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India's Relationship with Bangladesh: A Template for a "New" Regionalism

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SYNOPSIS

*While India was once defensive and risk-averse in its approach to regionalism in South Asia, it has now begun to take a more bold and proactive approach to its neighbours less Pakistan. **SINDERPAL SINGH** assesses that this shift, involving various bilateral and minilateral initiatives, is due to India's need to allay its neighbours' suspicions of its perceived hegemonic ambitions and to its intent to counter China's growing footprint in the region.*

Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, made a four-day state visit to India in early September this year. The visit was the latest in a series of high-level visits between the two countries since 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power. Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's independence leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the leader of Bangladesh's Awami League party, is considered more friendly towards India, compared with her major political rival, Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Hasina's term as prime minister, since 2009, has been held as ushering in a "golden era" in relations with India.

This paper examines this view in the context of the broader implications of PM Hasina's recent visit to India. There are two main implications — economic connectivity and New Delhi's "new" regionalism in India's neighbourhood to address the strategic threat posed by China.

Economic Connectivity — Domestic and Regional Imperatives

In the aftermath of India's independence and the partition of colonial India into India and Pakistan, India's north-eastern states were cut off from their traditional economic hinterland. The birth of East Pakistan, later to become the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971, left India's north-eastern states landlocked and connected to the rest of India via a narrow land corridor, the Siliguri Corridor, also often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck". Since 2009, India and Bangladesh have significantly improved physical connectivity between the two countries, including through rail lines and bridges, and signed agreements for the transshipment of goods between them. The Indian government has three main objectives in improving connectivity with Bangladesh.

The first relates to India's north-eastern states. Each of these seven states has a history of insurgency against the Indian central government although the level of intensity varies from state to state. By providing these landlocked states easier access to ports in Bangladesh, the Indian government aims to raise economic growth and prosperity in these states, which it hopes would lead to lower levels of discontent against Delhi.



Narrow roads through thick tropical jungles in mountainous terrain—such as this near Kurseong in West Bengal, just north of the so-called Chicken's Neck—accentuate the geoeconomic and geostrategic isolation of India's northeast. [Photo](#) by *Boudhayan Bardhan on Unsplash*.

The second aim is to carve out new supply routes via India's north-east for Indian goods to third countries like Bangladesh as well as for goods from Bangladesh to

Indian container ports such as Kolkata in the east and Mumbai's Mundra port on India's west coast. During the COVID pandemic, this growing physical connectivity helped to keep important supply routes open between India and Bangladesh.

The third aim is to provide Bangladesh with alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's SagarMala programme, an initiative for the development of port and inland waterways infrastructure, aims to provide countries in South Asia greater connectivity and access to Indian ports. Bangladesh is a key part of several projects involving the SagarMala programme, run by India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. This effort to position India as a credible provider of regional infrastructural needs is embedded within India's broader approach to regionalism in South Asia.

South Asian Regionalism — Sans Pakistan

India has, in recent years, made significant efforts to restructure its approach to regionalism in South Asia. PM Modi's initial efforts at brokering a new phase of relations with Pakistan, with the aim of restoring some levels of normalcy in the bilateral relationship, were abandoned after a series of terrorist attacks in India linked to groups operating from within Pakistan.

The new strategy for India in South Asia is to pursue bilateral and minilateral regional initiatives with countries in South Asia minus Pakistan. This is the reason for the Modi government's recent efforts to revive institutions and processes such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) initiative, while abandoning SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), which includes Pakistan.

In this new approach to regionalism within its neighbourhood, India has identified Bangladesh as a key partner. India has publicly touted its agreement to refer its sea boundary dispute with Bangladesh to a United Nations tribunal, and its acceptance of the resultant ruling, which favoured Bangladesh. It has projected its willingness to accept UN adjudication as an example of a new pattern of relations between India and its neighbours based on mutual respect for international law and win-win outcomes for both India and its neighbours. In several important respects, the aim is to fashion India-Bangladesh relations as a model of India's "new" approach to regionalism, one that is proactive and bold. The approach serves two key, and inter-related, objectives of the Indian state.

The first is to allay the long-held concerns among South Asian states about India's perceived hegemonic tendencies within the region since 1947. Traditionally, India had been suspicious of multilateral regionalism within South Asia as it feared its neighbours would be tempted to gang up to collectively balance against India's overwhelming size as well as relative military power and political influence. The vulnerability of India's neighbours is exacerbated by the geographical fact that India shares land and maritime borders with nearly every South Asian country. India's propensity to get politically and militarily involved in the domestic politics of these bordering states since 1947 has further exacerbated this sense of vulnerability among India's neighbours in South Asia. India's approach to regionalism consequently had been defensive and risk-averse.

The new proactive approach seeks to ameliorate South Asian concerns by demonstrating India's willingness to build relations based on mutual respect and interests through new avenues of regional cooperation. India now aims to be the bold region-builder in South Asia rather than the defensive participant in regional processes, as was the case with SAARC in 1985 (Bangladesh, which had come up with the idea, had to convince India to accept the benefits of a regional association in South Asia).

The second objective of its new approach is to counter China's growing footprint in the region. India views China's increasing engagements with countries in South Asia with deep concern. China's investments in the region as part of the BRI have corresponded with the rising visibility of the Chinese navy in the waters off South Asia. India perceives opportunities to push back against this rising Chinese economic and military footprint, given that states in South Asia, apart from Pakistan, are mindful of being overly dependent on China as well as aware of Indian security concerns related to the growing Chinese presence. The various bilateral and minilateral initiatives of the Indian government are meant to signal India's bold approach to meet the Chinese challenge in South Asia. Growing cooperation between India and Bangladesh is therefore key as a demonstration of the benefits that South Asian states can enjoy by balancing their economic and military engagements between India and China.

India's key external security threat comes from China. Pakistan's status as a threat is increasingly viewed via the lens of China, as far as the latter supports, or at least condones, Pakistan's strategy of using groups based on its soil to carry out terrorist attacks against India. India recognises that states in South Asia are perennially wary of India's overwhelming influence in the region and will want to engage in China's BRI as a way of diversifying their dependence on India.

In this respect, India's current relationship with Bangladesh serves as an opportunity for India to demonstrate that it does not seek to coerce states in South Asia to choose sides between India and China but instead is willing to offer alternatives to China's BRI. This recasting of India's regionalism in South Asia, sans Pakistan, offers India a mode of meeting the challenge posed by China's growing influence, and thus threat, in South Asia. India hopes that its relationship with Bangladesh will serve as a template for its ability to forge renewed ties with its neighbours in South Asia, minus Pakistan, and thus meet the threat that China poses in India's own backyard.

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