

# Security Challenges to India-Bangladesh Relations: Some Visible Issues

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## Abstract

*South Asia is a conflict prone region subject to continuous political tensions. India, by far the largest country, and geographically centrally located, has developed differences with most of its smaller neighbours. Security has been a major driving force of India's neighbourhood policy. India's relations with Bangladesh have gone through several ups and downs over the past 40 years. Tensions have tended to recur periodically and have not allowed an atmosphere of mutual trust to prevail. At the root of threat to security lies a variety of forces that have become global in scope and more serious in their effects. The most important factor that generated hope was the change in the political atmospherics in Bangladesh regarding relations with India.*

## Keywords: -

Indian Hegemony, Security issues, Internal Security, Border Issues, India-Bangladesh Relations, Cross Border Firings, India's neighbourhood policy, political atmospherics in Bangladesh

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## Introduction

The end of the Cold war in the early 1990s has changed the political scenario of the world by furthering the process of democratization. The reduction in East-West tensions also reduced inter-state conflicts, some of which had occurred due to the ideological rivalry between the superpowers during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War also brought about fundamental changes in the international order which has since altered the nature of international conflict. Since the late 1980s, the main threat to regional and global peace has come, not from major inter-state confrontations, but from other sources: internal conflicts, i.e., conflicts occurring within the borders of states (Hossain, Segufta, 2012). Besides these conflicts, newer threats that were even beyond the control of the major powers of the world were coming to the forefront. The most notable of these are religious militancy, terrorism, North-South conflict, climate change and competition for the scarce resources. It can be said that the end of the Cold War has brought both stability and instability into the international politics.

With the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the bipolar international system of the cold war period disappeared, yielding place to a predominantly Unipolar system under the leadership of the United States, especially from a military/political point of view (Muzaffer, Ercan,2008).

Beginning from the end of the Cold War period, India witnessed changes in its own polity. The programme of liberalizing economic reforms begun by New Delhi in the early 1990s has unleashed the Indian economy, bringing about rates of growth that are double and triple those of the Cold War era. New Delhi's nuclear tests of 1998 established India as an unambiguous and unapologetic nuclear –weapons state, a posture that has been gradually accepted by the international community, led by the US (Hagerty, T, Devin, 2006). Now in its seventh decade as an independent country, India is widely considered to be on the brink of achieving its enormous potential for global influence (Schaffer, C, Teresita, 2007). In this regard, observers point to India's large size and population, resilient democracy, rapidly growing economy, booming information-technology sector,

scientific and technological sophistication, fast-expanding middle class, nuclear and conventional military strength, the important role that it plays in global governance, and its geostrategic position as the most powerful state along the Indian Ocean littoral and the sea lanes between East Asia and the Middle East (Schaffer, C, Teresita, 2005) . Increasingly, analysts of both South Asian international affairs, and great –power politics more generally, will have to turn their attention to India’s emergence as a major power and its relationship to the evolving global balance of power.

India from the very beginning of its existence has remained sensitive and concerned about peace and stability in its neighbourhood. This is because it believes that political instability and disorder on its periphery may impact its own security directly or indirectly

Security has been a major driving force of India’s neighbourhood policy. India’s sympathies with democratic forces and its aversion to extra-regional presence are all geared to optimise its security interest, which is enshrined in its principal belief of a stable neighbourhood while engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship (Afroz, Shaheen, 2012).

In the present times, security is directly related to Globalization due to growing interdependencies in all aspects of our lives. On one hand progress has created suitable environment to achieve economic affluence, spread of political freedom and has promoted peace and on the other hand it has led to social fragmentation and implanting the seeds of hostility and conflict. At the root of threat to security lies a variety of forces that have become global in scope and more serious in their effects. It is due to the result of the spread of knowledge, the dispersion of advanced technologies and the movement of people as manifested in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the terrorist attacks in India in 2008. These attacks demonstrated the use of advanced technologies, global financial networks, transnational linkages and the easy movement of people due to lacunae in the security system. At the same time greater economic interdependence is likely to create political, social and ethnic tensions between and within nations as the communities will try to exploit or resist competition. It is expected that economic pressures may lead to resurgence of anti-capitalist ideologies due to resentment arising out of perceptions of injustice among those whose expectations are not met.

India's relations with Bangladesh have gone through several ups and downs over the past 40 years. The relationship has often been marked by occasional setbacks, thereby making the bilateral ties rather lukewarm and uneven. It will not be an exaggeration to say that they plummeted to a low of mutual mistrust and suspicion from the heights of very close friendship that lasted a brief period in the aftermath of Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Neither the warmth or nor the trust in the relationship could be sustained for very long. This uneven relationship appears to be caused by the misperceptions regarding each other in both countries. Recently, there has been a tectonic shift in bilateral relations between the two countries following a series of high level visits that produced some significant outcomes for both Bangladesh and India in the security arena. Against this background, the main objectives of this topic are to understand the common security challenges and their implications for India-Bangladesh relations by analysing the security dynamics and how can these be dealt with by the two countries. This is a defining period in India-Bangladesh relations, there is an opportunity for transforming the overall relationship into one that can address each other's

sensitiveness and enable them to work together to achieve economic prosperity social benefit and development (Afroz, Shaheen, 2012).

## Security Challenges

There is no doubt that India has faced immense security challenges in the last 66 years of independence. The country has experienced four major conventional border wars besides a limited war at Kargil. There exists a nuclearized environment in the region, with both China and Pakistan possessing nuclear weapons. It continues to have territorial and border disputes with other neighbouring Countries particularly with Bangladesh. With respect to Bangladesh, despite an enormous improvement of relations, there are certain issues that continue to keep the two countries wary of each other. The potential transnational threats from Bangladesh are from trans-border terrorism, illegal immigration, weapon proliferation, ethnic violence, global crime, drug trafficking, environmental degradation and food security that threaten the security of the region.

## India-Bangladesh Security Issues

- *Border Issue*

The India–Bangladesh borderland that runs through Eastern India and Western Bangladesh has lingering ties to colonial history, the post-independence war of 1971, and geopolitical similarities of the communities across borders, and the strong influence of Kolkata. The India–Bangladesh border was created after the Partition of India in 1947 and was known as the India–East Pakistan border prior to the War of 1971 between East and West Pakistan (Pallavi Banerjee, 2012). Geography dictates that the destinies of India and Bangladesh are, and will always remain, inextricably intertwined. If India’s map is likened to a human figure, with Jammu and Kashmir as the head and the northeast region as an out stretched arm, then Bangladesh is the joint that connects the Northeast region to the rest

of India, and plays as vital a role as does a joint in a human body. As a neighbour country, Bangladesh creates for India many problems that are common between neighbouring states elsewhere in the world but which apply uniquely to Bangladesh in South Asia (Sikri, Rajiv, 2011).

India shares over 4,096 Kilometers (km) of a porous land boundary with Bangladesh – the longest among all its neighbours of which 6.5 km are yet to be demarcated. Of these, 1.5 km is in Daikhata in the Panchagarh district; 2 km in the riverine parts of the Comilla-Tripura area and 3 km in Lathitila-Dumabari in the Moulvibazar district remain undemarcated. All these areas remain undemarcated because of differing technical positions taken by India-Bangladesh (Afroz, Shaheen, 2012).

**Table -1.North-East’s Land Borders with Neighbouring Countries (in km)**

	Bangladesh	Bhutan	China	Myanmar	Nepal
<b>Arunachal Pradesh</b>	-	160	1080	440	-
<b>Assam</b>	263	262	-	-	-
<b>Manipur</b>	-	-	-	398	-
<b>Meghalaya</b>	443	-	-	-	-
<b>Mizoram</b>	318	-	-	480	-
<b>Nagaland</b>	-	-	-	215	-
<b>Sikkim</b>	-	30.90	220.3	-	07.80
<b>Tripura</b>	956	-	-	-	-

<b>India</b>	4096.7	699	3488	1643	1741
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India's reluctance towards this issue is attributed to —the concerns of the Hindus living in the lands likely to go to Bangladesh after demarcation .Its inability to find an alternative site to relocate the Hindu population is the major stumbling block in resolving this issue. As long as the question of demarcation is not resolved, India would be unable to ratify the Indra-Mujib agreement of 1974 which laid the basis for Indo-Bangladeshi friendship (Singh, Jaswat, 2002). The river borders pose a different kind of problems because the shifting river routes, soil erosion or frequent floods make it difficult to demarcate borders, especially when they form numerous islands and chars. River border lines tend to change course periodically leading to a host of disputes, associated with the difficulties in establishing ownership of the newly created territories, for example in the 1980s controversies surrounding sovereignty over New Moore island (South Talpatty) dominated Indo-Bangladeshi relations.

The problem of enclaves is a legacy from the days of British India which Bangladesh inherited in 1971 after its independence. As per an agreed list of enclaves signed in April

1997 at the level of the director general land record and survey (DGLR&S), Bangladesh has 51 enclaves inside India measuring 7,110 acres and India has 111 enclaves measuring 17,158.1 acres within the territory of Bangladesh. According to the land Boundary Agreement of 1974, both Bangladesh and India were required to exchange their enclaves expeditiously. Although Bangladesh handed over the Berubari enclaves to India soon after the land Boundary Agreement was signed, India is yet to hand over Tin Bigha.

The disputes over enclaves raise many questions about the residency rights and the statelessness of the inhabitants which often takes the form of lawlessness. The porous nature of the land and maritime border are congenial for extensive smuggling activities between the two countries. Right from arms and ammunition, a whole range of commodities including jute, rice, cattle as well as services and human capital are being smuggled through the borders (Leung, Mikey, 2009).

To address the boundary disputes and to reduce tensions between the two countries, the Nehru-Noon Agreement on India-East

Pakistan Border was signed in New Delhi on September 10, 1958. This was followed by a series of other agreements. The disputes were, however, far from settled. In 1974, three years after the liberation of Bangladesh, the then prime ministers of India and Bangladesh, Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, inked an agreement to settle the land boundary issue. Inter alia, the Indira-Mujib Agreement laid down the methods for demarcating various disputed stretches of the India-Bangladesh boundary. Under the agreement, India retained the southern half of South Berubari Union No.12 and the adjacent enclaves and Bangladesh retained Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves. India also promised to lease in perpetuity a 178 metres x 85 metres corridor, “Tin Bigha” to Bangladesh to connect Dahagram with Panbari Mouza. According to the agreement, the adverse possessions in areas already demarcated were to be exchanged within six months of the agreement. But, the concern remains unresolved due to political sensitivity towards the importance of potential voters, the enclaves and adverse possessions have not been exchanged (Das.Pushpita, 2010).

## **Trans-Border Terrorism and Movement of Insurgents.**

In 2001, two simultaneous events in the South Asian region—the formation of Begum Khaleda Zia’s government (2001-2006) in Bangladesh and the United States (US) led “War on Terror” that led to the invasion of Afghanistan, redefined India’s regional security scenario. As the security threat, which until then existed primarily from India’s western border, has also extended to its eastern border. The 9/11 and subsequent “War on Terror” brought many extremist outfits in Afghanistan under the US scanner. These terrorist outfits required an alternate place for abode. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service in its July 2003 report noted that the (Islamist) radicals in Bangladesh established links with al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden’s International Islamic Front (IIF). Also, the October 2002 Bali blast resulted in the shifting of some of the Indonesian and Malaysian terrorist groups bases to Bangladesh (R.N.P.Singh, 2002). Since the change of regime in 2001, Bangladesh has emerged as the new hub of terrorist activities. The unstable social, political and economic setup along with long absence of democratic polity made Bangladesh a soft country for the extremists



and terrorist to establish their base. Easy money laundering provided ideal conditions for making it a breeding ground for recruitment, motivation, support, infiltration and safe haven for international terrorist groups, gunrunners, smugglers, pirates and ethnic insurgents. Various terrorist training centres have emerged after the BNP government came to power with the support of fundamentalist parties like Jamait-e-Islami (Jel) and Islamic Oikya Jote which have an anti-India agenda (Jamwal, 2004).

Ali Riaz, Associate Professor at Illinois State University, points out that there are four regional factors that contribute to the rise and proliferation of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh as: Indo-Bangladesh relationship; cross-border cooperation among the militant groups of Myanmar, north-east India and Bangladesh; easy availability of weapons; and the “proxy-war” between India and Pakistan (Ali Riaz, 2008). According to one report/ estimate there are about 127 training camps sponsored by ISI functioning in Bangladesh under patronage of Jel, Harkat-ul-Jamait-e-Islami (HUJI), and Islamic Morcha. Maulana Abdul Raut is the main kingpin who coordinates with Lashkar-e-Toiba

(LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Al Qaida (Hindu, The, 2002).

Trans-border terrorism and movement of insurgents, particularly in the light of the 2008 terrorist attacks on the major cities of India involving one common point of having its base in Bangladesh, is one of the major security challenges India faces from its eastern border. The territory of Bangladesh is aggressively used by the north east insurgent as a safe haven for, training and transit point for the terrorist to keep Indian security fragile. The extremists and the terrorist organisations are able to establish themselves firmly in Bangladesh. Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is using Bangladeshi territory to execute its nefarious activities in India.

The role of ISI in funding and arming these groups is fairly documented (Kumar, Parveen, 2003). In the recent past, ISI has increased its activities from Bangladesh after Pakistan came under pressure after September 11, 2001. The fact that ISI was using Bangladesh soil also came to light when West Bengal police arrested many ISI agents from Kolkata who had crossed over from Bangladesh in 2002.

*"The Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka has become the 'nerve centre' of ISI*



*activities in promoting terrorism in India." He further said that major insurgent groups have established training camps in different parts of Bangladesh and a large number of madrassas have sprung up along the Indo-Bangladesh border.*

(Yashwant Sinha stated in Parliament)  
Establishment of madrasas particularly in the border areas, that has become the recruiting place for the terrorist outfits. In 2002, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, said that illegal Muslim seminaries were being used to provide sanctuary to terrorists at the behest of Pakistan's ISI. In this respect it may be noted that the 2005, serial bombing, where more than 400 small bomb blasts within a span of half an hour rattled the capital and towns across Bangladesh, demonstrated a steady increase of the terrorist activities in the political and social setup of Bangladesh (Sashank S.Banerjee,2001).

According to Indian intelligence agencies, terrorist training camps in Bangladesh training North-East insurgents get patronage and protection from both the Bangladesh Army and the BDR. Most of the important camps are in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Habiganj, Mymensingh, Rangamati, Khagrachari, Bandarban, Sherpur, Moulvi

Bazaar, Netrakona and Sunamganj districts. Cox Bazaar in Chittagong district is used for the trans-shipment of weapons and explosives (Nandy, Chandan, 2002).The South Asian Terrorism Portal website has listed 38 insurgent groups in Assam. Prominent among them are the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Dina Halim Daigah (DHD), United Liberation Front of Barak Valley (ULFBV), and Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) (Assam Assessment 2009, South Asia Terrorist Portal). Many of the small groups are the offshoot of major groups. The objective of most of the groups is independence from the India which is the stumbling block for peace in the region. Most of these groups are not just terrorist groups; they are organizations, having a rigid and clear cut philosophy and a well-coordinated system of action.

Security cooperation is one of the key areas where the Bangladesh-India relationship has improved most in the past three years. In particular, the extent of this improvement can be appreciated if it is compared with the state of security relations prior to the AL's assumption of office in 2009. After assuming office, the Bangladesh foreign

minister quite emphatically announced: 'We have pledged not to allow our land to be used by any terrorists. We are determined about it.' (News, Daily, 2009). It was a clear signal that the AL government would extend security cooperation to India and pay heed to the longstanding Indian complaint that terrorists and insurgents were using Bangladeshi territory. Dhaka and New Delhi took significant steps to formalize security cooperation when Sheikh Hasina visited New Delhi in January 2010. Three agreements on security cooperation were signed at the summit meeting with Manmohan Singh: (1) Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters; (2) Transfer of Sentenced Persons; and (3) Combating International Terrorism, Organised Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking. The two countries have also initiated discussions on an extradition treaty; (The Times of India, 2010) if concluded, this will further boost security cooperation between the two countries. Both India and Bangladesh also signed the extradition treaty on January 28, 2013. It is important to note that Islamic fundamentalist movement linked to Al-Qaeda and Pakistan's intelligence agencies poses a great threat to India and Bangladesh. Keeping in mind this fact, the leaders of

India and Bangladesh rejected extremism, violence and terrorism and agreed to cooperate in combating these evils.

Thus, Security cooperation highlights the extent of closeness between the two countries during Sheikh Hasina's second term as prime minister. It also demonstrates her India-leaning foreign policy orientation, implying that her government has abandoned the counterbalancing strategy adopted by her predecessors.

## Illegal Migration

Migration has now come to be regarded as one of the new 'security threat' as it involves not only human and personal security and human rights issues but also has internal and international security implications. Illegal immigrants are referred to those migrant across national borders in a way that violates the immigration laws of the destination country. Myron Weiner, a social scientist, identifies five broad categories of situations where refugees or migrants are perceived as a threat - to the country which produces the emigrants, to the country that receives them, and to relations between sending and receiving countries. The first is when refugees and migrants are regarded as a threat - or at least

a thorn - in relations between sending and receiving countries, a situation which arises when refugees and migrants are opposed to the regime of their home country; second is when migrants and/or refugees are perceived as a political threat or security risk to the regime of the host country; thirdly, when immigrants are seen as a cultural threat; fourthly, as a social and economic problem for the host society; and finally—a new element growing out of recent developments in the Gulf—is when the host society uses immigrants as an instrument of threat against the country of origin (Weiner, Myron, 2008). Officially recognized as a separate category of states, north-east refers to the easternmost region of India consisting

of the contagious Seven Sister States .The presence of illegal Bangladeshi nationals in India remains the contentious issue that undercuts India-Bangladesh relations and is detrimental to security of India.

A major consequence of a porous border is the ease with which it is crossed illegally. The trend of illegal migration from Bangladesh into India has continued since independence. Various “push” factors such as political upheavals, religious persecution, demographic pressures, and environmental crises and “pull” factors such as availability of land, employment opportunities, medical care, and education have contributed to the large-scale influx of Bangladeshis into India (Das, Pushpita, 2010).

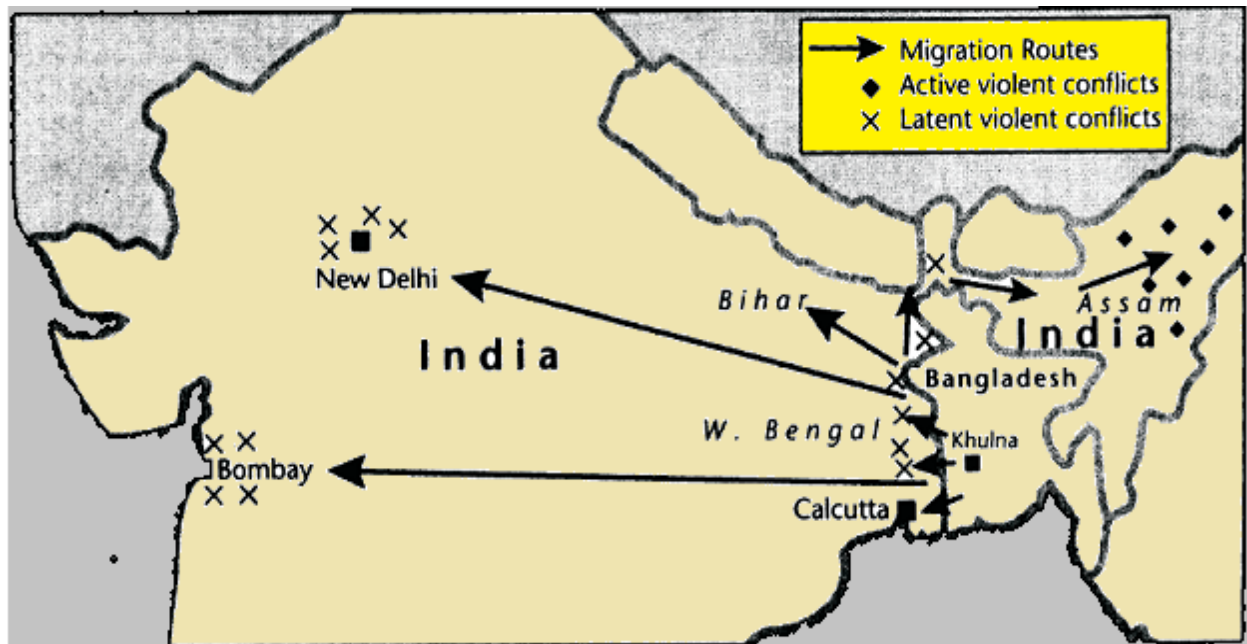


Figure 1. Migration Routes from Bangladesh to India and Sites of Actual and Potential Conflict.

The first wave of migration was prompted by political reasons. During the early years after the formation of Bangladesh (this was also true in the aftermath of the Babri mosque demolition in 1992) the changed political situation led to considerable forced migration of Hindus into India, who took advantage of the economic and social support extended by their relatives across the border or even by those who had migrated earlier. In the next phase, the flow of both Hindu and Muslim migrants increased due to economic reasons, especially during the 1980s through the 1990s; however, the numbers of Muslims were substantially more than the Hindus (Dahiya, Rumel, 2012).

According to a report by Lt. Gen. SK Sinha, former Governor of Assam, submitted to the President of India in 1998, the contributing factor for migration has been primarily economic. Besides, there is ethnic, linguistic and religious commonality between people living on both sides of the border, many of whom have familial ties that encourage migration. Analysing the possible reason behind Bangladesh's stand, the report claims that there is no evidence of Bangladesh government encouraging illegal migration. However, the report opines that possible

reason behind Bangladesh government's denial could be that it wants to ease the pressure of its own bursting population.

There is no consensus about the exact numbers of Bangladeshis who have entered India illegally and have stayed back. There is no exact data as the numbers are as varied as the agencies and stakeholders that are involved in collating it. The Task Force on Border Management headed by Shri Madhav Godbole, which submitted its report in 2001, put the figure at 15 million, with 300,000 Bangladeshis entering India illegally every month. This illegal migration has changed the demographic profile of many Border States, which has resulted in separatist movements (Das, Pushpita, 2010). India claims that cross border movements of illegal immigrants is causing economic, social and political problems, especially in Assam and the Northeastern hill states, and in many other parts of India. Illegal Bangladeshi immigration is a significant cause for ethnic conflicts in northeastern India, where it has shifted the balance of ethnic communities, setting off inter-ethnic violence. But illegal immigration has also become a source of trans-national criminal enterprises, some of which, Indian police

and security agencies believe, are linked to terrorism.

To tackle illegal migration, along with effective border management, there is a need to set up a mechanism on the lines of work permits. The system would not only help legalize the influx of people, but would also help in avoiding the political backlash in India, resulting from illegal migration. Again, the illegal migrants are mostly employed in the unorganized sector and the permits would help them to get some privileges enjoyed by migrant workers, specially the right to send money home. This would also help in addressing the issue of trade imbalance.

### **Border Killings**

The killing of Bangladeshi nationals by Border Security Force (BSF) has become a major irritant between the two countries in the recent past. It has evoked strong public sentiments in Bangladesh.

Even from India's point of view, the border question poses a number of problems between the two countries. Frequent border clashes partly emanate from this feeling. In 2001 alone 50 Indians and 41 Bangladeshis were killed in border clashes. The clashes between BSF (Border Security Force) and

BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) in the disputed enclaves in the Assam-Meghalaya-Bangladesh borders in April 2001 were seen by some as a calculated move by the military to flare up anti-Indian sentiments (Sharma, C.M, 2008).

According to a report of Bangladesh Human Rights Watch organization *Odhikar*, BSF has, from January 1, 2001 to March 31, 2012, killed 907 Bangladeshis. Bangladesh wants no time lost in stopping these killings. Acting on Bangladesh's request, India has adopted a policy of restraint at the border and has directed the BSF to avoid shooting. Instead of firing, BSF is detaining intruders and handing them over to the local police for further action. There have been some positive steps taken by both the governments to contain such incidents. For instance, BSF and Border Guards of Bangladesh (BGB) have started coordinated patrolling and night patrolling at various points on the border. Such steps have significantly reduced incidents of border killing. This fact is also endorsed by Major General Anwar Hossain, Director General of BGB. All the same, the border, being prone to cross border crimes—mainly cattle smuggling, arms, and illegal human trafficking, and killings—remains a serious concern (Independent, The, 2012).

## Conclusion

As the state of South Asia make their journey as nation-states and recognise that they are multi- cultural and plural societies and promote democracy and inclusive growth which would empower marginal groups to become stakeholders, the security challenges that they are facing from within would reduce. The temptation of groups to take external aid to fulfill their political aspiration would then become less attractive. India and Bangladesh faces common challenges that range from poverty, illiteracy to small arms proliferation, militancy etc.

Though there are many issues on which the two countries differ, nevertheless this could be the beginning of a journey to forge mutually beneficial ties in a globalizing world. To quote Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, “*India seeks to build a new future with Bangladesh. The time has come to chart a new path. We are ready to pursue a bold Vision for our relations, based on mutual respect and benefit*”.

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