



India–Bangladesh Strategic Partnership: Defence Cooperation, Regional Security, and Emerging Trends

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ABSTRACT

Defence cooperation between India and Bangladesh represents one of the most significant bilateral security partnerships in South Asia. Rooted in the shared history of the 1971 Liberation War, the relationship has evolved from early political solidarity into structured military collaboration encompassing joint exercises, defence dialogues, border management coordination, and maritime security cooperation. This paper examines the historical continuity of defence ties and analyzes emerging trends in the context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics and shifting regional power equations. It evaluates institutional mechanisms such as the Annual Defence Dialogue, military exercises including Sampriti and Bongosagar, and defence-industrial engagement. The study further assesses the implications of Bangladesh's evolving domestic political landscape and its expanding engagement with external actors, particularly China, for India's strategic calculus. The analysis argues that despite geopolitical competition and occasional diplomatic tensions, defence cooperation remains resilient due to shared security imperatives and geographic interdependence. The paper concludes that future stability in bilateral defence relations will depend upon balanced diplomacy, institutional deepening, and maritime collaboration in the Bay of Bengal.

**Introduction:**

India and Bangladesh occupy a strategically sensitive region at the crossroads of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Sharing one of the longest land borders in the world, intertwined cultural linkages, and deep historical memories of the 1971 Liberation War, the two countries have gradually transformed their relationship into a structured strategic partnership. While early engagement after Bangladesh's independence was marked by political solidarity, defence cooperation remained limited and episodic until the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The formalization of defence ties through agreements in 2017 marked a turning point, institutionalizing mechanisms for training, logistics cooperation, and joint exercises (Pant, 2017). However, the foundations of this partnership lie in the broader evolution of India's neighbourhood policy and Bangladesh's search for strategic autonomy within a competitive regional environment (Ganguly, 2010; Sisson & Rose, 1990). This paper traces the trajectory of defence cooperation from its historical origins to contemporary developments, highlighting both continuity and transformation.

1. The 1971 War and Foundational Strategic Trust:

The genesis of defence cooperation can be traced to India's decisive role in the 1971 Liberation War. India's military intervention in support of Bangladesh's independence not only reshaped the geopolitical map of South Asia but also established a foundational layer of strategic trust (Sisson & Rose, 1990). The war fostered institutional familiarity between the armed forces of both countries, although formalized cooperation did not immediately follow.

During the early years under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, bilateral ties emphasized reconstruction and economic support rather than structured defence collaboration (Ganguly, 2010). Nevertheless, the memory of shared sacrifice continued to shape strategic perceptions in both capitals.

2. Fluctuation during Regime Changes (1975–2008):

Following the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975, Bangladesh's political orientation shifted. Successive military regimes recalibrated foreign policy priorities, often balancing relations between India, China, and the United States (Riaz, 2016). During this period, defence cooperation with India remained cautious and limited.



Border tensions, insurgent movements in India's Northeast, and mutual suspicion occasionally strained security relations (Bajpai, 2003). However, even during periods of political divergence, coordination between border forces persisted, demonstrating an undercurrent of pragmatic engagement.

3. Reorientation under Democratic Consolidation (2009 onwards):

The restoration of democratic continuity under Sheikh Hasina marked a renewed emphasis on improving relations with India. Security cooperation expanded significantly after 2009, particularly in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing (Pant, 2017). Bangladesh's firm action against insurgent groups operating along the border strengthened India's trust and laid the groundwork for expanded defence collaboration.

This period witnessed growing convergence on issues such as maritime security, counter-radicalization, and disaster management.

4. Institutionalization: Defence Agreements and Annual Defence Dialogue:

In 2017, India and Bangladesh signed formal defence cooperation agreements, including a line of credit for defence procurement. These agreements institutionalized military exchanges and training programs (Pant, 2017). The establishment of the Annual Defence Dialogue created a structured forum for reviewing cooperation and identifying new initiatives.

The Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) serves as the highest institutionalized forum for military cooperation between India and Bangladesh. Since its inception, this dialogue has evolved into a comprehensive platform where defence secretaries and military officials review ongoing cooperation and propose future initiatives (Ministry of Defence, 2023). The fifth ADD held in Dhaka reflected a mutual commitment to enhance defence interaction through broader exercises and increased complexity of engagements (DD News, 2023).

Institutionalization reduced dependency on political cycles and introduced predictability into defence engagement. Such mechanisms reflect continuity in strategic intent while adapting to contemporary security demands.

5. Joint Military Exercises and Interoperability:

Joint exercises such as **Exercise Sampriti** (army) and **Exercise Bongosagar** (navy) are key pillars of tactical and operational cooperation. Exercise Sampriti enhances army interoperability and tactical



coordination, focusing on operational drills, peacekeeping scenarios, and disaster response. Bongosagar, launched in 2019, emphasizes maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal, covering surface warfare, coordinated patrols, and communication drills.

The continuation of naval drills amid political tensions in 2025 indicates that defence cooperation remains resilient and driven by shared security interests rather than bilateral diplomatic fluctuations (*Business Standard*, 2025). These exercises provide opportunities for knowledge transfer, capacity building, and the harmonization of tactical procedures.

- **Chart No 1: Joint Military Exercises and Defence Engagements (2019–2025):**

Year	Exercise/Engagement	Description
2019	Bongosagar launched	India–Bangladesh naval cooperation initiated
2020	Exercise Sampriti	Annual army exercise focusing on interoperability
2021	Expanded naval drills	Enhanced maritime interoperability
2023	Fifth Annual Defence Dialogue	Structured review of cooperation
2024	New naval contracts	Defence shipbuilding and technical ties
2025	Bongosagar and patrols	Continued drills amid political tensions

6. Defence Industrial and Technical Cooperation:

Beyond joint exercises, India and Bangladesh have engaged in defence industrial collaboration. Recent naval contracts between Indian shipbuilders and the Bangladesh Navy signify a broadening of cooperation into production and technical collaboration (*Economic Times*, 2024). India’s Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers (GRSE) signed contracts to build support vessels for Bangladesh, strengthening maritime infrastructure and operational capacity.

This trend denotes an emerging area of **strategic reciprocity**, where Bangladesh’s defence modernization benefits from Indian expertise, and India strengthens its influence in the Bay of Bengal region. While occasional cancellations of deals due to external geopolitical pressures have surfaced, defence industrial cooperation remains an important trend.

7. Multidimensional Security Challenges and External Influences:

The India–Bangladesh defence partnership operates within a complex regional environment, with external actors such as China increasing military cooperation with Dhaka, including UAV manufacturing agreements. These developments present both challenges and strategic opportunities. India’s engagement



must balance cooperation with Bangladesh while managing regional competition and ensuring that shared security interests are not undermined.

At the operational level, border security remains a major focus of collaboration, with regular coordination between India's Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh's Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) to manage infiltration, trafficking, and cross-border crimes (*DD News*, 2023). Such initiatives demonstrate the pragmatic utility of defence cooperation in addressing common challenges.

8. Economic and Strategic Dimensions of Defence Cooperation:

Increasing defence cooperation is often linked with broader economic and security integration. Bilateral trade—exceeding USD 12.9 billion in FY 2023-24—supports the context in which defence ties expand. Strategic connectivity projects, such as rail links and port usage agreements, bolster logistical interoperability and support defence logistics and contingency planning. These economic linkages provide a broader foundation for sustained defence cooperation.

9. Maritime Boundary Settlement and Blue Economy Cooperation:

The peaceful resolution of maritime boundary disputes in 2014 through international arbitration significantly reduced friction and enabled cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. The settlement provided clarity over exclusive economic zones and encouraged maritime collaboration (Pant, 2017).

Maritime security now forms a critical dimension of defence engagement, particularly in protecting sea lines of communication and addressing non-traditional threats.

10. Border Management and Internal Security Coordination:

Given their extensive border, coordinated management remains central to defence cooperation. Joint efforts to curb trafficking, insurgency, and illegal migration reflect shared security interests (Bajpai, 2003). Regular meetings between border forces help manage localized tensions and prevent escalation.

11. Defence Cooperation in the Contemporary Geopolitical Flux (2024–2025):

11.1 Political Transition and Strategic Recalibration in Bangladesh (2024):

The 2024 general elections in Bangladesh and the subsequent consolidation of political authority under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina marked another phase of domestic continuity combined with calibrated foreign policy adjustments. While Dhaka reaffirmed its long-standing commitment to regional stability,



internal political contestations and external diplomatic balancing—particularly between India and China—have introduced subtle but significant strategic recalibrations (Riaz, 2024).

From India’s perspective, Bangladesh remains indispensable to its eastern security architecture, especially in the context of insurgency management, maritime domain awareness, and connectivity to the Northeast. The post-2024 political consolidation in Dhaka did not alter foundational defence understandings, yet it encouraged a more diversified procurement approach under Bangladesh’s “Forces Goal 2030” modernization framework. This has required New Delhi to adapt by expanding defence-industrial cooperation rather than relying solely on traditional political goodwill.

Thus, continuity is preserved at the level of political intent, but emerging trends reveal increasing institutionalization and diversification of defence engagement.

11.2 2024–2025 Military Exercises and Institutional Deepening:

Between 2024 and early 2025, joint military exercises such as *Sampriti* (Army) and coordinated naval patrols in the Bay of Bengal continued, reinforcing operational interoperability. More importantly, discussions intensified on:

- Enhanced intelligence-sharing protocols
- Expanded hydrographic cooperation in the Bay of Bengal
- Greater use of India’s coastal radar chain integration

The sustained frequency of bilateral exercises in recent years demonstrates institutionalization beyond leadership-level diplomacy.

- **Chart No 2: Growth of Major Bilateral Defence Engagements (2015–2025):**

Year	Major Joint Exercises/Defence Engagements
2015	2
2017	3
2019	4
2021	5
2023	6
2025	6+ (including expanded maritime coordination)



The data indicates that engagement levels have stabilized at a higher plateau since 2023, reflecting institutional maturity rather than episodic cooperation. This trend strengthens the argument that India–Bangladesh defence cooperation has moved from confidence-building to operational coordination.

11.3 Maritime Geopolitics and Bay of Bengal Security (2024–2025):

The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a strategic theatre shaped by Indo-Pacific competition. In 2024–2025, increasing Chinese maritime presence and infrastructure financing in South Asia generated renewed emphasis on maritime coordination between India and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has maintained a policy of “strategic autonomy,” avoiding formal alignment within Indo-Pacific blocs. However, Dhaka’s growing participation in Indian Ocean regional dialogues and hydrographic collaboration with India suggests a functional convergence rather than alliance formation.

India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) has indirectly intersected with Bangladesh’s maritime modernization goals. Rather than framing cooperation in ideological terms, both states have prioritized:

- Search and Rescue (SAR) interoperability
- Blue economy security
- Anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking patrols
- Climate-security coordination

The Bay of Bengal therefore serves as a domain where traditional cooperation (naval goodwill visits, training exchanges) has evolved into structured maritime security architecture.

11.4 Border Security, Technology Integration, and Smart Surveillance:

By 2025, India’s border management strategy increasingly incorporates smart fencing and digital monitoring technologies along the India–Bangladesh border. While historically border issues—illegal migration, cattle smuggling, and cross-border crime—created friction, recent years have witnessed more coordinated border management.

The Border Security Force (India) and Border Guard Bangladesh have institutionalized:

- Coordinated patrol frameworks



- Real-time communication mechanisms
- Non-lethal engagement guidelines

Technological integration has reduced incidents of escalation, reflecting a transition from reactive security management to cooperative border governance.

11.5 Regional Instability and the Myanmar Factor (2024–2025):

The intensification of instability in Myanmar during 2024–2025 has introduced a shared security concern for India and Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugee crisis remains unresolved, and renewed violence has triggered cross-border humanitarian and security anxieties.

For Bangladesh, prolonged refugee hosting strains domestic resources and internal stability. For India, instability in Myanmar affects insurgency management in the Northeast. Consequently, trilateral security implications have reinforced bilateral defence dialogue between New Delhi and Dhaka.

This convergence demonstrates that external regional crises can deepen India–Bangladesh defence coordination rather than weaken it.

11.6 Balancing China: Strategic Prudence Rather than Confrontation:

A critical emerging trend in 2024–2025 is Bangladesh’s calibrated balancing strategy between India and China. China remains a major defence supplier to Bangladesh. However, Dhaka has carefully avoided exclusive dependency by diversifying partnerships, including with India.

India has responded by:

- Offering defence lines of credit
- Expanding training programs in Indian military institutions
- Increasing joint production discussions

This indicates a shift from symbolic cooperation to defence-industrial engagement. Rather than framing the relationship as competitive containment, India appears to prioritize interdependence and trust-building.

Thus, continuity lies in mutual security trust; emerging trends lie in economic and technological dimensions of defence cooperation.



11.7 Economic Security and Connectivity Corridors:

Defence cooperation in 2024–2025 increasingly overlaps with connectivity initiatives such as:

- Multimodal transport corridors
- Energy grid interconnection
- Port access arrangements

The strategic logic is clear: economic interdependence enhances security stability. Bangladesh's growing role as a transit hub for India's Northeast has security implications requiring defence coordination.

This fusion of connectivity and security illustrates the transformation of bilateral defence relations from narrow military engagement to comprehensive strategic partnership.

12. Strategic Reorientation in India–Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations: Implications of a BNP Comeback:

The return of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power marks a pivotal shift from the previous administration's close alignment with India toward a more diversified and sovereignty-focused foreign policy. This transition recalibrates the South Asian strategic triangle, moving away from "personality-driven" diplomacy toward a model of strategic autonomy.

12.1 Key Pillars of the Recalibration:

From Exclusivity to Multi-Vector Diplomacy: While the previous government maintained deep institutional ties with New Delhi, the BNP is expected to balance India's influence by strengthening economic ties with China and pursuing symbolic normalization with Pakistan which can be reflected through lesser defence cooperation in coming years.

Security & Border Governance: India's primary concern is the potential dilution of security cooperation. The 4,096 km border requires intense coordination to manage migration and counter-insurgency. Any shift in intelligence sharing could impact the stability of India's Northeast.

The Pakistan Variable: Pakistan may find a symbolic diplomatic opening through trade and cultural outreach. However, due to the legacy of 1971 and a lack of geographic proximity, Islamabad's role will likely remain narrative-driven rather than structurally significant.

**Conclusion:**

Defence and strategic cooperation between India and Bangladesh demonstrates remarkable continuity rooted in historical trust and geographic necessity. From the 1971 Liberation War to contemporary naval drills, the partnership has evolved from symbolic solidarity to institutionalized engagement.

While geopolitical competition—particularly China’s presence—introduces new variables, the bilateral defence relationship has shown resilience. Its durability stems from shared security challenges, economic interdependence, and institutionalized mechanisms.

Despite occasional diplomatic strains and external geopolitical pressures, defence cooperation remains robust. The continued conduct of joint military exercises, institutional dialogues, and defence industrial collaboration highlights mutual trust and shared aspirations for regional security. Further cooperation is likely to deepen further, shaped by evolving threats, connectivity initiatives, and strategic imperatives in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

The future of the India-Bangladesh defence will be defined by practicality over rhetoric. While the BNP will likely seek to reduce India’s regional "exclusivity," the hard realities of geography and trade ensure that functional and strategic cooperation will remain the baseline for regional stability.

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