

The Effects of Geopolitical Competition on Local and National Conflict Tensions in Bangladesh: Politics & Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With its strategic location and economic potential, Bangladesh is a hotspot for geopolitical competition, impacting infrastructure, crisis management, and democratic processes. The country is transitioning from a least developed to a developing nation by 2026, undertaking ambitious projects requiring external support. Choices like the Japan-funded Matarbari seaport over the China-funded Sonadia seaport highlight geopolitical maneuvering. Geopolitical competition also influences elections, as seen in the 2024 general election. This study examines these influences on local and national conflict tensions, focusing on infrastructure and democratic processes.

This research uses desk and secondary-level assessments, data analysis from the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO), and targeted interviews with key stakeholders. The desk analysis reviews literature and policy documents, while the BPO provides data on violent and non-violent incidents since 2012. Ten interviews with policymakers, officials, experts, civil society representatives, and community leaders in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar enrich the quantitative analysis and contextual findings.

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has experienced political instability despite some regime stability, most notably from 2008 to 2024 under Sheikh Hasina's government. While this period saw significant economic growth and development, political violence remained prevalent, with over 400 annual deaths from political unrest since 1971. Key events like the assassinations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina in 2004 illustrate the violent nature of Bangladesh's political landscape.

Bangladesh's politics are dominated by the rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), with the military playing a critical role in maintaining regime stability. From 2009 to 2024, the alliance between the AL and the military (Cantonment) ensured regime continuity, marginalizing the BNP. However, in August 2024, widespread protests led by students and driven by economic grievances ended Hasina's 15-year rule.

The political landscape is shaped by deeply entrenched "mega-identities," primarily rooted in the historical conflict between the AL and BNP. This has led to recurring violence during elections, as evidenced by the rising number of electoral incidents between 2013 and 2024. Despite efforts to create peaceful elections through caretaker governments, violence persisted, reflecting Bangladesh's polarized politics.

Internal and external pressures also shape the country's electoral dynamics. Externally, countries like India, China, Russia, and the US seek influence, exacerbating political divisions. Internally, polarization between the AL and BNP has eroded trust in democratic institutions, with the opposition's focus on demands for a caretaker government failing to gain public support. Economic challenges, youth protests, and the concentration of power in the ruling elite have further complicated the political scene, ultimately leading to Hasina's resignation.

Bangladesh's infrastructure development involves securing support from diverse sources, intersecting with geopolitical and local dynamics. Projects like the Padma Bridge faced delays and controversies, illustrating challenges in international joint ventures. Regime stability has facilitated ambitious projects like the 'Mega Road Network' and the 'Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) 2023.' However, stability can lead to governance complacency, resulting in funding crises, delays, and corruption. Effective oversight and governance are essential to mitigate these risks.

The Padma Bridge project, essential for national connectivity, faced challenges, including the withdrawal of World Bank funding due to corruption allegations. The government financed the project domestically, highlighting its strategic autonomy. The Teesta River issue remains unresolved, complicated by local dynamics and regional politics. Bangladesh's alternatives, like the proposed water storage project with China's support, illustrate multipolarity's potential in resolving disputes. India's interest in financing Bangladesh's Teesta Project suggests a possible tripartite collaboration.

Bangladesh's deep seaport projects, particularly Matarbari, highlight the broader geopolitical competition between major powers. Japan's support for Matarbari aligns with its Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's regional influence. Meanwhile, the stalled Sonadia seaport, initially backed by China, reflects India's security concerns. These projects illustrate Bangladesh's careful balancing act between economic benefits and geopolitical risks, underscoring the complex interplay of local, national, and international interests.

Globalization and multipolarity have shifted geopolitics from conflict to cooperation, a shift Bangladesh should embrace. Historically, geopolitics was driven by territorial competition, but those ideas have become outdated with decolonization and global interconnectedness. Bangladesh, facing polarized internal politics, must rebuild trust among its political parties, focusing on its people rather than external influences. Developmental partnerships, like the Padma Bridge, showcase Bangladesh's ability to foster inclusive cooperation with multiple nations, transcending security concerns. This collaborative approach is also evident in its infrastructure projects, where countries like China, Japan, India, South Korea, and many other countries work together despite political tensions, underscoring the potential for cooperation in overcoming mistrust.



1.INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Bangladesh has become a focal point of intense geopolitical competition within the South Asia region, attracting the interest of both global and regional powers. The country's strategic location, economic growth potential, abundant cheap labor, and youthful population make it a key player in maritime trade and regional dynamics. However, Bangladesh faces significant challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, political instability, corruption, partisan conflicts, and the growing threat of extremism.

The geopolitical competition influences various aspects of Bangladesh's internal affairs, particularly infrastructure development, crisis management, and democratic processes. This study explores these influences through case studies on infrastructure projects and electoral dynamics, shedding light on how external powers shape local and national conflicts. As Bangladesh transitions from a least developed country (LDC) to a developing nation by 2026, it has embarked on ambitious mega-projects requiring external financial support and technical expertise. The involvement of international lenders and regional powers often intersects with local dynamics, leading to complex outcomes.

For instance, the choice of Japan-funded Matarbari seaport over China-funded Sonadia seaport, citing environmental concerns, reflects geopolitical maneuvering. Geopolitical competition also impacts Bangladesh's democratic processes, as external actors seek to influence elections to advance their strategic interests. The recent general election in January 2024 highlighted this, with global powers exerting influence, leading to heightened political divisions and partisan violence.

This study comprehensively analyzes the indirect effects of geopolitical competition on Bangladesh's local and national conflict tensions, focusing on infrastructure development and democratic processes. The insights gained aim to inform strategic interventions for promoting peace, stability, and democratic governance in Bangladesh and beyond.

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This study aims to identify the indirect effects of geopolitical competition on local and national conflict tensions in Bangladesh. It analyzes how this competition impacts infrastructure development and examines its influence on elections and democracy in the country.



2.METHODS

The research methodology for assessing the effects of geopolitical competition on local and national conflict tensions in Bangladesh employs a multi-faceted approach to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The methods include desk and secondary-level assessments, the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) analysis, and targeted interviews with key stakeholders.

The foundation of this research is established through an extensive desk analysis and secondary-level assessment. This phase involves a thorough review of existing literature, reports, and policy documents relevant to the effects of geopolitical competition on conflict tensions in Bangladesh. Sources include:

- Government policy documents
- Academic studies
- Reports from think tanks
- Media coverage

The objective is to comprehensively understand the subject by synthesizing insights from diverse sources. This approach helps identify knowledge gaps, highlight key themes, and set the context for further investigation.

A critical component of this study is analyzing data from the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). The BPO is a robust dataset that documents over 200,000 unique entries of violent and non-violent incidents in Bangladesh from 2012 to the present. The dataset is categorized into twenty-six distinct types of events, providing a nuanced classification system.

The study incorporates targeted interviews with key stakeholders to complement the desk analysis and BPO data. A total of ten interviews are conducted, focusing on three primary themes: i. State of Politics & ii. State of Development. The interviews were conducted in two locations: Dhaka and Cox's Bazar. The stakeholders were selected to represent diverse perspectives and expertise, including policymakers, government officials, academic experts, civil society representatives, and community leaders. The study used semi-structured interview protocols to extract in-depth insights into how geopolitical competition affects local and national conflict tensions. The interviews provided qualitative data that enriched the quantitative analysis from the BPO and contextual findings from the desk analysis.



3.STATE OF POLITICS

3.1 Political stability versus regime stability

Bangladesh has never had political stability since its birth in 1971. It had regime stability for the first time from January 2008 to 5 August 2024, which allowed the government to carry out several durable social, economic, and mega-developmental projects. Not surprisingly, it succeeded in making a positive impression on the country globally for initiating a 'developmental model' or 'South Asian miracle'! Whether protracted regime stability would contribute to political stability remains an open question or an issue to be witnessed. Bangladesh is no exception in this conditionality. Nepal, for instance, has changed its Constitution on average every ten years since endorsing the first Constitution in January 1948.² Italy's political instability is no different. Since the end of World War II in 1945, Italy has had 69 governments, which on average comes to one every 1.11 years.³ Still, a distinct part of Bangladesh would be the violence meted out during the protracted phase of political instability. This not only included the political violence on the streets, which killed over 3000 in the first three years of Bangladesh's independence,⁴ and 1028 between 2013-2017,⁵ and another 951 in the last five years between 2018-2022.⁶ This would mean that, on average, nearly 400 people died in political violence annually since its independence in 1971. But then, some of the deaths were horrifying and tragic. The brutal killing of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with his family members, on 15 August 1975 stands out as one of the darkest chapters in the history of Bangladesh. Equally gruesome was the grenade attack on the then opposition leader, now prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, on 21 August 2004, which killed 24 people and injured more than 300 others.⁷

Despite such violence, the question that merits attention is what has contributed to regime stability since December 2008. The answer lies in understanding Bangladesh politics in four alphabets – ABCD. A and B are easy to recognize. A stands for Awami League (AL), and B for Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It is important to note that so long there is A in Bangladesh, there will also be an anti-A, which is currently B, making our alphabetical composition easier. But then, the military - C or Cantonment - is equally vital in Bangladesh. This is not only because C captured governmental power and governed Bangladesh directly for 15 years (1975-1990) and indirectly for two years (2006-2008) but also because it is a critical force reproducing the state. In this alphabetical order, D is the "democrats, dreamers, and dumb" broadly, the general public, but often referred to as samaj or civil society in narrow terms.

In this configuration, if two of the alphabets are together, then the third one cannot do anything. From January 2009 to 5 August 2024, A and C were together, so B could not do anything. Earlier, B and C were together, so A could not do anything. When C and A were together during the Ershad period (1983-1990), B could not do anything. At one point in Bangladesh's history, A and B got together (anti-Ershad movement), so C had to retreat. This led to the fall of Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1990. Here, only D can change things provided they become active and come on the streets in millions against the incumbent government, indeed, in such a massive number that compels C to notify whoever is in power: "Sorry, we can't be with you any longer"! This led to the configuration being changed, as it happened on 5 August 2024. However, after the changeover, D or the "democrats and dreamers" becomes the 'dumb' as the regime in power aligns more closely once again with C, and D achieves the least, if not nothing. This time, unless drastic reforms are made, the D may end up yet again with nothing!

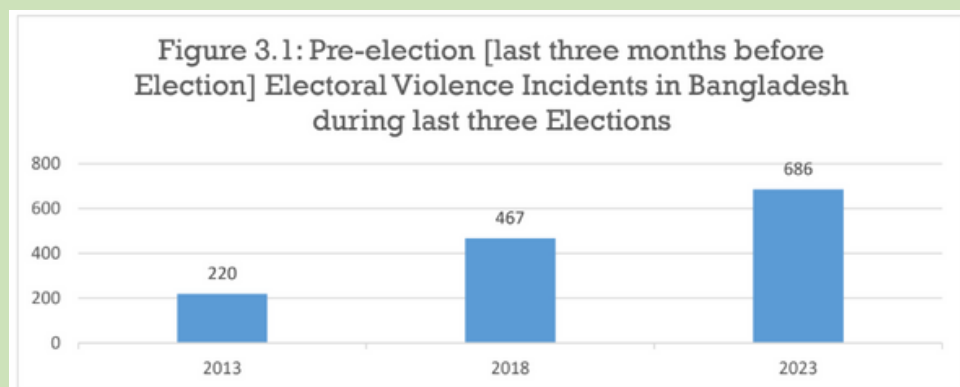
The regime stability since January 2009 was primarily the result of the alignment between A and C. One must quickly point out that D or the general public did not find solid reasons to come out on the streets in millions, even though national elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024 did not meet international standards, according to many critics. One reason, interestingly, could be the public's understanding of democracy. In a massive survey in five South Asian countries in 2004-2005, when the question was asked about the meaning of democracy, 40 percent of South Asian masses responded by saying, "basic necessities" or food, clothing, health, and shelter.⁸ Only 17 percent said election or "power to change the government." In Bangladesh's case, 52 percent said "basic necessities," much higher than the South Asian average, and only 13 percent said, election, which remains lower than the South Asian average. This could be one clue why the Sri Lankans came out on the streets in thousands despite having free and fair elections and forcefully entered the President's House to force the Rajapakse government to resign. Lack of having access to "basic necessities" certainly played a role. Contrariwise, the same could be the reason why the opposition parties in Bangladesh failed to attract the support of the masses for keeping their campaign only on the "election" and not on how they would make a difference from the ruling party on the question of "basic necessities," which the latter has been relatively successful in addressing. However, the anti-quota movement, spearheaded by general students, made a difference, finally leading to the Hasina regime's fall on 5 August 2024.

The regime stability in January 2009 – 5 August 2024 was primarily the result of the alignment between A and C, as indicated earlier. However, the events of July-August 2024 highlighted the fragile nature of this stability. Amidst escalating protests and rising dissatisfaction with Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian rule, D finally mobilized on an unprecedented scale, leading to the ousting of Hasina after 15 years in power.⁹ The protests, which began as a reaction to abolishing the quota system, including economic grievances, quickly evolved into a broader rejection of Hasina's governance, culminating in her resignation and flight to India. This marked a dramatic end to her tenure and questioned the sustainability of regime stability without genuine political inclusivity and responsiveness. The military's role in this transition also underscored the enduring influence of C, further complicating the prospects for D and the future political stability in Bangladesh.

3.2 Politics of mega-identities

In Bangladesh, the landscape of politics is characterized by the dominance of mega-identities, primarily embodied in the two major political platforms led by the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).¹⁰ These mega-identities are deeply rooted in historical narratives, including differing perspectives on pivotal events such as the 1971 liberation war, the genocide of that year, and the subsequent political upheavals. The polarizing nature of these identities has led to a political climate marked by intolerance, mistrust, and recurring violence, especially surrounding national elections.

The cycle of electoral violence in Bangladesh underscores the contentious nature of its political landscape. Figure 3.1 illustrates the escalation of electoral violence incidents in Bangladesh during the last three elections. In 2013, there were 220 reported incidents, followed by 467 in 2018 and a further increase to 686 in 2023. This data underscores a concerning trend of rising electoral violence in the period leading up to elections in Bangladesh.



Source: Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka, 25 April 2024¹¹

Despite efforts to ensure fair elections through various caretaker government systems, instances of violence have persisted, casting doubt on the effectiveness of such mechanisms.¹² The introduction of caretaker governments aimed to mitigate violence and ensure free and fair elections. However, over time, these systems became embroiled in political maneuvering and manipulation, further exacerbating tensions between opposing political factions.

One prevailing myth surrounding the caretaker government system is that it fosters peaceful elections and promotes political tolerance among major parties.¹³ However, empirical evidence suggests otherwise, with opposition parties' frequency of parliamentary boycotts steadily increasing over successive administrations. In fact, it has increased progressively for the worse, from 34 percent in the 5th Parliament, 43 percent in the 7th Parliament, 60 percent in the 8th Parliament, and 83.38 percent in the 9th Parliament in 2009-2014.¹⁴ This trend underscores the deep-seated divisions and entrenches mega-identities within Bangladesh's political landscape. The notion that national elections conducted under the Caretaker Government (CTG) are inherently peaceful is unfounded. Except for the 9th Parliamentary Election in 2008, held under a military-backed CTG, previous national polls have been marred by violence. (Figure 3.2). For instance, the 8th Parliamentary Election in 2001 witnessed a staggering 248 violent deaths. Interestingly, despite being overseen by a military-backed CTG, the 9th Parliamentary Election in 2008 recorded the lowest death toll at 21, compared to the 49 deaths in the 5th Parliamentary Election of 1991.

Furthermore, the 10th Parliamentary Election in 2014, conducted under an elected incumbent government, experienced 142 deaths, still fewer than the violence seen in the CTG-backed 8th Parliamentary Election of 2001. These statistics are based on a comprehensive mapping of electoral violence spanning four weeks, including three weeks before and one week after Election Day. Even in the recent 12th Parliamentary Election, held under the elected incumbent government and analyzed over ten weeks, there were 30 deaths, significantly lower than those recorded in the 5th Parliamentary Election of 1991. Even when considering electoral violence from October 28, 2023, when significant violence erupted in Dhaka, the overall death toll remained lower than that of the 2001 Parliamentary Election, with a total of 44 deaths. (Figure 3.3). It is crucial to note that each loss of life is deeply tragic, particularly for the affected families. However, numerical data on deaths, injuries, and incidents provide a necessary basis for comparison when evaluating the scale of electoral violence.

Figure 3.2 Electoral violence during Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh (1991-2024)¹⁵

Inter-party election violence				All other election-related violence
Elections	Incidents	Deaths	Injuries	Overall Death
5 th Parliamentary Election 1991	39	31	590	49
6 th Parliamentary Election 1996 (15 February)	56	18	1382	51
7 th Parliamentary Election 1996 (15 June)	51	27	979	45
8 th Parliamentary Election 2001	345	150	9174	248
9 th Parliamentary Election 2008	73	10	836	21
10 th Parliamentary Election 2014	77	41	2603	142
11 th Parliamentary Election 2018	175	33	2537	61
12 th Parliamentary Election 2024	-	07	-	30

Source: Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka, 25 April 2024.

Figure 3.3 Electoral violence from 28 October 2023 to 11 January 2024¹⁶

Motives	Inter-party tensions	Intra-party tensions	Other political issues	Grand Total
28-Oct			2	2
29-Oct	1		1	2
31-Oct			4	4
2-Nov	1	1		2
4-Nov	2			2
11-Nov	1			1
12-Nov			1	1
18-Nov			1	1
21-Nov		1	2	3
23-Nov			1	1
4-Dec	1			1
5-Dec			1	1
11-Dec			2	2
13-Dec			1	1
18-Dec			1	1
19-Dec			5	5
23-Dec			1	1
29-Dec		1		1
30-Dec		1		1
03-Jan	1			1
04-Jan	1			1
05-Jan			4	4
07-Jan	2			2
08-Jan	1			1
09-Jan			1	1
11-Jan	1			1
Grand Total	12	4	28	44
Three weeks before and one week after the election day.	7	3	20	30

Source: Bangladesh Peace Observatory, Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka, 25 April 2024.

The entrenched nature of mega-identities poses significant challenges to the democratic process in Bangladesh. Ideological compromises are often overshadowed by rigid adherence to partisan positions, leading to further polarization and political gridlock. After months of escalating protests, the ousting of PM Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 further highlighted the deeply ingrained divisions within the country's political landscape. The fall of Hasina, who had long been a central figure in the AL's identity, disrupted the balance of power between the mega-identities, leaving a vacuum and raising concerns about the future direction of the country's politics.

Addressing mega-identity politics requires a multifaceted approach encompassing institutional reforms and cultural interventions. Electoral reforms, such as expanding parliamentary representation and introducing a two-tier election system, aim to enhance the accuracy and inclusivity of people's representation. Additionally, implementing specific criteria for nomination based on adherence to constitutional principles and recognition of historical events can help foster a more accountable and responsible political culture. Furthermore, cultural interventions are crucial in reshaping national narratives and promoting unity beyond partisan divides. Mainstreaming cultural discourse that celebrates the spirit of the 1971 liberation war, zero tolerance to regime-led corruption, and emphasizes national unity can help counteract divisive narratives and mitigate the influence of sectarian identities.

3.3 National election 2024: internal and external pressures

Geopolitical competition significantly impacts Bangladesh's electoral process and democratic institutions, influencing the country's political landscape and stability. External actors, including neighboring countries and global powers, often seek to influence Bangladesh's elections to advance their regional strategic interests.¹⁷ The electoral process in Bangladesh was under the microscope in the recent general election in January 2024, in which the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), along with many other smaller parties, boycotted the election, citing distrust of the incumbent Awami League (AL) government's ability to host a fair election.¹⁸ But there could also be other reasons, including BNP's leadership, with the top two coming from the same family being convicted and unable to participate in the election. The election drew widespread attention globally as it became a geopolitical tug-of-war between Western powers, including the US and the EU and India, China, Russia, and Japan.¹⁹ The geopolitical competition exacerbated political divisions, heightening tensions between political parties and their supporters and partisan violence. The "India Out" campaign gained traction across the social media platforms in Bangladesh among the supporters of the BNP following the allegations that India interfered in Bangladesh's election.²⁰ Similarly, anti-US and pro-Russian sentiments prevailed among the supporters of the incumbent government.

3.4 Internal Pressure

Within Bangladesh, the dynamics surrounding the 2024 national election are marked by internal pressures that significantly influence the electoral landscape. Foremost among these pressures is the enduring political polarization between the two dominant parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This polarization created a deeply divided electorate and fostered an atmosphere of antagonism and mistrust, making conducting a fair and inclusive electoral process increasingly challenging.²¹

Critics argued that excessive external involvement worsened internal divisions, increased the risk of violence, and undermined trust in domestic institutions.²² There were also concerns about political parties relying on foreign support to gain power. Despite facing real-life issues such as economic woes, inflation, and corruption, the opposition parties focused primarily on the demand for a caretaker government. This stance proved to be less popular with the public. Despite organizing significant street protests on October 28, 2023, the BNP's efforts to persuade the electorate to boycott the election were unsuccessful.²³ The subsequent fatal partisan violence after October 28 further harmed the BNP's reputation, as their apparent use of violent tactics seemed to erode public trust. The BNP appeared to rely more on external actions, such as the anticipated sanctions by the US, rather than actively participating in the electoral process. The party also suffered from organizational weaknesses, operating abroad while many key leaders were imprisoned. Additionally, thousands of party members were arrested and harassed through 'political cases,' further hampering their ability to campaign effectively.

The ousting of PM Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 culminated these internal pressures. Months of mounting youth protests, economic challenges, and political polarization led to a tipping point where the ruling party could no longer maintain control. The intense dissatisfaction with the ruling party, particularly its role in cracking down on student protests, created a scenario where Sheikh Hasina was forced to step down. Her resignation marked a significant shift in Bangladesh's political landscape, raising concerns about future stability and the potential for continued internal conflict amid hope for a less dictatorial and more tolerant democratic polity.

Furthermore, the erosion of democratic values within the ruling party, including allegations of authoritarian tendencies and a disregard for democratic norms, further complicates the electoral landscape. The concentration of power within the ruling elite and the marginalization of alternative voices contribute to disillusionment among citizens, who might feel increasingly alienated from the political process.

Finally, the internal pressures facing Bangladesh's 2024 national election are multifaceted and deeply entrenched within the country's political landscape. From political polarization and opposition marginalization to the erosion of democratic values and the emergence of youth activism, these pressures collectively shaped the electoral dynamics. They presented significant challenges to consolidating democratic governance in the country.

3.5 External Pressure

Externally, Bangladesh's electoral landscape is influenced by a myriad of pressures stemming from the interests and interventions of major global powers. The central external pressure is the scrutiny and intervention of countries such as the United States, India, and the European Union, which closely monitor the state of democracy and human rights within Bangladesh. These international actors have expressed concerns about the fairness and transparency of the electoral process, issuing warnings of punitive actions and potential sanctions in response to perceived violations of democratic norms.²⁴

The involvement of external powers in Bangladesh's domestic affairs further complicates the electoral landscape, undermining national sovereignty and autonomy. The United States exerted significant external pressure on Bangladesh's electoral landscape through diplomatic statements and policy actions during the 2024 election. It announced the polls were 'not free and fair.'²⁵ The US expressed concerns about issues such as political violence, intimidation, and restrictions on opposition parties. The US urged Bangladesh to uphold democratic norms and ensure free and fair elections through diplomatic channels and public statements. Additionally, the US threatened punitive measures, including sanctions and visa restrictions, against individuals and entities deemed responsible for undermining democratic principles.²⁶ This external pressure from the US contributed to the scrutiny and tensions surrounding Bangladesh's electoral process.

India's role in exerting external pressure on Bangladesh's electoral landscape was influenced by historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties between the two countries. Indian officials closely monitored the electoral process and supported democracy and stability in Bangladesh despite concerns about democratic 'backsliding.'²⁷ India sent observer teams during the 2024 election to monitor the electoral process despite many countries, including the US and the EU, declining to do so.²⁸ Moreover, India's bilateral relations with Bangladesh, including economic cooperation and infrastructure development projects like the Rampal Power Plant and Khulna-Mongla Port Rail Line, India's trust in the AL government, particularly in resolving the security threat in northeast India, and the overall regional stability might have played a role behind the Indian government's support.

On the contrary, Russia's role in exerting external pressure on Bangladesh's electoral landscape was framed by a stance of non-interference. Russian officials criticized Western countries, particularly the United States, for alleged attempts to meddle in Bangladesh's internal affairs under the guise of promoting democratic values.²⁹ Russia emphasized respecting Bangladesh's sovereignty and territorial integrity while advocating for bilateral cooperation and mutual respect. The relations between both countries reignited following Dhaka's abstention in UNGA's Ukraine vote and the ongoing Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant.

China's role in exerting external pressure on Bangladesh's electoral landscape was characterized by a stance of non-interference in domestic affairs.³⁰ While maintaining close economic and diplomatic ties with Bangladesh, China refrained from overtly criticizing the electoral process or intervening in the country's internal politics. Instead, China emphasized cooperation and bilateral relations, particularly in infrastructure development projects, trade, and investment.

Finally, the external pressures facing Bangladesh's 2024 national election reflect a complex interplay of diplomatic, geopolitical, and economic factors. From diplomatic scrutiny and intervention to regional rivalries and strategic alliances, these external pressures shaped the electoral landscape and presented significant challenges to the consolidation of democratic governance in Bangladesh. Balancing domestic aspirations with external expectations and navigating complex international relations will be crucial for Bangladesh's leadership in the post-election period.



4. STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

As Bangladesh transitions from a least developed country (LDC) to a developing country by achieving the status by 2026,³¹ the government has embarked on multiple ambitious mega-projects in recent years to sustain its momentum of rapid economic growth. These projects, such as the Matarbari deep seaport, Padma multipurpose bridge, Rooppur nuclear power plant, Rampal power plant, Dhaka metro rail, and Bangabandhu tunnel, are pivotal for the country's infrastructural development and economic advancement.³² However, Bangladesh often requires external financial support and technical expertise to execute these mega-projects successfully. Consequently, international lending agencies such as the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), New Development Bank (NDB), dominant Western powers, the US, the UK, and the EU, as well as the regional powers, India, China, Japan, compete to exert influence on the Bangladesh government in the domains of infrastructure and development.³³

4.1 Geopolitical Influences and Local Dynamics in Mega-Development Projects

The competing interests often shape the direction and pace of crucial infrastructure projects. So far, Bangladesh has adopted a cautious infrastructure development strategy by seeking financial support and technical expertise from several sources. However, geopolitical maneuvering often intersects with local and national dynamics within Bangladesh, leading to complex outcomes.³⁴ For instance, Bangladesh, citing environmental implications, opted for the Japan-funded Matarbari seaport instead of the China-funded Sonadia deep seaport.³⁵ The critics, however, argue that the strategically located Sonadia deep seaport at Sonadia island in Cox's Bazar would have been a security risk for neighboring India.³⁶ The alleged corruption and the withdrawal of funding for the Padma multipurpose bridge from the World Bank created tensions between rival political parties and confusion among the public.³⁷ The delays in the execution of the project also resulted in absurd rumors, fake news, and mob violence.³⁸ The potential environmental risk of the India-facilitated Rampal power plant also faced protests and objections from opposition political parties and environmental activists.³⁹ Additionally, the joint ventures between Bangladesh and funding countries sometimes created hostility between the workers of Bangladesh and the project funding country. A Chinese worker was killed and multiple injured in sporadic deadly clashes in June 2019 between Bangladeshi and Chinese workers following the death of a Bangladeshi worker inside the project area at the Payra power plant in Patuakhali.⁴⁰

4.2 Regime stability and mega-developmental projects

Regime stability is crucial in successfully implementing mega-projects in Bangladesh by providing a consistent policy environment and long-term vision essential for such large-scale undertakings. This stability has enabled the government to undertake ambitious plans in various sectors, such as the 'Mega Road Network' to become South Asia's trade hub, which aims to be completed by 2041 and includes cross-country expressways, river bridges, and tunnels (see Table 4.1).⁴¹ Additionally, the government has initiated the 'Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) 2023' supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and The Institute of Energy Economics, Japan (IEEJ) to increase and diversify power generation, addressing the demands of various special economic zones under construction across Bangladesh (See, Table 4.3).⁴² Bangladesh is also undertaking several major energy projects to boost its power generation capacity. The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, its first, is 77% complete and will have a capacity of 2400 MW, with entire operations expected by June 2027. The Matarbari Power Plant in Cox's Bazar, with a capacity of 1200 MW, is 95% complete, and its first unit began trial operations in July 2023. A second nuclear plant is also proposed close to the Rooppur one. The Payra Thermal Power Plant, the country's largest at 1320 MW, was inaugurated in March 2022. The 1350 MW Banshkhali Power Plant is under construction. An underground power distribution system spanning 1001 km is also being developed in Dhaka and Narayanganj for \$2.5 billion. (See, Table 4.2)

Regime stability has allowed the Bangladesh government to effectively mobilize resources, maintain investor confidence, and ensure that strategic projects align with national development goals. For instance, the stability provided by the current government has been instrumental in advancing projects like the Dhaka metro rail and the Rooppur nuclear power plant. These projects have succeeded, with Bangladesh entering the age of nuclear energy, a milestone achieved by only a few developing countries.⁴³ The newly inaugurated metro rail line has also become very popular among city dwellers in Dhaka despite high production costs and multiple construction delays.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the current government's ability to attract significant foreign investment and secure technical expertise from countries like Japan for the Matarbari deep seaport and India for the Rampal power plant demonstrates how regime stability can facilitate international collaborations critical for these ventures.

Table 4.1: List of Bangladesh Megaprojects- Road and Highways

Project	Location	Route	Length (km)	Status	Cost (USD Billion)	Traffic	Notes
Karnaphuli Tunnel	Chittagong, Karnaphuli River	Dhaka-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar	3.32	Completed	1.2	Underwater Road Tunnel	First underwater tunnel in South Asia, part of Dhaka-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar highway network. Opened in October 2023.
Dhaka Elevated Expressway	Dhaka	Shahjalal Airport-Banani-Tejgaon-Mogbazar-Kamalapur-Chittagong Road	19.73	78% completed	1.63	Expressway	Construction began in 2011, expected to be completed by late June 2024. The work is divided into 3 sections.
Chittagong Elevated Expressway	Chittagong	-	18	80% completed	4	Expressway	-
Dhaka Chittagong Expressway	Dhaka - Chittagong	-	217	Approved	-	Expressway	-
BRT Line 3	Dhaka	Gazipur-Airport-Mohakhali-Ramna-Gulistan-Keraniganj-Jhilmil	22.4	70% completed	-	Bus Rapid Transit	-
BRT Line 7	Dhaka, Narayanganj	Kamargaon-Narayanganj	34	Proposed	-	Bus Rapid Transit	-
Dhaka Inner Ring Road	Dhaka	-	88	Proposed	-	Road	-
Dhaka Outer Ring Road	Dhaka	-	132	Proposed	-	Road	-
Bus Route Rationalization	Dhaka	n/a	n/a	Proposed	-	Road Transport	DTCA

However, regime stability can lead to complacency and unchecked governance, resulting in funding crises, implementation delays, and potential corruption. The Padma multipurpose bridge, for example, faced significant delays and funding issues following allegations of corruption, which led to the withdrawal of World Bank support. Despite eventually securing alternative financing and completing the project, the initial setbacks underscored the challenges of maintaining transparency and accountability.⁴⁵ Another illustrative case is the Rampal power plant, which has been controversial due to environmental concerns and opposition from various quarters.⁴⁶ Environmental activists and opposition political parties have protested against the potential ecological impact on the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁴⁷ These protests have led to delays and increased scrutiny, highlighting issues in project management and the need for thorough environmental assessments.

Table 4.2: List of Bangladesh Megaprojects - Energy Projects

Project	Location	Capacity (MW)	Status	Cost (USD Billion)	Notes
Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant	Ishwardi, Pabna District	2400	77% completed	12.65	First nuclear power plant in Bangladesh. First unit expected in 2024, second by 2025. Complete operational extension date to June 2027.
Matarbari Power Plant	Cox's Bazar	1200	95% completed	N/A	First unit began operation on a trial basis in July 2023.
Nuclear Power Plant	Ishwardi, Pabna District	-	Proposed	-	On April 2, 2024, PM Hasina urges ROSATOM to set up another nuclear power plant at Rooppur.
Payra Thermal Power Plant	Patuakhali, Payra	1320	Completed	2.48	Largest power plant in Bangladesh. Inaugurated by PM Sheikh Hasina on March 21, 2022.
Banshkhali Power Plant	Banshkhali, Chattogram	1350	Under construction	-	-
Underground Power Distribution System	Dhaka, Narayanganj	1001 km	Under Construction	2.5	Includes setting up 40 substations and moving overhead cables.

The Payra power plant also exemplifies the complexities associated with mega-projects. In June 2019, clashes between Bangladeshi and Chinese workers indicated difficulties in managing labor relations and cultural differences within international joint ventures. Such incidents can disrupt project timelines and harm diplomatic relations.

Table 4.3: List of Bangladesh Megaprojects - Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

Project	Location	Status	Cost (USD Billion)	Notes
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar	Mirsarai, Chittagong	70% completed	4.2	Largest industrial city in Bangladesh, covering 30,000 acres. Expected to create over 1.5 million jobs.
Moheshkhali Economic Zone	Moheshkhali Island	Under construction	-	-
Mirsarai Economic Zone	Mirsarai, Chittagong	Under construction	-	Part of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar.
Araihazar Japanese Economic Zone	Araihazar, Narayanganj	Under construction	-	Joint venture between Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) and Sumitomo Corporation. Expected to be completed by 2024.
Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone	Anwara, Chittagong	Under construction	-	-
Korean Export Processing Zone	Anwara, Chittagong	Under construction	-	Joint venture between BEZA and Youngone Corporation.
Indian Economic Zone	Mongla, Bagerhat	Under construction	-	-

Moreover, the ambitious Bangabandhu tunnel project under the Karnaphuli River, intended to enhance connectivity in the Chattogram region, has faced challenges. Reports of cost overruns and delays due to technical difficulties and insufficient planning had raised concerns about the project's viability and the effective use of resources.⁴⁸

Table 4.4: List of Bangladesh Megaprojects - Airports

Project	Type	Location	Status	Cost (USD Billion)	Notes
Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Terminal 3	International airport	Dhaka	90% completed	2.5	Expansion includes a passenger terminal (226,000 m ²), VVIP complex (5,900 m ²), cargo building (41,200 m ²), and multi-level car park with a tunnel. Passenger capacity will increase to 24 million from 8 million annually. Cargo capacity will increase to 500,000 from 200,000 tonnes annually. Completion by October 2024.
Cox's Bazar Airport Expansion Project	International airport	Cox's Bazar, Chittagong	80% completed	0.3	Once completed, it will be the fourth international airport in Bangladesh. Expected completion by mid-2024.
Osmani International Airport Expansion Project	International airport	Sylhet	10% completed	0.255	Post completion, the passenger capacity will increase to 2 million per annum from the current capacity of 600,000.

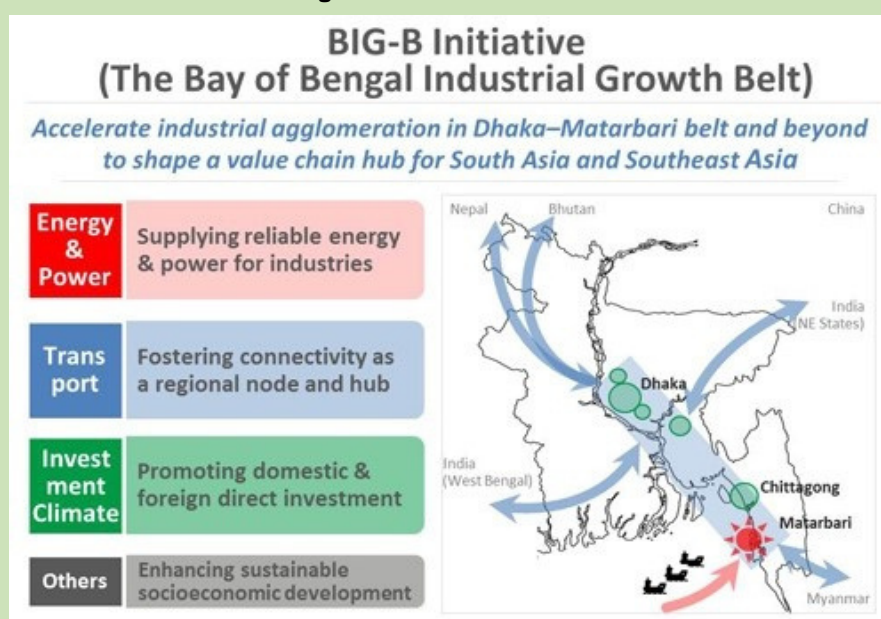
These examples illustrate that while regime stability is essential for initiating and maintaining momentum in mega-projects, it must be accompanied by robust oversight and governance mechanisms. Without these, the risks of corruption, inefficiency, and environmental degradation can undermine the potential benefits of these large-scale investments. Ensuring transparency, enforcing strict regulatory standards, and engaging with local communities are critical steps in realizing the full potential of Bangladesh's mega-developmental projects while safeguarding public trust and sustainable development goals.

4.3 Deep Seaports and Competing Interests

Developing deep seaports in Bangladesh aimed at enhancing its trade capabilities and regional connectivity has been a critical component of the country's infrastructure strategy as Bangladesh did not have a deep seaport for a long time and, therefore, could not host big vessels for exports and imports. However, the deep seaport projects have been at the center of competing interests, both domestically and internationally, reflecting the broader geopolitical dynamics in South Asia. The most notable projects in this regard are the under-construction Matarbari deep seaport (see Table 4.5) and the scrapped Sonadia deep seaport, each influenced by different geopolitical players and strategic considerations.⁴⁹

The Matarbari deep seaport in Cox's Bazar has been funded primarily by Japan through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The project includes a port, a coal-fired power plant, and an industrial zone. The total investment in the Matarbari project is estimated to be around \$4.51 billion, with significant financial and technical support from Japan.⁵⁰ The Matarbari seaport is also part of Japan's Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative, launched in 2014 (See Figure 4.1). The BIG-B was announced during the summit between Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Sheikh Hasina, during which Japan pledged 600 billion Yen (around US\$6 billion) in ODA loans over 4 to 5 years.⁵¹ BIG-B aims to leverage Bangladesh's strategic geographical position between South and Southeast Asia. The initiative focuses on building economic infrastructure, improving the investment climate, and fostering connectivity, utilizing Japan's advanced technologies and development experience. BIG-B envisions transforming Bangladesh into a regional financial hub by integrating it into inter-regional and global value chains while complementing existing regional cooperation frameworks.

Figure 4.1: The BIG-B Initiative



The Matarbari seaport project is strategically important for several reasons. Economically, the Matarbari deep seaport is expected to handle large container ships, significantly reducing logistics costs for Bangladesh's exports and imports. This enhancement in logistics infrastructure will increase the competitiveness of Bangladeshi goods in the global market.⁵² Geopolitically, Japan's involvement is part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's regional influence. By supporting Bangladesh, Japan seeks to strengthen its ties with South Asian countries and promote regional stability. Additionally, Matarbari's choice over Sonadia was partly due to environmental concerns. The Bangladeshi government cited potential ecological impacts as a reason for preferring Matarbari, which critics argue was also influenced by geopolitical factors, particularly the security concerns of neighboring India.

Table 4.5: List of Bangladesh Megaprojects - Ports

Project	Location	Status	Cost (USD Billion)	Notes
Matarbari Deep Sea Port	Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar	18% completed	2.409	First deep seaport of Bangladesh. Projected completion in 2026.
Payra Sea Port	Payra, Patuakhali	50% completed	15	Operational since 2016. Complete operations expected by 2026.
Bay Terminal	Chattogram	20% completed	2.1	Expected completion by 2025.

The proposed Sonadia deep seaport, located in Cox's Bazar, was initially backed by China. This project aimed to establish a significant maritime hub to boost Bangladesh's trade capacity significantly. However, the project has faced numerous challenges and needs to be completed. One of the main strategic concerns is India's reservation about the Sonadia project, fearing it could become a strategic outpost for China like Hambantota in Sri Lanka, potentially threatening India's security in the Bay of Bengal. This geopolitical tension has played a significant role in the project's delay.

Financial and environmental issues have also hampered the Sonadia project. The Bangladeshi government has cited environmental concerns as a primary reason for not proceeding with the project.⁵³ However, the underlying geopolitical factors and the preference for diversified international partnerships, avoiding excessive reliance on China, have been significant considerations. Economically, the estimated cost of the Sonadia project was around \$14 billion, which posed substantial financial challenges.⁵⁴ The project's viability was further complicated by the need for extensive infrastructural development in an ecologically sensitive area.

The contrasting trajectories of the Matarbari and Sonadia deep seaports highlight the complex interplay of competing interests. Geopolitical maneuvering is evident in Bangladesh's preference for Matarbari, which Japan supports. This preference aligns with Bangladesh's strategy to balance relationships with major powers like China and India. This cautious approach aims to maximize economic benefits while minimizing geopolitical risks.

Economic viability is another critical factor. Matarbari's comprehensive development plan, including power and industrial components, presented a more viable economic model than Sonadia's standalone maritime focus. Additionally, both projects have faced environmental scrutiny, but Matarbari's strategic and financial advantages have outweighed these concerns in the decision-making process. Ensuring sustainable development and addressing community impacts remain critical challenges for these mega-projects.

4.4 Padma Bridge and Competing Interests

The Padma Bridge, one of Bangladesh's most ambitious infrastructure projects, was a focal point of competing domestic and international interests. Spanning 6.15 kilometers, the bridge was expected to significantly enhance connectivity and economic integration across the country by linking the southwestern region to the northern and eastern parts. Despite its potential benefits, the project was mired in controversies and challenges, highlighting the complex interplay of geopolitical, financial, and local dynamics.⁵⁵

Initially, the World Bank agreed to finance the Padma Bridge with a \$1.2 billion loan. However, allegations of corruption in the bidding process led to the withdrawal of World Bank funding in 2012.⁵⁶ This decision delayed the project and created significant political tensions within Bangladesh. The ruling Awami League government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, faced criticism from opposition parties and skepticism from the public. Accusations of graft fueled political rivalries, exacerbating the already polarized political landscape.

In response to the funding crisis, the Bangladeshi government decided to finance the project through domestic resources, an ambitious move that underscored its commitment to completing the bridge. The government allocated approximately \$3.69 billion for the project, showcasing a solid political will to overcome external pressures and demonstrate national self-reliance.⁵⁷

The Padma Bridge project also reflected the broader geopolitical interests in Bangladesh. Following the withdrawal of World Bank funding, several countries expressed interest in supporting the project. China, in particular, showed a keen interest in participating and offering financial and technical assistance. However, aside from technical assistance from China and getting support for the rail link, the Bangladeshi government opted to proceed independently, partly to avoid over-reliance on a single foreign power and to maintain strategic autonomy.

India's interest in its successful completion further highlighted the project's geopolitical significance. Enhanced connectivity through the Padma Bridge was expected to facilitate trade and movement of people between India and Bangladesh, fostering stronger bilateral economic ties. This interest aligned with India's broader regional strategy to counter China's growing influence in South Asia through infrastructure diplomacy.

Economically, the Padma Bridge is projected to have a transformative impact on Bangladesh's economy. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the bridge was expected to boost the country's GDP by 1.2% annually by facilitating trade, reducing travel time, and improving access to markets and services.⁵⁸ The southwestern region, previously isolated due to inadequate infrastructure, was poised to benefit immensely from increased economic activities and investment opportunities.

While the economic benefits were substantial, the project faced social and environmental challenges. The displacement of communities and environmental concerns related to river dredging and land acquisition led to protests and legal battles. The government undertook various measures to address these issues, including compensation packages and environmental management plans, but criticisms remained regarding the adequacy and fairness of these interventions.

The Padma Bridge stood as a symbol of Bangladesh's aspirations for economic development and infrastructural advancement. Its journey from conception to completion highlighted the complex web of competing interests involving financial institutions, geopolitical actors, and domestic stakeholders. While the project navigated significant challenges, its successful completion unlocked substantial economic potential and demonstrated Bangladesh's resilience and strategic autonomy in the face of multifaceted pressures.

4.5 Teesta River and Competing Interests

The Teesta River issue has been a contentious point between Bangladesh and India and a geopolitical issue in the region, particularly after a draft agreement was reached between Bangladesh and the central Indian government under Manmohan Singh in September 2011. However, the reluctance of the Indian State of West Bengal, led by Mamata Banerjee (the Chief Minister), to approve the draft has stalled progress; as per the Indian Constitution, her approval is mandatory. One could argue that Mamata had good reasons to stall the agreement over Teesta with Bangladesh. From her standpoint, given the scarcity of water and before deciding to share with Bangladesh, she wanted a guarantee from Delhi on how much water the Indian State of Sikkim, from where the Teesta originates, would be willing to release and share with West Bengal. This is a fair demand, particularly when reports indicate that Sikkim runs 26 live hydropower projects over Teesta.⁵⁹ But then, critics believe that Mamata also took the opportunity to pressure Delhi for an economic package for West Bengal in exchange for her consent to the Teesta agreement.

Things have proved difficult on both accounts. Bringing Sikkim into the fold, in addition to West Bengal, to negotiate an international agreement would dilute the federal government's power, which Delhi is unwilling to part with. As for the economic package from Delhi in exchange for consenting to India's foreign policy initiative vis-à-vis Bangladesh, indeed, a federal matter, amounts to 'blackmailing' the central government! Moreover, there is misgiving about Mamata Banerjee now, whether her opposition to Teesta and her earlier opposition to the exchange of enclaves were motivated by economic reasons. That is, catering to the interests of the non-Bengali business community in West Bengal, the latter is less keen on a newer Bangladesh-India relationship, including 'pan-Bengali fondness,' as it would create space for Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and make them a competitor, particularly in northeast India where the non-Bengali business community holds a monopoly when it comes to economic activities there. However, hydropolitics in the age of multipolarity, with the backdrop of unresolved issues and complicated inter-state relationships, can open space for collaboration with other regional actors and beyond to resolve the issue. This is where Bangladesh's proposed alternative policy to resolve the Teesta issue merits attention.

The flow of Teesta is seasonal. During the rainy season, the flow is more than adequate for navigation and agricultural requirements. In fact, due to the lack of dredging over the years, the water often overflows and causes floods on both sides of the river.⁶⁰ However, out of the 115 km course of the Teesta inside Bangladesh during the dry season, at least 102 km of it dries up.⁶¹ Bangladesh has waited for over 12 years now for an equitable share of the Teesta water, as the finalized draft agreement stipulated 42.5 percent of the water for India and 37.5 percent for Bangladesh. The remaining 20 percent of water would be kept for river navigability.⁶² But no agreement could be reached, as indicated earlier, because of West Bengal's objection.

This created space for Bangladesh to look for alternatives. Since thousands of families in northern Bangladesh are affected by water shortage during the dry season,⁶³ resolving the issue is urgent, lest it becomes a hotspot for agitation against the incumbent government for economic stress. One credible solution is to store the water inside Bangladesh during the rainy season and use the stored water during the dry season. But this solution is not without cost. This is where China enters the Indo-Bangladesh hydro-politics following the latter's request for a USD 983.27 million loan from China to implement a "Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project."⁶⁴ In many ways, this is similar to China's support of the Padma Bridge following the World Bank's refusal to fund the project, as indicated earlier. China's involvement would not have arisen if India could have resolved the water issue by signing the draft agreement on Teesta in the last 12 years.

The Teesta River issue exemplifies a significant geopolitical dilemma where India's failure to agree on water management has compelled Bangladesh to seek China's assistance. The broader geopolitical point is that, due to India's inability to finalize an agreement, Bangladesh is turning to China for a loan to undertake the "Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project." This project aims to manage and store water during the rainy season for use during the dry season, addressing the severe water scarcity affecting thousands of families in northern Bangladesh. This situation highlights the complexities and opportunities in regional cooperation and multipolarity, where no single country can dictate the developmental aspirations of another.

This is the possibility or multiple options one talks about that emerge from multipolarity, with no one country holding the power to resist the developmental aspirations of others. Moreover, if India feels threatened by China's involvement, the best would be for India to join the initiative and have a tripartite Bangladesh-China-India arrangement to build the water storage. India would then be relieved of the problem of sharing the Teesta water, which, in the backdrop of dam construction in Sikkim and agricultural requirements of Paschim Banga, is a non-starter, if not impossible to implement. This is precisely the option India is now considering, expressing interest in financing Bangladesh's Teesta Project, which incidentally was flagged by Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud following India's Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra's visit to Dhaka amid the Indian election in May 2024.⁶⁵



5. CONCLUSION: FROM GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION TO GEOPOLITICAL COOPERATION

Globalization creates grounds for multipolarity, with the potential of devising what could be referred to as the geopolitics of cooperation. Since the Europeanization of the world, geopolitics has always had a negative conflictual connotation. Theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries, conceptualizing geopolitics in the backdrop of colonialism and lebensraum (living space), were primarily responsible for this. Johan Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922), Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Halford John Mackinder (1861-1947) all advocated geopolitics of conflict, as countries would be passionately engaged in conflicts for bringing territories of near and faraway places under their control for reproducing and enhancing their powers. However, that was the policy of yesteryears, and the theories of geopolitics that were promoted then became redundant in the aftermath of decolonization, the transformation of national capitalism into globalization, and the emergence of multipolarity. Since post-colonial Bangladesh has embraced globalization and multipolarity and is ready to engage with the uncertain but promising world, Bangladesh would be eager to promote the geopolitics of cooperation and make the best of it to serve its national interests. In the context of our discussion above, three outcomes can quickly be flagged.

Firstly, given the dismal state of politics, particularly in the light of polarized politics and the corresponding politics of mega-identities, more extraordinary efforts ought to be made to reproduce trust among the major political parties based on the rationale of creating a new country. No country can survive for long without having a moral basis and the historical necessity for its emergence. Bangladesh is no exception. This otherwise implies that geopolitical competition only hinders the process of strengthening the democratic aspiration of the people. Therefore, the focus should be on the people and not on external actors, however benevolent their policy prescriptions may be. As part of an older civilization that can be traced back thousands of years, Bangladesh has endured trials and tribulations like any other country. Yet, it has always been the people, coming out in millions on the streets, that have steered the country to the noble objectives it has enshrined in its Constitution, however limited though they may have been in fulfilling their aspirations. Geopolitics of cooperation, as has been the case at the end of the recent national election, only indicates the changing nature of geopolitics in the world.

Secondly, there is an attractive feature when it comes to developmental partnerships compared to issues related to security partnerships. A good case in this context would be the construction of the Padma Bridge. The latter, although commissioned after the World Bank's reluctance to fund the project and China coming forward to support Bangladesh's 'dream project,' facilitated trade relationships with India as much as it did with the United States, Japan, South Korea, and many more countries, and not remain limited to promoting only Bangladesh-China trade relationships. This is the uniqueness of a developmental partnership compared to a security partnership. Bangladesh's foreign policy principle of "friendship to all and malice toward none" allows the country to forge alliances with all the world's sovereign nations so long they are inclusive and do not include exclusive relationships with a government or group on security matters. This has also been made clear in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook, which was declared in April 2023.⁶⁶

In this context, Bangladesh's infrastructural development, whatever the source of funding, allows for a win-win situation for those interested in doing business with Bangladesh. Indeed, geopolitical cooperation can play wonders, as indicated earlier, if China and India, along with a few others, form a consortium and jointly fund Bangladesh's Teesta Project, each taking responsibility for certain sections of the mega-projects. One cannot help but point out that such cooperation exists at the construction level. Take, for instance, the building of the third terminal at Dhaka's International Airport, which the Japan International Cooperation Agency funded. Still, technical support and materials for the terminal came from several countries, including South Korea, Bangladesh, India, and China. The same is the case with Dhaka's Metrorail, which is China-funded, but technical support and materials came from several countries, some of which have tense political relationships. However, such a case is not only in Bangladesh. For instance, a trust deficit exists between China and India despite China being India's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States in FY 2023-2024.⁶⁷ The trust deficit arises primarily from territorial disputes, and the two sides remain rigid in finding solutions. Yet, both countries have gone a long way in shedding their mistrust and have started cooperating on many issues, including in the BRICS, SCO, Ukraine-Russia conflict, and de-dollarization; even with respect to the UN voting on Myanmar, the two countries have voted identically.

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