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EXPANDING DIPLOMATIC SPACE FOR PAKISTAN IN BANGLADESH FOLLOWING SHEIKH HASINA'S OUSTER: OPPORTUNITIES, CONSTRAINTS, AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract
The political transition following Sheikh Hasina's departure from office in August 2024 created new opportunities for Pakistan to recalibrate and potentially expand its bilateral engagement with Bangladesh. This study examines the opportunities, constrains, and broader regional implications of the following Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship in the post-Hasina period. The research uses a descriptive-analytical method based on information from other sources and content analysis. The study uses the ideas of Regional Security Complex Theory, Balance of Power and Soft Power. The findings indicate that the post-Hasina political environment has generated opportunities for enhanced diplomatic dialogue, trade and economic cooperation, educational exchanges, and people-to-people connectivity. However, the historical legacy of the 1971 Liberation War, Bangladesh's enduring strategic relationship with India, and continuing domestic political developments remain important constraints on deeper bilateral engagement. The competition between countries in the region are still big problem. The study says that the chance for Pakistan to have a relationship with Bangladesh mainly shows that Bangladesh is trying to have more choices in its foreign policy not that Bangladesh is changing its main strategy to be closer to Pakistan.

Introduction
Bangladesh's strategic geographical location, access to the Bay of Bengal, close proximity to India and increased economic and strategic ties with China and other regional players make it a strategically important country in South Asia. Bangladesh occupies a strategically significant position in South and Southeast Asia due to its geographical location and its growing importance in regional connectivity, maritime affairs, trade, and security dynamics. In this context, Bangladesh's foreign policy has been more oriented towards maintaining ties with multiple powers: regional and extra-regional, at the same time safeguarding its national interests and strategic autonomy (Hossain, 2013; Riaz, 2022). Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan, India, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan demonstrate that Dhaka's foreign policy extends beyond any single bilateral relationship and reflects a broader strategy of external engagement and diversification.

Geographical proximity, historical ties, economic dependence, border security, water sharing problems, energy cooperation and transportation connectivity are particularly significant in India's

foreign-policy environment in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina's government has expanded the Bangladesh-India security cooperation, connectivity, trade, and counterterrorism among other areas (Bajpaee, 2016; Hossain & Islam, 2021). The Hasina government maintained close political and strategic relations with New Delhi, which contributed to India's considerable role in Bangladesh's regional and foreign-policy calculations. At the same time, Bangladesh expanded its economic and strategic engagement with China, creating a complex triangular dynamic in which Dhaka sought to maintain constructive relations with both India and China while safeguarding its own strategic interests (Karim, 2024; Amin, 2025).

The political transition in August 2024 significantly altered this regional and diplomatic environment. After months of student-led protests that developed into a broader political movement, Sheikh Hasina resigned and departed from Bangladesh on 5 August 2024. This was followed by an interim government taking charge of the administration of the country. The political transition represented not only a significant development in Bangladesh's domestic politics but also an important inflection points in its external relations. The conclusion of Hasina's extended leadership raised doubts over Bangladesh's ties with India and provided the opportunity for Dhaka to rethink its policy with other regional players (IISS, 2024). The transition was particularly significant because of the close relationship that had developed between India and the Hasina government, contributing to a period of recalibration in Dhaka-New Delhi.

The political transition following Hasina's departure has contributed to a period of reassessment in Bangladesh-India relations, accompanied by increased diplomatic uncertainty and bilateral friction. This led to an additional friction between India-Bangladesh relations since Hasina entered India after departing Bangladesh. This new political climate in Dhaka also led to discussions on India's influence and Bangladesh's reliance on New Delhi. Nevertheless, the post-Hasina policy environment should not be interpreted as a strategic departure from India. Instead, Bangladesh is looking to India, China, Pakistan and other outside partners for more flexibility in the relationship management process. This is in line with the overall trend of strategic diversification observed in the foreign policy studies of Bangladesh (Hossain & Islam, 2021; Karim, 2024). The recent study also indicates that Bangladesh has tried to follow a flexible approach with both India and China, but with a focus on its strategic interests (Amin, 2025).

In this dynamic context, the relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh has become more relevant. Historically the relationship between the two has been hampered by the effects of the Liberation War of 1971, political conflicts and the regional differences between the countries. During much of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, bilateral relations remained politically constrained and characterized by limited high-level engagement. However, Pakistan and Bangladesh were already making progress in the area of diplomatic normalization prior to 2024 and the political transition had further possibilities for engagement. Following Hasina's departure, Islamabad and Dhaka demonstrated renewed interest in strengthening bilateral engagement, including in the fields of trade, agriculture, security and undertook high-level diplomatic talks (Associated Press, 2025).

In this context, this study seeks to determine if and how the ouster of Sheikh Hasina has opened up Pakistan's diplomatic space in Bangladesh. It emphasizes three interrelated aspects: opportunities, constraints, and regional implications. First, it looks at the possibilities for Pakistan in political diplomacy, economic cooperation, connectivity, security, culture and people-to-people relations. Second, it seeks to evaluate the historical, political, economic and geopolitical obstacles that can hinder greater Pak-Bangladesh cooperation. Third, it examines the implications of increased Pak-Bangladesh relations for the Indian and Chinese foreign policies as well as the wider South Asian regional order.

Accordingly, this study argues that the political transition following Sheikh Hasina's departure

has created additional diplomatic space for Pakistan within Bangladesh's evolving foreign-policy landscape, but it does not necessarily mean that the country is shifting its policy towards Pakistan. Rather, the new linkage can be seen as a part of Bangladesh's overall external relations diversification and strategic flexibility. It will be Pakistan's capability to do what is referred to as the 'diplomatic conversion' that will determine how far it can move towards sustainable influence in the bilateral relations and how it can balance its engagement with the history of Pakistan. The study thus helps to understand the South Asian realignment in the region and the impact of Bangladesh's 2024 political shift on the Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship.

Literature Review

Historical developments of partition, 1971 Liberation War and the subsequent challenges of building a sustainable bilateral relationship have been the focus of the literature on Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. However, recent historical research has called for a more complex understanding of the historical ties that linked the two wings of Pakistan prior to 1971 in political, social and institutional terms. The history of Pakistan prior to 1971 must not be viewed solely through the lens of the eventual separation of East and West Pakistan, as political and social encounters with one another produced complex patterns of connections and contests earlier as well. Bangash and Devji (2025) argue that the history of Pakistan before 1971 must not be understood only through the eventual separation of East and West Pakistan, as political and social encounters with one another produced complex patterns of connections and contestations earlier as well. Furthermore, Shah et al. (2024) also found that the impact of the war of 1971 on interstate relations is still a significant factor as historical memory keeps playing its role in the attitudinal level of diplomacy between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Concurrently, no relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan can be discussed without considering the relationship with India and China in the country, as revealed by Sureshan (2025). This field of literature thus confirms the still present relevance of historical memory but the impact of historical memory needs to be studied in conjunction with the evolving strategic and geopolitical context.

A second strand of research emphasizes the changes in Bangladesh's foreign policy after Sheikh Hasina's exit in August 2024. Bian Sai (2025) notes a notable shift in Dhaka's foreign relations, especially through enhanced communication with Pakistan while maintaining ties with China and managing tensions with India. Rizve (2025) similarly notes that the post-Hasina climate has fostered opportunities for the resurgence of Pakistan–Bangladesh relations following years of minimal interaction. Rizve (2025) also describes Bangladesh's post-Hasina diplomacy as a more extensive foreign-policy overhaul, where Dhaka aims for increased diversification instead of simply swapping one key partner for another. Uddin and Lau (2025) contend that a self-reliant Bangladeshi foreign policy increasingly relies on broadening external alliances and diminishing heavy reliance on any one power. Together, these studies suggest that Bangladesh's engagement with Pakistan should be viewed mainly as an effort for strategic flexibility and diplomatic diversification, rather than as proof of a formal alignment with Islamabad.

Recent research highlights the evolving regional impacts of Bangladesh's growing ties with Pakistan. Bose (2025) contends that Pakistan has emerged as an important factor in the evolving India-Bangladesh dynamics, especially as Dhaka re-evaluates its international alliances following Hasina's exit. Ranjan (2025) similarly observes that the revitalized Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship has broader geopolitical consequences since both nations uphold significant ties with China, leading to potential overlapping strategic interests. Hameed (2025) notes that the revitalized diplomatic energy has progressed from mere political declarations to actual agreements and institutional interactions, indicating that the relationship is entering a more dynamic phase. At the wider regional level, the literature indicates a transition from a primarily India-focused view of Bangladesh's foreign relations to a more multifaceted regional context

that includes India, China, Pakistan, and other external players.

Another key idea is the difference between opening and sustainable partnership. The latest studies say that more top-level talks do not automatically clear the walls that have stuck Pakistan-Bangladesh together. Ranjan (2025) points out that old hurts still make it hard to finish the normalization even when leaders are talking more. Rizve (2025) says the new ties are important yet they sit inside a game that includes India and China. Sureshan (2025) reminds that Bangladesh has to juggle big friends at once so a simple move, to Pakistan is hard to make. So, the scholars say Pakistan's new diplomatic space must be judged not by how many visits or deals happen but by whether those talks become lasting economic, institutional, educational, cultural and social ties turning diplomatic opening into a real sustainable partnership.

Research Gap

The past of the 1971 Liberation War, historical tensions between Pakistan and Bangladesh, Bangladesh's ties with India and China, and recent developments in the diplomatic ties between the two countries after the August 2024 ouster of Sheikh Hasina have been discussed in the existing scholarship on Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. But at the same time, there is dearth of systematic studies on the way forward for Pakistan to make the most of the post-2024 diplomatic window to pursue sustainable bilateral engagement with Bangladesh. Particularly, it has not been sufficiently focused on evaluating the opportunities for trade, education, health, agriculture, culture, connectivity and security dimensions along with political, historical and geopolitical restraints. This study aims to fill this void by examining secondary qualitative data using three lenses: Regional Security Complex Theory, Balance of Power, and Soft Power and what it may have to say to India, China and South Asia.

Research Questions

- How has Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024 affected Pakistan's diplomatic space and bilateral relations with Bangladesh?
- What opportunities and constraints shape Pakistan's efforts to expand diplomatic, economic, educational, cultural, and security cooperation with Bangladesh in the post-Hasina period?
- To what extent does Bangladesh's post-Hasina foreign-policy diversification provide Pakistan with opportunities for sustainable diplomatic engagement without indicating a strategic alignment against India?
- What are the implications of the expanding Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship for India, China, and the broader South Asian regional security order?

Research Methodology

The study will use a qualitative research approach to study the expansion of Pakistan's diplomatic space in Bangladesh after the exit of Sheikh Hasina from power in August 2024. The study examines the evolving dynamics of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, opportunities for Pakistan, challenges to enhanced bilateral interaction and implications for the regional dynamics of South Asia. This is a qualitative study because it focuses on the interpretation of political, diplomatic, strategic and regional power dynamics and not only on their measurement in quantitative terms.

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive piece highlights key events of Pak-Bangladesh relations since August 2024, such as top-tier diplomatic engagements, economic integration, connectivity projects, and mutual cooperation in sectors like education, culture, and security. The analytical part focuses on the impact of these developments on the Pak-Bangladesh diplomatic equation and what could ease or hinder institutionalization of enhanced bilateral ties.

Data Collection

The study relies primarily on secondary data collected from academic literature, policy documents, official government publications, international organizations, think tanks, and reputable news organizations. Special focus is placed on events since August 2024 to reflect the shift in the direction of Bangladesh's foreign policy since Hasina. Sources are comprised of publications by the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Congressional Research Service (CRS), and other reputable research institutions. Relevant scholarly articles, books, policy briefs and current media reports are also analyzed, offering empirical evidence and various viewpoints on bilateral relations.

Data Analysis

The data collected is analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. The relevant information is presented in a thematic manner based on the objectives of the study. The study investigates four broad areas of Pakistan's foreign policy engagement with Bangladesh: (1) Pakistan's diplomatic expansion with Bangladesh, (2) opportunities for economic, political, cultural and security cooperation, (3) constraints due to history, domestic, economic and geopolitical factors and (4) implications of Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis the competition of powers and stability in South Asia. There is a cross comparison of official statements, scholarly interpretations and policy analyses to determine points of agreement and disagreement.

Scope and Period of Study

The principal period of analysis begins in August 2024, following Sheikh Hasina's departure from office, and extends through 2026. This time frame was chosen because Bangladesh's political shift opened up fresh avenues for reevaluating relationships with Pakistan. When appropriate, historical developments are also taken into account because they still have an impact on current bilateral ties, especially the legacy of the 1971 Liberation War.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in some ways. First, due to restricted access to private diplomatic correspondence and in-depth primary interviews, it mostly uses secondary sources. Second, as political relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan are changing quickly, some things might change after the study is finished. Third, institutional or national viewpoints may be reflected in media and policy sources. The study compares data from many sources and places more emphasis on official papers, peer-reviewed academic research, and reputable research institutions in order to overcome these limitations.

Overall, this methodology offers a methodical framework for analyzing how Pakistan's diplomatic space has been impacted by Bangladesh's post-2024 political transformation and whether the developing rapprochement can grow into a long-lasting and strategically significant relationship within the shifting South Asian regional order.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical approach used for this study is the theory of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. Balance of Power Theory serves as a perspective for supporting the analysis and Joseph Nye's Soft Power concept as an analytical concept. These strategies, together, offer a comprehensive approach to the analysis of Pakistan's increasing diplomatic engagement in Bangladesh after the political shifts of August 2024. The three theories, namely RSCT, Balance of Power, and Soft Power, help in understanding the larger security context of South Asia, the process of Bangladesh's security diversification and the quest for greater diplomatic flexibility, and how Pakistan can enhance its diplomatic influence through soft instruments, respectively.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

According to RSCT, geographical proximity has a significant impact on security dynamics and states within a specific geographical region are linked by security interdependencies (Buzan & Waever, 2003). When the security interests of states are closely linked in particular area, and when the security interests are at least to some degree interdependent, then a regional security complex exists. The theory thus moves the emphasis from the individual state behavior to regional level of interaction.

All these factors make RSCT of special relevance to the South Asian region as it is geographically near, has historical connections, political rivalry, economic ties and shared security threats. India's strategic role, India-Pakistan relations and Bangladesh's ties with India and China, along with the importance of the Bay of Bengal, all have a strong impact on the regional security environment. India's strategic importance, India-Pakistan relationship, Bangladesh-India and Bangladesh-China relations, and the strategic environment. Thus, the political situation in Bangladesh might affect its ties with the neighboring and major regional powers.

Balance of Power

Different perspectives of power and capabilities are used in the broader context of Bangladesh's attempts to maintain strategic flexibility in a high-power diversity context, referred to as Balance of Power Theory. Waltz (1979) maintains that states react to the allocation of capabilities in the international system and try to safeguard their interests and autonomy. This can also be achieved by states forming multiple relationships with actors, so as to not become overly reliant on one powerful state.

This view can be extended to Bangladesh in view of its geographical proximity, strong linkages with India, increasing economic and strategic cooperation with China, and its interactions with other regional and international partners. The growing interactions with Bangladesh can thus be seen as a part of Bangladesh's external relations diversification. It doesn't necessarily signal Bangladesh's quest to remove India and forge an official alliance against Pakistan. Rather, greater engagement with Pakistan could offer further political and economic avenues for Bangladesh.

Soft Power as an Analytical Concept

Soft Power is applied to analyze the non-coercive tools with which Pakistan can improve its attraction and diplomacy in Bangladesh. For Nye (2004) soft power is the power of attraction rather than compulsion, sports, media, tourism, health cooperation and people-to-people contacts can play a role in enhancing the societal and institutional linkages with Bangladesh.

With this regard, Sustainable Diplomacy is especially important for this because higher level political contacts alone cannot make the difference in the creation of sustainable influence. The sustainability of influence for Pakistan would hinge on the sustainability of bilateral engagement in the areas of economic, educational, cultural and societal interactions that would bring about enduring positive impacts after 2024. This is particularly significant in the face of the ongoing debate of the past over the 1971 conflict.

Historical and Political Context of Pak-Bangladesh Relations

Pakistan and Bangladesh have a lengthy history as members of the same subcontinent. The result of their combined fight for independence from a colonial force was the establishment of Pakistan. It was the pinnacle of collaboration and selflessness on the side of the people of Bengal, a Muslim-majority region in western India, which eventually became West Pakistan, for a shared cause. Bengal was split along religious lines when the subcontinent gained independence in 1947 and became the sovereign republics of Pakistan and India. Due to the existence of a Muslim majority, the eastern half was ceded to Pakistan and named East Pakistan, while the western, predominately Hindu portion became the India's part as West Bengal. India posed a security threat to Pakistan starting in 1947, which made the country a security state and gave its military an excessive amount of development. Pakistan's military took control of the country in 1958 as a

result of political unrest, economic difficulties, and security concerns (Mahmood et al., 2015).

East Pakistan, which had the lowest military presence, felt marginalized in the decision-making process throughout this protracted military regime. They also believed that the 1962 constitution denied them provincial authority. Underrepresentation in accordance with the parity principle increased the deprivation even further. Furthermore, there were significant variances between the two regions of the country due to linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Bengalis vehemently objected to Urdu being made Pakistan's only official language. The nationalist movement in Bengal was founded on the struggle to protect the Bengali language (Mahmood et al., 2015).

Separatist tendencies were also fostered among the people and government of East Pakistan as a result of economic mismanagement, an excessive focus on West Pakistan's security, and mistrust of one another. Pakistan's integration was shaken by the Awami League's Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman's six-point agenda and the General Ayub Khan government's improper handling of the matter. General Yahya Khan, his successor, made an effort to accommodate the Awami League's demands, but it was too late (Mahmood et al., 2015).

In 1970, the general elections were a turning point in Pakistani politics, which, in turn, intensified the division between East and West Pakistan. The Awami League won all the constituencies of East Pakistan, and became the biggest political party in the National Assembly. After the elections, the issue of devolution of power from the federal government to the provinces and the establishment of a national government headed by the Awami League was discussed. But some differences arose with regard to the constitution and the authority of the provinces. The political demands of the Awami League were continued to be queried by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, while efforts to reach a satisfactory power-sharing solution with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were unsuccessful. Later, President Yahya Khan postponed the meeting of the National Assembly indefinitely. In East Pakistan, this move was interpreted as a negation of the Awami League's electoral victory and played a role in the general civil disobedience and political turmoil. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was then arrested by the authorities and the Awami League was banned, some of its leaders and supporters fled to India (Mahmood et al., 2015).

The political crisis continued to grow, despite the attempts of resolution. Bengali nationalist leaders declared the independence of the nation of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971. This led to an armed conflict between the Pakistan Army and Bengali forces, including Mukti Bahini. With the heightened tension, there was a huge exodus of civilians into neighboring India, where it was estimated that about ten million people took shelter in India. India gave them a cordial welcome and took use of the occasion to lunch a global propaganda effort highlighting the violence committed by the Pakistan government on its own civilian population. These developments further aggravated the relations between Pakistan and India, and added to the internationalization of the conflict. Eventually, in December 1971, a military clash between Pakistan and India developed into the wider war. Pakistani troops surrendered in Dhaka on 16 December, 1971 and the war in East Pakistan was declared over, giving rise to Bangladesh as an independent country (Mahmood et al., 2015).

Pakistan has acknowledged Bangladesh in 1974, the two states' relations somewhat normalized. Under the terms of the Simla Accord (Simla Agreement, 1972), both nations also signed a number of additional accords. Even though Bangladesh was accorded recognition by Pakistan during the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Lahore in 1974 and both countries' official missions took on their tasks in 1976, tensions in the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh persisted (Mahmood et al., 2015).

In 1977, there was a thaw in the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. The first Bangladeshi head of state to visit Pakistan was President General Zia-ur-Rahman. Both countries were under the control of martial law regimes at that time. The military coup in

Pakistan in 1977 opened the door for enhanced relations with Bangladesh's like-minded military regime, established after Mujib-ur-Rehman's assassination in 1975. In the context of Islamic nationalism, the military regime in Bangladesh positioned itself similarly to the military in Pakistan. Strangely, both nations were governed by generals who shared the same name. In Pakistan, it was General Zia-ul-Huq, In Bangladesh; it was General Zia-ur-Rahman. Pakistan's President Fazal Ilahi Chaudhry and Chief Martial Law Administrator General Zia-ul-Huq welcomed President Zia-ur-Rahman at the airport. Pakistan's foreign ministry stated that the visit had effectively sealed "the process of normalization and reconciliation" between Pakistan and Bangladesh. General Zia-ur-Rehman visited Pakistan during his tour of South Asian countries to promote the establishment of a pan-South Asian regional organization similar to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU). These initiatives took shape much later, following General Zia-ur-Rehman's assassination, with the establishment of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. In 1985, General Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan participated in the inaugural SAARC summit held in Dhaka ((Chowdhury, 2025).

Pak-Bangladesh Relations under Sheikh Hasina's Era

Within segments of Pakistani political and policy discourse, Sheikh Hasina was widely perceived as maintaining particularly close political and strategic relations with India, who opposed Islamabad's attempts to deepen bilateral relations while she was in office, first from 1996 to 2001 and then subsequently from 2009 to 2024. Sheikh Hasina concentrated on exploiting the tragic events of 1971 and the claimed exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan throughout her 20 years in power (Zia, 2024).

Sheikh Hasina was Bangladesh's prime minister from June 1996 until July 2001. When Sheikh Hasina's Awami League administration took power following its victory in the 1996 general elections, ties suffered. Islamabad's apology-tendering problem gained momentum and was included into the Bangladeshi state narrative. During Sheikh Hasina's tenure, the government placed considerable emphasis on the historical events of 1971, including allegations concerning the killing of intellectuals and other wartime atrocities. In February 1998, the prime minister of Pakistan traveled to Dhaka. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that "let us learn from the mistakes of the past and build a better tomorrow for our people" during a dinner meeting that Sheikh Hasina arranged in his honor. Bangladesh once more called for an apology about the alleged 1971 atrocities carried out by West Pakistan (Ahmar, 2022).

Particularly during her second term as prime minister, bilateral relations between Islamabad and Dhaka remained frozen throughout her administration. People-to-people communication remained at a bare minimum due of the visa restrictions on Pakistanis. So, cold diplomatic ties went so far as to cause direct flights between Dhaka and Karachi to be canceled. Due to reported abuse of its staff, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) ceased flights to Dhaka in 2018, while Bangladesh's Biman Airlines terminated service to Pakistan even earlier. Additionally, there hasn't been a high-level official visit between the two nations in a long time, and the consultations with the foreign secretary have been discontinued since 2016. In a similar vein, the Joint Economic Commission (JEC) between the two nations has been dormant for some time. Dhaka, during Sheikh Hasina leadership, supported India in regional diplomacy. The summit of the SAARC, which takes place every two years, took place in Nepal in 2014. The subsequent summit, which Pakistan was scheduled to hold in 2016, was canceled when India withdrew due to a terrorist incident in the territory it administers, Jammu & Kashmir. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan withdrew from the conference as well, citing security concerns as their excuse. During Sheikh Hasina's tenure, several political figures associated with pro-Pakistan positions during the 1971 conflict were prosecuted and, in some cases, executed following war-crimes proceedings. People in

Pakistan consider 1971 to have been a terrible occurrence, and they are beginning to realize that the old East Pakistan was not handled correctly. Pakistan, throughout the conflict, crimes were carried out by both sides, with militants' particularly killing huge numbers of non-Bengalis. The historical interpretation of the 1971 conflict remains contested, with significant differences between Pakistani and Bangladeshi narratives concerning wartime violence, accountability, and reconciliation. However, Islamabad vehemently disputes Bangladesh's accusation that the Pakistan Army slaughtered millions of Bengalis. Pakistani officials claim that over time, Dhaka's attempts to normalize relations with Pakistan were thwarted by Sheikh Hasina's strong relationship with New Delhi (Zia, 2024).

Opportunities for Pakistan

The political change that happened after Sheikh Hasina was ouster in August 2024 has made it easier for Pakistan to work closely with Bangladesh. The new political situation gives Islamabad a chance to build ties with Bangladesh. These ties can go beyond the problems and issues from the past. Pakistan could prioritize mutually beneficial cooperation across economic, social, and in institutional domains. In this situation Pakistan can take an approach. This approach should focus on trade and money matters helping people connect with each other and working together in a way that benefits both sides of trying to compete. There are areas where Pakistan and Bangladesh can work together. These include buying and selling things, education and learning exchanges, health care and medicine farming and working together in the SAARC group. These chances can help make the chance to improve relations into something that lasts and covers many areas. This can help build more complete relations, between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

1. Bilateral Trade and Investment

Pakistan has significant opportunities to expand bilateral trade with Bangladesh. There is considerable potential for complementarily trade between Pakistan and Bangladesh, especially in the textile, pharmaceuticals, rice, agricultural products, leather goods and manufactured products. The restoration of direct maritime trade between Karachi and Chattogram has made the environment more conducive towards enhancing trade flow. Direct shipping can eliminate transportation hassle and enhance the active participation of Pakistani exporters in the Bangladeshi market (State Bank of Pakistan, 2025).

2. Educational and Academic Cooperation

Education is an important instrument of soft power for Pakistan. Possibilities for Pakistan and Bangladesh include the strengthening of university collaborations and scholarship programs, academic exchange, joint research, and professional training. Cooperation can be further enhanced between the universities of Pakistan in agriculture, medicine, engineering, political science, international relations, and information technology. Academic cooperation is significant because it can create enduring institutional ties between the two countries. A student/ faculty exchange may also help exchange information about the society and foreign policy of each country. This interaction could help to gradually strengthen the people-to-people links and establish a new generation of professionals who are familiar with both countries (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, 2025).

3. Pharmaceutical and Health Cooperation

Pharma and Healthcare industry in Pakistan is an industry with significant opportunities. The pharmaceutical and medical institutions are well established in Pakistan and Bangladesh is a huge market for the pharmaceutical and medical products. Medical exports, medical tourism, telemedicine, medical training and joint research are some of the forms of cooperation that are possible. Pakistani pharmaceutical companies may be interested in finding opportunities in the Bangladeshi market and medical institutions may want to create partnerships with the hospitals and universities of Bangladesh. Cooperation in the field of healthcare might also offer a viable

basis for bilateral relations as it directly addresses social and economic requirements, not just strategic considerations (Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, 2025).

4. Agricultural Cooperation

There are other areas in which cooperation might be possible, such as in agriculture. Agriculture is a major contributor to the economy in both countries and the key issues such as food security, climate change, agricultural productivity, and water management are common in both countries. Pakistan can share expertise in irrigation, agricultural production, agricultural research, food processing, and climate smart agriculture with Bangladesh, and also boost food exports. In particular, joint studies between agricultural universities and research institutions are beneficial. Pakistan can also learn from Bangladesh experiences in agricultural adaptation and rural development, while Bangladesh can benefit from Pakistan in irrigation, agricultural research etc. (Pakistan Agricultural Research Council, 2025).

5. Regional Cooperation through SAARC

The growing bilateral ties also offer Pakistan a chance to deepen the cooperation in the region through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Pakistan is also keen on further institutional and economic cooperation with Bangladesh. There are potential areas of cooperation between the countries that can be achieved with the revival of SAARC in the fields of trade, climate change, disaster management, public health, education and poverty alleviation. Pakistan can thus claim its better ties with Bangladesh as a component of a regional-cooperation initiative. This would enable Islamabad to ramp up its diplomatic efforts without casting Pakistan–Bangladesh cooperation as targeting another South Asian country (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2025).

Constraints on Pakistan's Expanding Diplomatic Space

The political changes in Bangladesh after the removal of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 opened up more space for Pakistan. Then, high-level political contacts, resurgence of economic interaction, military exchanges, and talks on regional cooperation boosted bilateral relations. But this diplomatic opening is limited by historical, political, economic and geopolitical considerations. The recent evaluations highlight that ongoing institutionalization of Pak-Bangladesh relations is still constrained by structural issues, including the unresolved issue of 1971, Bangladesh's changing dynamics with India, domestic political developments and the strategic balancing of major powers (Abid, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2025).

1. Unresolved Legacy of the 1971 Liberation War

The most significant limitation on Pakistan's widening diplomatic outreach in Bangladesh is the legacy of the Liberation war of 1971. While relations have on the whole improved greatly since 2024, grievances are not forgotten. In August 2025, Pakistan and Bangladesh agreed to work on enhancing relations during Pakistani Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar's visit to Dhaka, but with a different interpretation of the issues and their resolution pertaining to 1971. Bangladesh reiterated concerns on apology, financial demands and other pending issues, and Pakistan reiterated that many of the issues had been discussed (Sengupta, 2025).

The lingering of 1971 issue is significant because of its impact on government-to-government relationship, as well as public sentiments in Bangladesh. Thus, state level diplomatic relations can develop more rapidly than societal reconciliation. History has been cited as one of the primary structural barriers to achieve sustainable partnership between Pakistan and Bangladesh (Abid, 2025). However, in order to expand Pakistan's diplomatic space, historical concerns must be addressed in a manner that

involves continuous dialogue and confidence building.

2. India's Continuing Strategic and Economic Importance

India's continuing strategic and economic importance in Bangladesh represents an important structural consideration for Pakistan's expanding diplomatic engagement. Bangladesh's geographical proximity to India, extensive economic links, energy connections, and shared security concerns make India an indispensable partner for Dhaka.

The post Hasina government has been trying to realign Bangladesh's foreign policy and to balance the key relationship with India (IISS, 2025). So, the strengthening of Pak-Bangladesh relations shouldn't be seen as Bangladesh replacing India with Pakistan. Rather, Dhaka seems to be moving towards increased flexibility in its foreign policy.

Bangladesh has no problem with closer ties with Islamabad but it will not compromise its core interests with New Delhi. Further, bilateral ties between Pakistan and Bangladesh may get more security centric, which may be interpreted as a strategic threat by India. However, Pakistan should avoid framing its engagement with Bangladesh primarily through the lens of strategic competition with India.

3. Bangladesh's Domestic Political Transition

Another significant limitation is Bangladesh's political shift at home. The diplomatic opening with Pakistan was part of the political change that took place after the fall of Hasina, and domestic political leadership changes can have an impact on foreign policy priorities. Pakistan cannot assume that the diplomatic momentum generated after August 2024 will necessarily continue.

The political landscape in Bangladesh has undergone further changes as has been seen recently. The shift to an elected government and the introduction of a new phase in Bangladesh's foreign policy have been accompanied by a continuing process of rebalancing relations with India, China, Pakistan and other external partners (Congressional Research Service, 2026).

This uncertainty necessitates the need for Pakistan to establish relations in a manner that goes beyond political leaders and parties. There needs to be institutional relationships between foreign ministries, parliaments, universities, business communities, and civil society, for sustainable diplomatic influence to be achieved. If not, then a change of government in Bangladesh at some point in the future might further restrict Pakistan's diplomatic options.

4. Limited Economic Interdependence

Deep economic interdependence between Pakistan and Bangladesh has not been witnessed yet as a result of the expansion of diplomatic ties since 2024. Though trade has improved, direct shipping links have grown and the economic dialogue has restarted, bilateral economic relations are relatively small by Bangladesh's economic relations with India, China, the United States and its other key economic partners.

There had been no high-level talks between the foreign offices of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 15 years until April 2025. Institutional economic and diplomatic engagement between the two countries had remained limited so far. These talks covered trade and investment, agriculture, education, connectivity, and other areas of cooperation (Dawn, 2025).

The limited depth of economic relations represents a potential constraint on Pakistan's efforts to institutionalize the current diplomatic rapprochement because diplomacy is more effective if it is accompanied by commercial and institutional interests. If there are not meaningful investment, partnership, banking, transportation, and trade developments in the private sector, then the current thawing may not be rooted in more than politics.

5. Risk of Geopolitical Misperception

Last but not least, there is a possibility that the growing space for Pakistan's diplomacy will be limited by the manner in which it engages with Bangladesh is received by other regional powers. If Pakistan-Bangladesh cooperation is interpreted primarily through the prism of India-Pakistan strategic competition, the emerging

rapprochement could become entangled in broader regional power rivalries. Pakistan would therefore benefit from framing its engagement with Bangladesh around mutually beneficially economic, social, and regional objectives rather than as an instrument of strategic competition with India.

This is even more important due to the fact that at the same time Pakistan and Bangladesh are actively pursuing relations with China. But Bangladesh has shown interest to keep strategic flexibility instead of being a formal bloc. The post Hasina relationship with Pakistan has also been analyzed with a word of caution by Al Jazeera, that Bangladesh could not be said to be forming a China-Pakistan axis (Hussain, 2025).

As such, Pakistan's diplomatic approach must prioritize regional cooperation and mutual interests over opposition to India as the foundation for improved Pak-Bangladesh relations. This would minimize the risk of strategic mis-perception and help preserve the nation's own foreign policy space.

Regional Implications

The implications of Sheikh Hasina's departure for Pakistan-Bangladesh relations extend beyond the bilateral domain. The enhanced normalization of Islamabad-Dhaka relations happens while Bangladesh is transitioning in India ties and is emerging as an active player in regional politics with its counterparts. As a result, the Pak-Bangladesh rapprochement could have a bearing on the geopolitical integration, economic integration, regional institutions and security landscape of South Asia. These developments are not necessarily a sign of a formal strategic alliance, however. Instead, it is a sign of the two countries trying to diversify their external ties and gain more strategic and economic flexibility (Ahmed & Shabbir, 2014; Mostofa, 2025).

1. **Changing South Asian Geopolitical Dynamics**

The improvement in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations contributes to the gradual evolution of the South Asian geopolitical landscape. Bangladesh has had very tight political, economic and security ties with India for most of the preceding ten years, and Pakistan was much less of a factor in Bangladesh foreign policy calculations. Sheikh Hasina's exit has given Dhaka more opportunity to diversify its diplomatic engagement. Since then, Pakistan has further enhanced its engagement with Bangladesh through the highest level of diplomatic contacts, economic cooperation, connectivity programs, and security exchanges (Mostofa, 2025).

This development could help shape a multipolar scenario in the region where smaller and middle powers try to steer clear from being overly reliant on any one regional power. Bangladesh's interaction with Pakistan can thus be seen as a part of foreign-policy diversification rather than an end to its ties with India. An analysis suggests that Bangladesh is trying to establish ties with various big countries, particularly India, China, Pakistan and U.S more and more. This diversification may give Dhaka more leverage and at the same time open up new diplomatic opportunities for Islamabad (Chatham House, 2025).

2. **Impact on India-Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations**

A possible regional effect of Pak-Bangladesh relations is the improvement of relations with India. The historical relation of Pakistan and Bangladesh with India varies greatly, but the contemporary relation of Pakistan and Bangladesh with India is different. Apart from the geographical, economic, cultural, and security ties, Bangladesh has a huge strategic competition with Pakistan and India has a long-standing competition with Pakistan. Although Bangladesh and Pakistan have historically experienced significant political tensions, their contemporary relationship is increasingly characterized by diplomatic engagement and efforts toward normalization. So, more contact between Islamabad and Dhaka might add another element to India's regional diplomacy.

The developing relationship has already garnered some attention in India as the improvement of Pak-Bangladesh relations could weaken the

influence of New Delhi in Dhaka in the future, while growing Pak-Bangladesh engagement could also change the dynamics of South Asian regional relations. Likewise, Indian strategic analysts have pointed out that Pakistan-Bangladesh military and diplomatic ties could also become a new security threat for India (Sitaraman and Banerji, 2025).

However, it is too early to describe the ties as anti-India. Bangladesh's economic and geographical ties with India can be characterized as significant and Pakistan and Bangladesh have their own economic and political agenda. The more likely scenario is a new regional competitive and interconnected space, where Bangladesh is aiming for strategic autonomy and Pakistan is looking to enhance its diplomatic outreach. Hence it is likely that the development will spur India to show more interest in Bangladesh's economic and security needs and could also help push India towards more involvement in Dhaka (Sitaraman & Banerji, 2025).

3. Implications for China and the Emerging Regional Triangle

The enhancement of the Pak-Bangladesh ties also has implications for China as Beijing has significant economic and strategic relations with both countries. Pakistan is a key stakeholder in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh has also established a robust economic and infrastructural partnership with China. Hence, better cooperation between Islamabad and Dhaka can facilitate more economic engagement between Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. These developments should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a formal China-Pakistan-Bangladesh strategic axis. Rather, it is an overlapping economic and strategic interest that is reflected. There is more flexibility in Dhaka's infrastructure development, trade, investment and connectivity with both Beijing and Islamabad. Bangladesh has more options now for infrastructure, trade, investment and connectivity with both Beijing and Islamabad. In terms of Pakistan, better relationship with Bangladesh may help link the western and northern economic corridors with the markets and maritime routes of the Bay of Bengal. In China, however, there may be a need for more connectivity within its economic community (Bhattacharjee, 2025).

4. Security and Strategic Implications

Security implications of the developing Pak-Bangladesh relationship also exist. Previously, when there was less political engagement, there was a relatively limited scope of defence and intelligence cooperation between the two countries. However, there has been a rise in exchanges and security contacts at the military level since 2024. Bangladesh takes part in maritime exercises and recent developments indicates a gradual expansion of security and defence related contacts between the two countries (Sitaraman & Banerji, 2025).

There could be opportunities for greater security cooperation including information sharing, maritime security, cooperation on counterterrorism, cooperation in disaster response and professional military exchanges. Both countries are interested in the stability in the Indian Ocean and securing their maritime economic interests. There are areas of practical cooperation available for Pakistan which has an experience in maritime security and Bangladesh which has a strategic geo-location in Bay of Bengal.

5. Implications for Regional Power Competition

The larger significance of the Pak-Bangladesh rapprochement is its contribution to the power dynamics shift in South Asia. Geographically, India has been a prime force in the strategic environment in the region and has been strong in all aspects such as economy, military and in diplomatic relation with the neighboring countries. Bangladesh's growing interaction with Pakistan, China and other external actors after the political change in 2024, however, suggests that Dhaka's foreign-policy options are beginning to diversify. Bangladesh, however, seems to be more interested than ever in building relationships with a number of regional partners,

rather than the one primary partner that it initially relied on (Chatham House, 2025).

Another key aspect of the growing regional power balance is China. Beijing has far-reaching economic, infrastructure, trade and defence ties with Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan is a key partner in the BRI program through the CPEC and Bangladesh has recently emerged as an important economic and strategic partner of BRI for China in the Bay of Bengal. As a result, more interactions between China, Pakistan and Bangladesh may create new opportunities in the areas of regional connectivity, investments, maritime cooperation and economic integration (Bajpaee & Jie, 2025).

The trilateral mechanism between China, Pakistan and Bangladesh was also created in June 2025, which further illustrates the growing interaction between the three countries. The mechanism is not formal strategic alliance, but it is a reflection of growing convergence between the two sides on some aspects of diplomacy. The trilateral meeting carries a lot of geopolitical significance as both Pakistan and Bangladesh have already strong ties with China. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has not wanted to be seen as part of an 'anti-India bloc' and the continued relevance of its traditional policy of non-alignment was evident (Rahman, 2025).

Conclusion

The ouster of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 has opened a new chapter in the relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh. This political shift has created space for Pakistan to deepen its ties with Bangladesh. The analysis shows that after Sheikh Hasina left there has been interaction between the two countries on diplomatic matters. There is also renewed focus on cooperation, educational exchanges, cultural programs, better connectivity and security dialogue. This emerging phase should not be interpreted as a fundamental realignment of Bangladesh's external relations towards Pakistan. Rather, it reflects Dhaka's broader effort to diversify its external partnerships while preserving strategic flexibility and autonomy. Bangladesh continues to value its ties with India, China and other global partners. The move toward engagement with Pakistan is not about replacing old alliances but about balancing them. Still several obstacles remain, the memory of the 1971 Liberation War continues to affect sentiment and political discourse in Bangladesh. Many people still view this history through a lens of trauma. At the time India remains a major player in Bangladesh's life geographically, economically and in terms of security. Any progress in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations may be viewed through an India-centered perspective, which could limit cooperation. Domestic politics in Bangladesh are still changes in leadership or public opinion could slow down the momentum. Economic links between Pakistan and Bangladesh are still weak. Trade volumes remain low; investment flows are limited. Without economic glue it will be hard to build a lasting partnership. The possibility of a Pakistan-Bangladesh alliance being interpreted as directed against India might also make some stakeholders cautious. Therefore, the study concludes that Pakistan should not aim for a strategic alignment with Bangladesh. Instead, Pakistan must use the diplomatic opening to build deep sustainable connections. This includes focusing on trade, investment, education, healthcare, agriculture, cultural events, infrastructure projects and practical security cooperation. Pakistan must also handle issues with care through consistent dialogue and respect for Bangladesh's sensitivities. On a level improved Pakistan-Bangladesh ties could lead to a more balanced and competitive South Asian region. A stronger bilateral relationship may give Bangladesh room to act independently in foreign policy. It could also encourage both India and China to rethink how they engage with Dhaka. However, this does not mean an anti-India bloc is forming. Does it signal a formal China-Pakistan-Bangladesh alliance. Rather it points to a shift toward a more pluralistic regional order one where Bangladesh seeks greater independence and Pakistan aims to broaden its diplomatic reach. Ultimately the success of this rapprochement depends on turning opportunity into long-term reality. The post-Hasina period has given Pakistan a chance to

reconnect with Bangladesh. Building a strong partnership will take time. Success requires patience, realism, sensitivity to history and a genuine commitment, to benefits. Then can the diplomatic window open today become a durable bridge tomorrow.

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