

Love-hate relationship: Why bilateral tensions persist between India and Bangladesh

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*LSE Professor **David Lewis** argues that New Delhi and Dhaka should consolidate ties since India remains central to Bangladesh's future.*

Bangladesh receives comparatively little attention in the western media, and the little coverage that exists is often negative. Last month, in [an article that seemed to suggest that India needs to save Bangladesh from itself](#), *The Economist* returned to a familiar theme: the idea of the Bangladesh government as one of the world's worst. This is a surprising claim given the achievements of the Bangladeshi democratic political system that has been in place since 1990—economic growth, relative stability, near self-sufficiency in food production, a functioning but flawed democratic system, a vibrant civil society, and good progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). What *The Economist* is correct to highlight is the importance of India to Bangladesh's future well-being.



There is now a pressing need to overcome the problems that have recurred between the two countries over four decades. Since the Liberation War of 1971, when India's intervention made Bangladesh's secession from Pakistan possible, relations have been characterised by periodic tension and distrust. Bangladeshis have developed something of a love-hate relationship with India: grateful for its support in 1971 and mindful of a common culture and shared history, but resentful of the ways that India throws its weight around as the regional superpower.

There are several points of contention between the two countries, starting with asymmetrical trade. Cheaper Indian goods flow across the porous border into Bangladesh and impede the development of local industries. At the same time, non-tariff barriers under the South Asian Free Trade Agreement continue to create major obstacles for Bangladesh's exports. In terms of natural resources, Indian water management practices upstream have long impacted negatively on Bangladesh's own water management, contributing to localised drought and flood control problems.

Meanwhile, on the security front, bilateral tensions arise from India's claim that insurgent bases on the Bangladeshi side of its north-eastern border provide safe havens for Indian secessionist groups. India is also concerned about the large numbers of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh that it believes are working in India. These concerns led India to construct a steel fence along its 2,500-mile border with Bangladesh. Frequent cases of unarmed villagers in

Bangladesh being shot by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) have further strained bilateral ties ([Human Rights Watch has documented](#) up to one thousand such killings in the past decade).

Sustained bilateral tensions are not in New Delhi's interest. India needs a stable and prosperous Bangladesh to support its own efforts to improve governance and maintain security and territorial integrity. Specifically, India needs improved access through Bangladesh to reduce the exclusion of its remote north-eastern states such as Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, which lag behind much of the rest of the country in terms of development.

Bangladesh, too, could benefit from improved relations: Indian investment could help Bangladesh begin exploiting its hard-to-reach gas reserves and address its chronic electricity shortage. Bangladesh now has aspirations to join the BRICs as one of the 'next 11' countries, but it will need foreign investment if it is to achieve this goal.

Given Bangladesh's strategic location between south and south-east Asia, it could benefit from the resurgence of India and China and strengthen its diplomatic hand. But Bangladesh can only take advantage of this growing regional clout if it can steer a course that maintains good relations with both the giant powers.

The government of Sheikh Hasina has made a good start by revitalising diplomatic initiatives with India in the past few years. Although there have been setbacks, these_ have already born fruit in the form of a cooperation agreement on cross-border terrorist groups and a billion-dollar Indian investment plan. These initiatives build on earlier, successful bilateral projects such as the Kolkata-Dhaka rail link established in 2007. But much more needs to be done to cement relations around equitable water-sharing, border security and bilateral trade.

As *The Economist* rightly pointed out, India needs to pay more attention to its neighbour since it remains central to Bangladesh's future.

About the Author

David Lewis is professor of Social Policy and Development at LSE. He recently published *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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