordial and mutual relationship, and gradually expanded their relations in various fields and signed many agreements. However, after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's death, India and Bangladesh failed to forge any cordial working relationship between them. This was time when Bangladesh was engulfed with domestic political crisis and rapid growth of radicalisation within the society. Moreover, India-Bangladesh relationship was also at the lowest point.

For a range of factors, the development of bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh after 1975 was challenging until 1996. One of the reasons being the imposition of martial law in Bangladesh in 1975 by Ziaur Rahman under military-civil dictatorship after the demise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Subsequently, he disapproved the Bangladesh's pro-Indian stance of former President Mujibur Rahman. In addition, Ziaur Rahman distanced himself from India, and even amended the constitution to reject India's pro-secular ideas and embrace Islam as the country's national emblem. All these actions aided Bangladesh steer closer to developing closer ties with the Islamic world.

Subsequently, Islam has supplanted secularism in Bangladesh as the prevailing national perspective.^{11 12} Besides, Bangladesh realigned its foreign policy and prioritised its focuses to get closer to the Arab and Western world overlooking India. As Bangladesh and the Islamic world got closer, animosity and

[documents.htm?dtl/5621/Treaty+of+Peace+and+Friendship](#)

10 Syed Muazzem Ali, "The Current and Future State of India–Bangladesh Relations," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 5 (2018): 529.

11 J.N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1999).

12 James Heitzman and Robert L. Worden, *Bangladesh: A Country Study* (Washington DC: Government of United States 1989).

mistrust in India increased. It is also stated that Bangladesh was not happy with India's strong disdain for the murder of Mujibur and New Delhi unwillingness to work with Ziaur Rahman led military dictatorship. Indeed, all this has created mistrust and suspicion between the two countries, particularly among their political elite.

Another factor that soured India-Bangladesh relations was Dhaka's inaction against Indian base insurgent groups (like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), etc.), who were sheltering inside its territory and operating illegal activities across the border. The insurgents and other transnational criminals had used Bangladesh's territory as arms smuggling routes through Myanmar and supplied to various ethnic insurgent groups in India's northeast region. Evidence suggest that Bangladesh authority not only provided sanctuary to rebel armed insurgent groups from north-east India but also provided weapons and training. The former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia called these insurgent groups as "freedom fighters" and extended its support rather than curbing their illegal activities.¹³ The Bangladesh government further alleged in retort that the Indian government supported rebel groups like Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhat Samiti (PCJSS) that were operating in Chittagong Hill Tract.¹⁴

The unresolved debate on illegal immigration with different perspectives has been other factor behind their complicated relations. India perceived that the unabated influx of illegal migrant from Bangladesh threatening for massive demographic change in India's northeast region whereas Dhaka disagree with it. It is observed that Bangladeshi immigrants, who entered India illegally, have been used by the Bangladeshi home-grown Muslim militant groups, with it linked to international terrorism, in proliferation of Islamic extremism in north-east India.¹⁵

13 Cited in Md. Sohel Rana, "Transformation of India-Bangladesh Relations: From insecurity to cooperation in Northeast India," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 6 (2018): 561; see also Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): 101.

14 Zarin Ahmad, "Shanti Bahini," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) Commentaries* 293 (November 30, 1999). https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=293; See also Rana, "Transformation of India-Bangladesh Relations," 561.

15 Rana, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 563.

In 1977, when the Janata Party, under the leadership of Morarji Desai, came to power in India, an attempt was made to restore the India-Bangladesh relationship. This was done to modify the favourable bilateralism and non-alignment policies. This development unavoidably reduced anxiety and mistrust between India and Bangladesh. This improved relationship assisted them in establishing cooperation in a variety of fields, including defence and security. As a result, regular conversations and talks were conducted about their security concerns at various governmental levels without much success. Though, the real transformation, from resentment to amity, in India-Bangladesh relationship took place after Shiekh Hasina came to power for the second time in 2009. It is observed that the extent of defence and security cooperation between India and Bangladesh has also significantly improved during Sheikh Hasina's regime,¹⁶ with improved bilateral relations between them.

It has been noted that under Sheikh Hasina's regime the existing mechanism or appropriate course of actions for handling security-related matters between India and Bangladesh were established. Since then, both have agreed and continued to work jointly in the security domain to this day.¹⁷ Currently, various agencies of both government were working jointly to combat illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, fake currency, etc. Other bilateral mechanism include joint inspection of boundary pillars, joint boundary demarcation including riverine boundaries, and the Director General (DG) level talks between Border Guarding Forces, exchange of information are in better coordination.¹⁸ India-Bangladesh relationship has expanded over time by widening their trade and connectivity cooperation, and several integrated-check posts are now operational to maintain border security and prevent the flow of illegal arms and other lethal weapons.

16 Bhumitra Chakma, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Sheikh Hasina's India-positive Policy Approach," *The RSIS Working Paper series* No. 252 (November 2012): 10.

17 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 530; see also Haroon Habib, "Retaining Faith," *Frontline* 28, no. 15 (2011): 16-19.

18 "India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations," *Ministry of External Affairs Portal*, Government of India, accessed January 3, 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Bangladesh-February-2024.pdf>

Recent Development in Bangladesh

However, considering the present Bangladesh's shifting political environment, a challenge now exists in their relationship and security cooperation. Sheikh Hasina wins the January 2024 elections for straight fourth terms, but it was boycotted by the opposition party. Five months after election, Bangladesh's domestic politics turn into violence, particularly after the recent government crackdown on the students' protesters who are protesting government job quota reserves for descendants of people who fought in the 1971 war. By August, student-led protests turned noxious led to nationwide unrest.¹⁹ On 5 August, Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and flee the country, and the protestors stormed into the prime minister's residence. It has been reported that nearly 400 people got killed during this violent period, while many people tried to flee the country, trying to enter India through porous border areas to escape from the political and possible religious persecution. Therefore, this political unrest and new political development in Bangladesh, together with fears of the coming back of radical Islamic groups in the country, worried India. In the past, as mentioned earlier, these radical forces had operated against India by sheltering and supporting India-based insurgent groups.

As mentioned earlier, in the past fifteen years, India has managed to establish good relations with Bangladesh, particularly under Sheikh Hasina's regime. However, the present political situation in Bangladesh with uncertainty of who will come to power after the present interim government is another concern for India. This could change their bilateral relationship and subsequently distress the security cooperation between them. It is simply because whoever came to power in Bangladesh, India needs to (re)start its relations from the beginning again, which have been built over the past fifteen years. And if the BNP came to power, that would be more challenging for India, as it must give more efforts to build a good relationship with Dhaka. In the past, India had a bitter relationship with the BNP-led government because of its anti-Indian stance, support for insurgent groups in northeast India, mistrust, and insecurity. Likely, that could impede the cooperative relationship, which will be of great concern at this point, particularly with regard to border security, especially on the northeastern side.

19 Anbarasan Ethirajan and Vikas Pandey. "India's Bangladesh dilemma: What to do about Shiekh Hasina?" *BBC News*, September 3, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg4ypkpx1rqo>.

It is imperative that India considers it to maintain the security of its border. However, it becomes more challenging for India to make a new start or develop a relationship with Bangladesh because of the presence of Shaikh Hasina in India after a chaotic exit from her country.²⁰

Security challenges along the Indo-Bangladesh border

A country's top security priority is protecting and maintaining its borders, and neither Bangladesh nor India are an exception. This is in addition to promoting their national interests both domestically and internationally. India and Bangladesh viewed their respective national security comprehensive that encompasses both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Nevertheless, the emphasis of this paper is on security problems and threats that have similar concerns. Besides their geopolitical and geostrategic concerns, currently, India and Bangladesh are currently dealing with a wide range of security threats, ranging from transnational organised crimes to terrorism and insurgency, all of which are of grave consequence. These are issues that could endanger not just the national security but also the peace and security of the region:

Insurgency and Terrorism

For the past seventy years, insurgency issues have continued to be a major security concern for India. Everything began in the 1950s with the outbreak of the Naga rebellion. Over time, a wide range of insurgency groups have arisen throughout the countries; these include left-wing extremism in the eastern and south-central regions of India, insurgency in the north-east region and Jammu & Kashmir. Among this insurgency inflicted regions, India's northeast region have share long fragile and porous borders with both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Over time, the armed insurgent groups in the northeastern region have splintered into several factions, despite the counter-insurgency operations. Many of these Indian insurgent groups (IIG's) attacked the Indian security using the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar as a haven.²¹ The insurgent

20 Anbarasan and Pandey, "India's Bangladesh dilemma."

21 M. Shamsur Rabb Khan, "Towards Better India-Bangladesh Relations," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)*, Comment (2009). https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/TowardsBetterIndia_Bangladeshrelations_MSRKhan_090109

groups like National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Hynniewtre National Liberation Council (HNLC), and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) used to shelter inside Bangladesh.²² They utilise the cross-border pathways to smuggle weapons from Myanmar and other contraband after seeking refuge in a foreign country. In last few decades, they have created several societal problems in India's north-east region.²³ Some of the prominent societal problems or threats that northeast India is facing today include human trafficking, violence and crime, drug addiction, demographic threats, and social conflict between ethnic communities, etc. It is reported that, at present, there are no camps of Indian insurgent groups in Bangladesh. However, "Indian insurgent groups are still moving around in Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) of Bangladesh and a few areas bordering Meghalaya."²⁴

Likewise, insurgency and terrorism has also remained a serious concern for Bangladesh since its independence.²⁵ At present, according to SATP, there are many active terrorists and insurgents' groups in Bangladesh such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), etc. These insurgent and terrorist groups not only pose a threat to Bangladesh's national security but also a security concern for India. For example, in March 2023, the ethnic base insurgent group like KNF, active in the Chittagong Hill Tract, attacked Bangladesh army convoy and killed many soldiers including one officer. Same year, in July, the group had trigger an IED blast in Mizoram Lawngtlai district.²⁶ In addition, it is further reported that,

22 Rana, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 561; see also Khan, "India-Bangladesh Relations."

23 Sandhya Goswami, "Ethnic Conflict in Assam," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2001):123-37.

24 For details see "Northeast insurgents staying in Bangladesh but not operating from there: BSF," *Deccan Herald*, November 30, 2021. <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/northeast-insurgents-staying-in-bangladesh-but-not-operating-from-there-bsf-1056230.html>

25 Mohd. Aminul Karim, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Some Recent Trends," *Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) Working Paper no. 96* (November 2009): 6.

26 HC. Vanlalruata, "Armed militants have entered Mizoram, triggered IED blast on June 26," *The Times of India*, July 7, 2023. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/101557662.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

many of KNF member had infiltrated into Mizoram acting as refugee.²⁷ It is further observed that this group has a link with other Islamist extremist groups of Bangladesh by harbouring and providing training to them. Therefore, infiltration of this insurgent group into India could endanger the 'fragile' peace prevailing in India's northeast region by instigating social conflict between ethnic communities and posing various other non-traditional security threats. There are numbers of reports that alleged about KNF involvement in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, harbouring and training Islamist extremist in Bangladesh.

In 1970s, it is observed that some of Bangladesh insurgency groups received assistance and training from Indian insurgent groups. Some refuge in India and resisted the Bangladesh government.²⁸ For example, at its beginning, the Chakma armed rebel group (called Jana Samhati Samiti and its armed wing Shanti Bahini) received the assistant and training from the Indian insurgent groups. This ethnic armed rebel group were once active in the Chittagong Hill Tract. After Bangladesh military cracked down on insurgency in 1990s in the CHT eventually displaced the ethnic Chakmas and majority refuge in India. Currently, it is alleged that the Chakma insurgent groups have open their training centre in Salmore, Tara Ban, Chumochumi, Malchari, Bhalukkyachari, and Andar Manek villages in the Lunglei district, and Silsury and Amchari villages in the Mamit district of Mizoram.²⁹ This could jeopardise internal security of India, especially in Mizoram, not only by creating social conflict between ethnic communities, but also a demographic threat in future.

Therefore, the presence of Bangladeshi armed insurgency groups in India raises grave security implications for India.³⁰ What makes India more concerns today is the presence of (other) terrorist organisations in Bangladesh including

27 Jayanta Kalita, "Northeast Diary: Disguised as refugees, Kuki-Chin militants from Bangladesh entered Mizoram," *The Times of India*, July 29, 2023. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/102228283.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

28 Ahmad, "Shanti Bahini."

29 For details see "Bangladesh rebels training in Mizoram, claims former armed group," *The Hindu* (Guwahati), January 25, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bangladesh-rebels-training-in-mizoram-claims-former-armed-group/article67775986.ece>

30 Debasish Nandy, "Socio-political and security perspectives of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal: the impact on Indi-Bangladesh relations," *Journal of Historical Archaeology & Anthropological Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2019):123-129.

the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), and Al-Qaeda/Al-Qaeda in Indian sub-continent (AQIS). Because these groups have allegedly supplied guns and training to several Indian insurgent Groups (IIGs) from the north-east who have established contacts and cooperative plans to tranship weaponry across Bangladesh.³¹ *Naikhongchari*, a border town in Bandarban district of Bangladesh, is known as a significant transit route for arms smuggling and a home to ULFA. Yet again, this is where they (Bangladeshi home-grown terrorists) train IIGs in the use of advanced weapons. For Bangladesh, this widespread of terrorism and violence in recent years along with host of root causes and triggering factors are sources of threats to its national security.³² “Today, terrorism has posed serious social, political, economic and above all legal challenges to the survival of Bangladesh.”³³ Therefore, to counter or combat this insurgent and terrorist groups, both India and Bangladesh government required to establish security cooperation between them.

Trafficking, Smuggling and other activities

As mentioned above, the porous and fragile border extracts various security problems and further contributes to a wide range of cross-border crimes, both for India and Bangladesh, respectively. Arms smuggling is at the top of the list, followed by drug and people trafficking, counterfeit Indian rupee notes, cattle smuggling, border killing, illegal immigration, illicit trading, and so forth. The gunrunner used Bangladesh as a conduit for the smuggling of small arms and ammunition from Myanmar to insurgency groups in India. Moreover, it is also assumed that every year, more than 2 million cattle from India are smuggled to Bangladesh. The villagers on both sides of the border are part of this smuggling network. Most of the time, they used riverine areas such as the confluence of the Ganga, Padma, and Bhagirath rivers and bordering village routes in West Bengal such as Jagtai, Noorpur, Debipur, Hamidpur, and Wajibpur for this

31 Khan, “India-Bangladesh relations”; See also Karim, “Bangladesh-India Relations,” 6.

32 Brigadier General Mohammad Saber, “National Security of Bangladesh: Challenges and Options,” *National Defence College (Bangladesh) (NDC) E-Journal* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-26. <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/article/download>

33 Saber, “National Security of Bangladesh,” 19.

“multibillion” cattle smuggling.³⁴ In addition, the openness and porousness of the border are used by transnational criminals to carry out a range of illegal activities shipped from Bangladesh to India. Between these crimes, there is a network and a connection. These cross-border crimes have impacted India as well as Bangladesh, causing domestic unrest in both nations. Therefore, combating these kinds of transnational security threats cannot be resolved on their own, which required both countries working jointly.^{35 36}

Promoting Security Cooperation

Since the late 1990s, both countries have come forward and discussed the problems and challenges pertaining to security. The talks were also held on a wide range of security-related topics, from the Home Secretary to the Director General levels. However, since 2009, there has been a noticeable increase in the tangible manifestation of this form of security cooperation between India and Bangladesh. Bhumitra Chakma, Director of the South Asia Project at the University of Hull, stated that it became more apparent after 2009 because the India-Bangladesh relationship had been undermined by mistrust and suspicion, and each perceived the other as the source of their security problems.³⁷ For instance, in 2001, there was a border skirmish between the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), now known as the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). The clash broke out after the BDR intruded into Indian territory at Pyrdiwah village (Meghalaya) and killed the BSF personnel, which was retaliated a few days later in Boraibari village of Bangladesh (a bordering village with Assam). The tension has diffused with the change in government

34 Zeeshan Javed & Sukumar Mahato, “How millions of Indian cattle end up in Bangladesh”, *The Times of India*, March 26, 2023. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/99004187.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

35 Pushpita Das, “Cooperation is the key to manage the India-Bangladesh Border”, *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) Comment* (October 12, 2012). http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/CooperationisthekeyomanagetheIndiaBangladeshBorder_pdas_121012; and see also Rana, *Transformation of Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, 559-577.

36 N. S. Jamwal, “Border management: Dilemma of guarding the India-Bangladesh border,” *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2004): 5-36.

37 Chakma, “Bangladesh-India Relations,” 1.

in Bangladesh in 2009 through a series of flag meetings between BSF and BDR commanders. This development has been further strengthened by improvements in the India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. Presently, India-Bangladesh is at an all-time high and has expanded their defence and security ties, including on strategic issues. Some of these areas of cooperation, such as defence cooperation, fighting against terrorism and insurgency, border management, and combating transnational threats, are discussed below.

Defence Cooperation at the conventional level

In the area of defence, India and Bangladesh have established strong relationships. Without a doubt, bilateral defence cooperation is developing more quickly now than it did in the past. Since 2008, the defence relationship between Bangladesh and India has grown considerably. The commanders of the various defence forces have paid each other frequent visits, which is most notable. There had also been several official visits between the presidents of the two nations and the heads of their armed services. In addition, the armed forces of both countries conducted a joint military exercise called SAMPITRI on an annual basis and took part in cooperative drills. The eleventh edition of SAMPITRI (or Sampriti-XI) on sub-conventional operations was held on October 2023 at Umroi, Meghalaya. "This exercise, alternatingly organised by both countries, signifies strong bilateral defence cooperation initiatives. With its inception in Jorhat, Assam, in 2009, the exercise has witnessed ten successful editions till 2022".³⁸ Similar bilateral exercises were also conducted between the Indian Navy and the Bangladesh Navy, called BONGOSAGAR. Recently, the fourth edition of such an exercise was conducted in the Northern Bay of Bengal from 7 to 9 November 2023. It was a kind of joint coordinated patrol exercise (CORPAT) along the international maritime boundary line that would enhance interoperability.³⁹

38 For details see "Indian and Bangladesh armies begin Joint Exercise Sampriti-Xi in Umroi, Meghalaya", *Press Information Bureau*, Ministry of Defence, accessed January 8, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1963629>

39 For details see "India & Bangladesh Navies undertake Corpat & Ex-Bongosagar", *Press Information Bureau*, Ministry of Defence, accessed January 8, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1976149#:~:text=The%204th%20edition%20of%20Bilateral,from%2007%20%2D%2009%20Nov%202023.>

Besides, India hosted Bangladeshi armed forces for a counter-insurgency training programme at Jungle Warfare School in Vairengte, Mizoram, in 2017 as a part of the MoU on defence cooperation.⁴⁰ Together, they also introduced many other initiatives, including outreach for medical support. Moreover, when the Bangladesh Prime Minister visited India in 2017, five Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) on defence cooperation were signed between the Indian and Bangladesh governments. The first MoU was signed on the Defence Cooperation Framework; the second and third agreements were signed between premier defence institutions of both countries for the exchange of academic cooperation in the field of national security and strategic studies; the fourth agreement was for extending the Line of Credits (LOCs) of US\$500 million for defence purchases; and the last MoU between Directorate General Medical Service, Bangladesh Armed Forces and Tata Medical Centre, Kolkata,⁴¹ and a SoP for establishment of collaborative relationships between the coast guards of the two countries in order to combat transnational illegal activities at sea.

These five MoUs covered all areas of general cooperation, starting with defence financing, medical cooperation, information sharing, training exchanges, arms purchases, etc. The execution and operationalisation of these MoUs were spearheaded by the armed forces of both nations. They have conducted cooperative drills, navy ship port visits, staff-level discussions, and training exchanges. Bangladeshi officers and personnel have participated in several military training programmes in India. In addition, high-ranking officials from the respective country's air, army, and naval forces meet annually to deliberate on a range of topics, which help to develop mutual understanding and collaboration between them, reducing the tension and mistrust.⁴²

40 For details see "India-Bangladesh joint military exercise 'Sampriti 2017' concludes in Mizoram; officials say bilateral ties strengthened," *Firstpost*, November 7, 2017. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/india-bangladesh-joint-military-exercise-sampriti-2017-concludes-in-mizoram-officials-say-bilateral-ties-strengthened-4214003.html>

41 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 532; See also Joyeeta Bhattacharya, "India-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation: Coming of Ages, At last?" *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, Issues Brief No. 250 (July 2018): 2. <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230821133954.pdf>

42 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 532; and see also Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual report 2021-2022*.

Cooperation in the fight against Insurgency and Terrorism

Terrorism and insurgencies have been major security concerns for both countries national security for quite some time. It not only poses a threat to national security but also to regional and global peace and security. Both India and Bangladesh are susceptible to changing security risks and are victims of terrorism. In addition, over the last two decades, a number of Pakistani terrorist organisations have exploited Bangladesh as a transit route to India. Furthermore, cross-border networks have contributed to the terror groups' continued existence on one another's soil. Despite this, it is alleged that Bangladeshi domestic terrorist groups have carried out a number of terror operations in different parts of India with the assistance of foreign links. For example, in 2014, there was a bombing in the state of West Bengal, and it was purportedly carried out by the terrorist organisation Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).⁴³ This suggests that JMB's influence is expanding in border regions between Bangladesh and India. As a result, both nations must establish robust cross-border collaboration.⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh's bordering district of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has still remained a hotspot of insurgency and terrorism. There has been an increasing infiltration of Chin-Kuki militants from the Chin state of Myanmar into the CHT. Their objective is to carve out the territories from Bangladesh, India and Myanmar and formed a separate nation. This has posed a serious security risk as it threatens the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar respectively.⁴⁵ There is also a growing terror nexus and network not only between terrorists and various rebel groups but also with transnational criminal through sheltering in each other's territory. These organisations also smuggle weapons and other illegal goods across international borders. Additionally, terrorist groups such as the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI) have formed connections in Bangladesh. Several Indian insurgent groups, including the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the United

43 "Accused in Burdwan blast case were planning terror attack in Bangladesh: NIA," *Firstpost* (October 24, 2014).<https://www.firstpost.com/india/accused-burdwan-blast-case-planning-terror-attack-bangladesh-nia-1771573.html>

44 Nandy, "Socio-political and security perspectives," 127.

45 Sharmila Mahjabeen, "Kuki-Chin Militants Threatening Regional Stability," *Daily Times*, Pakistan, June 27, 2023; and see also Probir Kumar Sarkar, "Who are these Kuki-Chin armies in the CHT?" *Dhaka Tribune*, Dhaka, January 17, 2023.

Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), are receiving training from them on how to make Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and handle sophisticated weapons. Today, these cross-border terrorism and insurgency pose a threat not only to India and Bangladesh but to the whole South Asia region.^{46 47}

Therefore, since 2009, both governments have been working together to develop a common mechanism to counter this security threats and challenges. The course correction begins with their respective political view for each other. In actuality, India accused Bangladesh for sheltering terrorists and India base insurgents inside it territory from where they launched attacks against India. However, after Sheikh Hasina's government coming to power for second term in 2009, both countries has moved to put an end to its domestic problems⁴⁸, this has benefited them. Further, Bangladesh promise to prevent terrorist organisations from using its territory to launch attacks on its neighbours. Similarly, Bangladesh undoubtedly expected the same courtesy from all of its neighbouring countries including India in wiping out the insurgents from taking refuge in its territory.⁴⁹

India and Bangladesh has also agreed to transfer arrested insurgent to their respective origin country for further legal inquiries. In November 2009, the Bangladeshi government arrested United Liberation Front of Asom's (ULFA) finance secretary, Chitaban Hazarika, and foreign secretary, Shashadhar Choudhary and handed over to Indian authorities. It was disclosed that the ULFA uses to get international help to set up their camps like that of Pakistan ISI, etc. Similarly in 2010, the Bangladesh government handed over many top leaders of National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) and ULFA including Ranjan Daimary, the founder-chief of the NDFB to India respectively.

Fostering their security cooperation, India and Bangladesh signed an extradition treaty in January 2013. Through this treaty, offenders who sought refuge on one another's soil were sent back to their home country to face justice. For example, the Bangladesh government handed over Anup Chetia, the ULFA general secretary, to Indian authorities in 2015 based on this agreement. The

46 Mohd. Aminul Karim, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Some Recent Trends", *Institute of South Asian Studies*, Working Paper No. 96 (2009): 1-12.

47 Sreeradha Datta, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Enduring Partnership?", *Institute for Defence and Strategic Analyses*, Issue Brief, (2009): 1-12. http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/IndoBangladeshRelations_sdatta_060110

48 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 530.

49 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 531.

handing over of arrested insurgents showed Bangladesh's commitment to security cooperation with India on issues like terror and organised crimes. Moreover, increasing security ties has also directly or indirectly reduced the insurgency issue in India's north-east regions compared to previous years. The figure given below indicates a huge transformation in military-related casualties and a reduction of militant influence in the region after 2009.⁵⁰

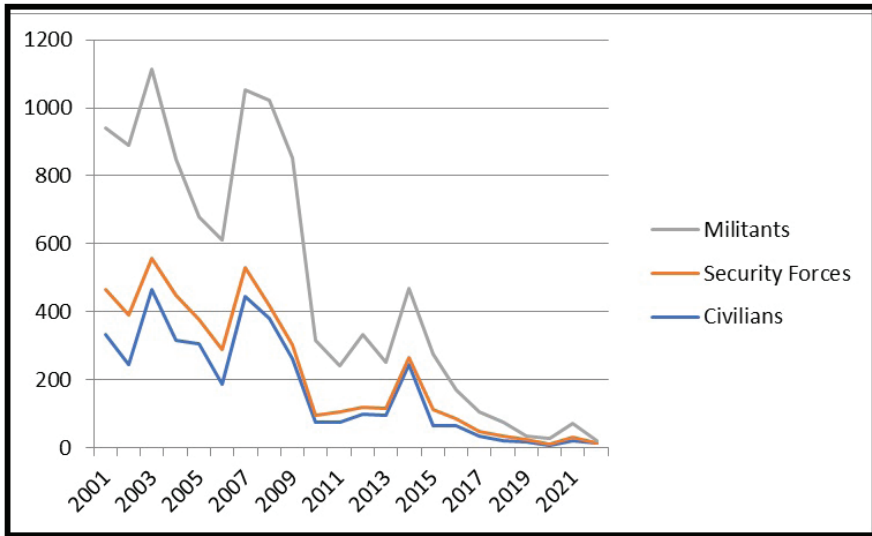


Figure 1: Stacked line Graph of Militancy related Casualties in North-East India
Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

India and Bangladesh security cooperation has further expanded into the area of exchanging and sharing intelligence information. This excels the positive cooperation between the BSF and BGB in destroying the north-east insurgent's camps inside Bangladesh.⁵¹ On regular intervention, the BSF shared information with its counterpart BGB whenever there is exodus of insurgents from the north-east India to Bangladesh. Moreover, in 2009, based on intelligence input from New Delhi, the Bangladesh authority arrested two Laskar-e-Toiba (LeT)

50 Chakma, "Bangladesh-India Relations," 12; see also Ministry of External Affairs, "Annual Report 2021–2022".

51 "Insurgent camps on Bangladesh soil reduced to almost zero, says BSF", *Indian Express*, December 17, 2017.

members of Indian origin and handed over to Indian authorities.⁵² In 2012, with a tip-off from Indian intelligence agencies, Dhaka successfully diverted a coup plot by some jihadis.⁵³ Similarly, through sharing the information of terrorist organisations, the Bangladesh government successfully cracked down against Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), backed terrorist groups in 2016 and 2018. It can be said that this kind of positive cooperation is a proactive approach to combating the insurgency problem in India's north-east region and also a step towards peace.

Coordination in Border Management

As mentioned above, the border between India and Bangladesh is one of the most difficult borders to monitor due to its physical characteristics. It is believed that because of this complexity and the lack of a surveillance system, different security issues have emerged along this boundary line, impacting both countries national security. Therefore, there is the necessity of creating a joint working mechanism, such as joint border patrolling between BSF and BGB, to prevent these security breaches. This is where India and Bangladesh's coordination and collaboration have a vital role to play in border management.

In contrast to the turbulent past, mutual understanding and trust have gradually improved. This has helped reduce border killings, and the BSF was even discouraged from deploying lethal ammunition. Additionally, the BSF also handed-over the arrested Bangladeshi nationals to the BGB. "India and Bangladesh have established institutionalized interaction to discuss border management issues through the meetings of home secretaries, the Joint Working Group (JWG), and director-general-level talks between the BSF and the BDR."⁵⁴ Today, there is a collaboration framework in place between the two border patrol agencies. On regular intervention, the two forces hold biannual conferences at the Director General (DG) level to fortify their collaboration and develop operational coordination.

52 "2 Laskar Men Held Inside Indian Border," *The Daily Star*, November 24, 2009, as cited in Chakma, "Bangladesh-India Relations," 13.

53 "Delhi 'tip-off' helped foil coup," *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), January 21, 2012, as cited in Chakma, "Bangladesh-India Relations," 13.

54 P. Das, "India-Bangladesh Border Management: A Review of Government's Response," *Strategic Analysis*, 32, no. 3 (2008): 381.

In the 37th DG-level coordinated conference held at Delhi in October 2012, numerous topics pertaining to major security concerns for the individual countries were also discussed during the meeting. Both countries put forth matters on the discussion table, i.e., the Indian side raised issues with border fencing, border pillar construction and repair, illegal immigration, including human trafficking, cross-border smuggling of cattle and fake currency notes, criminal attacks on BSF personnel, and operations against Indian base insurgent groups sheltering inside Bangladesh's territory. Whereas Bangladesh authorities raised issues concerning the importing of drugs and narcotics, especially Phensedyl, from India, the smuggling of cattle, and the alleged harassment of unarmed Bangladeshis by the BSF. Nevertheless, despite certain obstacles and challenges, these biannual talks between the two forces (at the DG-level) were able to address a number of the difficulties and concerns related to cross-border smuggling of cattle, circulation of fake Indian currency notes (FICN), illegal migration, human trafficking, and action against Indian insurgent groups based in Bangladesh, etc.⁵⁵ Similarly, in a recently concluded DG-level coordinated conference from March 5-9, 2024, held in Dhaka, a variety of border-related issues and challenges were discussed, including trans-border crimes, illegal immigration from Bangladesh, repairing and maintaining border pillars, cross-border movement, etc.⁵⁶

Coordination in handling Non-conventional threats

India and Bangladesh have close geographical proximity to the Golden Triangle, one of the major opium-producing regions and the main pathways for drug trafficking and other transnational crimes. The growing non-traditional security threats from these regions have been a serious security concern for both India and Bangladesh. In 2010, as a part of their broad security cooperation, India and Bangladesh signed three comprehensive agreements to fight against these security challenges. One of these agreements focuses on managing or thwarting the trafficking of illegal drugs and organised crime.⁵⁷ Today, the collaboration

55 Das, "Cooperation is the Key."

56 "India-Bangladesh hold Director-General-level border talks in Dhaka", *The Times of India*, March 9, 2024.

57 Dr. Saurabh, "Indo-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty", *Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)*, *View Point*, 1-3 (2013). https://icwa.in/showfile.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_

and coordination of the forces has also been extended to the coast guards and navies of the two nations, as there is an increasing use of sea routes by organised criminals to smuggle weapons, people, and drugs across the border. This will help to tackle such challenges.⁵⁸

Furthermore, in 2011 an agreement was signed between India and Bangladesh governments to establish a coordinate border control strategy.⁵⁹ This has contributed to improvement of security environment at the border regions along with improving mutual confidence and trust between them. The security cooperation between them was further strengthened with signing of MoUs in 2015 and 2017 which focuses on preventing human trafficking, smuggling of heroin and other substances, and the circulation of fake money, etc. A joint task force on fake currency notes between India and Bangladesh was established, and its first meeting was held in January 2014 at Delhi.⁶⁰

However, due to lengthy and porousness of borders, a proper patrolling is still a challenge. There are many blind areas where it is still a difficult task to detect cross-border activity. Moreover, the amount of material and human resources needed to protect the borders is enormous. Therefore, a synchronized and coordinated border security (including joint patrolling) might be the only option to stop many of the criminals' illicit activities. Perhaps, this might maximize the best possible use of border control resources for both countries. Reliable intelligence and information sharing between security services in both nations is also very crucial to stop these illicit activities. Coordination, collaboration, and capacity building among border guarding authorities are also necessary. In recent years, a progress has made in fostering mutual understanding and security-related cooperation. For example, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his visiting Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina had expanded their security cooperation to include maritime security, cyber security, counter-

id=739&lid=680

58 Joyeeta Bhatarcharjee, "India-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation: Coming of Ages, At last?", *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, Issue Brief No. 250 (2018): 5.

59 Ali, "India-Bangladesh Relations," 531.

60 "Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to prevent and counter smuggling and circulation of Fake Currency Notes", *Ministry of External Affairs*, accessed March 2, 2024. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/Legal TreatiesDoc/BG15B2416.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/Legal%20TreatiesDoc/BG15B2416.pdf)

terrorism, and human trafficking.⁶¹ This will enable Bangladesh to combat and control terrorism and drug trafficking, two of the most critical security concerns for Dhaka, before they transform the landscape of CHT and pose threats to its sovereignty. It can be noted that for many years Bangladesh has been facing waves of Islamic militancy and its terror activities (like the Holy Artisan attacked of 2016), which have recently shifted to CHT border areas. Beside, in recent times, Bangladesh has become a favourite transit point for drug and human traffickers.⁶²

The aforementioned strategic issues have served as the cornerstone of India and Bangladesh's security cooperation. Yet, there are still some areas where both nations have different perspectives, such as cattle smuggling and illegal immigration. Although it is a legal economic operation, cattle smuggling is still seen as a crime in India. Furthermore, when it comes to illegal migration, India primarily asserts that a large-scale demographic shift is being caused by an illegal influx of Bangladeshi migrants. Besides, a social, economic and political implication, illegal influx of Bangladeshi migration has "already responsible for the ongoing insurgency in Assam and Tripura".⁶³ However, Bangladesh asserts that economic migration is occurring from its borders to Europe and the Gulf, not to India.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The relationship between India and Bangladesh relations is now too significant to be overlooked and too critical to misread. There are some deeply entwined issues in both countries that demand extra measurements, like greater cooperation between them. Subsequently, over the past fifteen years, both India and Bangladesh have successfully supported bilateral cooperative management as a way to handle their shared security issues, which has resulted in a decrease in a variety of unlawful cross-border operations. However, their current ties would be impacted by the recent political unrest in Bangladesh. Yet both nations must

61 For details see "India-Bangladesh joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India", *Ministry of External Affairs*, Government of India (September 7, 2022). <https://www.mea.gov.in>.

62 Towkir Hossain, "Bangladesh's Non-Traditional Security Complex", *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (March 2023). <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au>

63 Jamwal, "Border Management," 14.

64 Das, "India-Bangladesh Border".

acknowledge how important it is for them to cooperate in promoting, protecting, and safeguarding one another's national interests on a local, regional, and even international scale.

It should also be noted that India has repeatedly raised its concern about China's expanding influence and presence across the Indian subcontinent and surrounding Indian Ocean region. Presently, many of India's immediate neighbours in South Asia are seemingly tilting towards China's orbit, promoting geopolitical rivalry in the region. To maintain both its national and strategic interests at this point in time, it is essential that bilateral relations with Bangladesh be strengthened. Developing a strong relationship between India and Bangladesh is also crucial to overcome the geopolitical compulsion that is looming large in South Asia today. On the other hand, the on-going civil war in Myanmar has already led to a massive exodus of people entering illegally into both countries, where many (ethnic base) insurgent groups may attempt to take advantage of it. For instance, there are many reports of the infiltration of militants from Myanmar and their getting involved in the present Manipur (India) crisis. In addition, growing security issues like terrorism, insurgency, and other non-traditional security challenges (with their transnational characteristics) have been a critical concern for both countries and demand greater cooperation and coordination to counter these challenges. Thus, despite all the mistrust, insecurity, and divergent viewpoints, India has put forth an effort to develop a relationship with the new interim government of Bangladesh. Otherwise, the circumstances could take different turn, with its larger implications on the domestic as well as the regional security environment.

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