



## Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations- Friends in Need?



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**P**akistan has been struggling with domestic instability and the diminution of its strategic relevance. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Washington's focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy, increasing strains in the US-China relations, and India's economic growth and diplomatic rise have challenged Pakistan's strategic relevance, which it has cherished for decades. On the domestic front, there have been continued crises on multiple fronts, and the all-powerful military seems to be constrained by options.

Recent months have witnessed Pakistan's desperate efforts to expand its presence, build up new relationships, strengthen its existing partnerships, and revive its strategic relevance. Its recent outreach to Bangladesh with promises of trade and potential military assistance indicates its urge to expand its strategic network and presence. Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh have improved at an accelerated pace after the fall of the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and the rise in anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. The change in the Pakistan-Bangladesh ties is critical as Pakistan's relations with Bangladesh have been, by and large, at a low level, and Islamabad did not enjoy any leverage in Dhaka. There have been severe restrictions on Pakistan nationals' visas in Bangladesh. There are commonalities of objectives between the two nations, with the most crucial one being dealing with the anger and anxiety against India. Pakistan's hostility with India has shaped its internal power dynamics, and India-Pakistan relations are at their lowest point at present. The interim regime in Bangladesh has been unhappy with India giving shelter to Sheikh Hasina, whom they see as a corrupt and hegemonic leader.

In December 2024, Bangladesh's interim Chief Adviser, Muhammad Yunus, met Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during the D-8 Summit in Egypt. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, is scheduled to visit Bangladesh in April 2025. In a significant development, a direct maritime connection between Pakistan and Bangladesh has been established, and a cargo vessel from Karachi was docked at the Chittagong Port, marking a crucial shift in the strained bilateral relations. For the first time since 1971, Bangladesh has resumed trade ties with Pakistan, and Dhaka agreed to import 50,000 tonnes of rice from Pakistan through the Trading Corporation of Pakistan.

There have been some interesting developments in the two countries' military-to-military relationship. A high-level delegation from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), led by Major General Shahid Amir Afsar, visited Dhaka, marking one of the first high-level engagements between the ISI and Bangladeshi officials. Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division of Bangladesh, travelled to Pakistan and held talks with the Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir. According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the two sides "underscored the importance of a stronger defence relationship, emphasising that the enduring partnership between the two brotherly nations must remain resilient against external influences." Dhaka's participation in Pakistan's multilateral naval exercise— AMAN-25— is a significant step in bolstering military cooperation between the two nations. Reports suggest that Bangladesh has expressed keenness to acquire the fourth-generation fighter aircraft, the JF-17 (earlier called the FC-1). The JF-17 is designated to be a low-cost combat aircraft and is co-developed by Pakistan and China. It is being built by China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation (CAC) and Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC).

India-Bangladesh relations, on the other hand, have severely deteriorated following the Muhammad Yunus-led interim government's inability (or unwillingness!) to control the attacks on minorities, specifically Hindus in Bangladesh. Pakistan's relationship with Bangladesh is being watched by India very cautiously. The evolving relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh underscores the desire of both countries to expand alliances and is a deliberate effort to position the two nations against India. Ashraf Qureshi, a former Pakistani envoy to Bangladesh, said, "Certainly, if you are Bangladesh, you would weigh your options, and with the state of their relationship with India, Pakistan comes into the equation, leading to better ties than before."

The evolving dynamics have raised security concerns in India as the Chittagong port, in the past, has been used by the militant groups of North East India, specifically the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), to smuggle lethal weapons. Opening the port for Pakistani vessels has the potential to aggravate security challenges for India. New Delhi has always been watchful of

Pakistan's activities in Bangladesh as they have had a bearing on India's North Eastern region. Reports suggest that the Pakistan-based anti-India terror groups could benefit from the increasing radicalisation in Bangladesh and also establish/revive links with Bangladesh-based radical groups to conduct anti-India activities. While Pakistan's military modernisation remains dependent on imports from China, Dhaka's potential acquisitions of the JF-17s from Pakistan would also increase its reliance on China.

There are speculations about how long the cordial exchanges of visits and military and economic cooperation between the two countries will be sustained, given their bitter history. This raises the question of whether the anti-India sentiment is enough to sustain and grow the evolving bilateral relations. For Dhaka, Pakistan cannot be a substitute for India given the economic cooperation and development partnership India and Bangladesh have shared. Nevertheless, India must be watchful of these developments to guard its strategic interests.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> "Bangladesh and Pakistan Resume Direct Trade After More than 50 Years" *Reuters*, February 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-pakistan-resume-direct-trade-after-more-than-50-years-2025-02-24/>. Accessed on March 01, 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> APP, "Pakistan, Bangladesh Underscore 'Enduring Partnership' for Resilience Against External Influences," *DAWN*, January 14, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1885175>. Accessed on March 02, 2025.
- <sup>3</sup> Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Pulls Closer to Post-Hasina Bangladesh Amid Shared India Concern", *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/17/pakistan-pulls-closer-to-post-hasina-bangladesh-amid-shared-india-concerns>. Accessed on March 10, 2025.
- <sup>4</sup> Sahidul Hasan Khokon, "Trucks of Arms Seized at Chittagong in 2004 Meant for ULFA: India's Ex-Intel Officer | Exclusive", *India Today*, February 23, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/bangladesh-defense-intelligence-agency-india-bnp-awami-league-major-general-gaganjit-singh-arms-consignment-2338411-2023-02-23>. Accessed on March 12, 2025.
- <sup>5</sup> For details see, Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Brief on India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations", <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Bangladesh2024.pdf>. Accessed on March 20, 2025.