

India's Neighborhood First Policy in South Asia: Revisiting its Implications in Post-Hasina Regime

Md. Shihab Uddin¹

Anika Tabassum²

Kamrul Hasan³

Abstract: India's 'Neighborhood First' policy aims to strengthen ties with South Asian nations, particularly Bangladesh, which is close by and has historical, religious, and cultural ties with India. This policy seeks to promote mutual security, economic cooperation, and regional peace. Both nations have a large number of MoUs, agreements, training and exchange programs for civil-military bureaucrats, significant trade flow, and border control accomplishments. The bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India are often termed as the highest level of friendly relationship by politicians from both sides. However, diplomatic relations have seriously been disrupted by the mass uprising in 2024, frequently dubbed as Bangladesh Revolution or Bangladesh 2.0, resulting in a new border dispute, heated speech by both sides, breakdown of usual trade relations, disinformation propagated by India against Bangladesh, water-sharing problems, and mistrust. Furthermore, the normalization and deepening of bilateral ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan and China's increasing influence in Bangladesh via investments and strategic alliances further complicate the regional dynamic. Against this backdrop, this paper revisits the BJP government's 'Neighborhood' first policy, critically evaluating the bilateral ties, including trade, diplomacy, indiscriminately killing of Bangladeshi nationals by Indian BSF at Bangladesh-India border, water conflict, flash floods, and so on. Drawing on the descriptive method, this paper is predominantly based on secondary literature, which includes journal articles, government documents, statements by political leaders and bureaucrats, newspaper articles, etc. Besides the introduction in section one, the article briefly discusses the bilateral relations in section two, while section three explores the 'Neighborhood First' policy. The paper then evaluates the bilateral ties in section four, revisiting the 'Neighborhood First' policy, and finally, section five concludes the paper with policy recommendations.

Keywords: India, Bangladesh, Neighborhood, Bilateral Cooperation, Regional Connectivity.

¹ Assistant Director, Centre for Local Governance Discourse (CLGD), Bangladesh.

² Independent researcher and former student at the Department of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University, and Transaction Service Officer at IFIC Bank, Bangladesh,

³ Associate Professor, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh.
k.hasan@juniv.edu

Introduction

In South Asia, India is the most influential nation in terms of population, economy, size, and armed forces. India widely acknowledged that a peaceful neighborhood is mandatory for its vision of economic growth. Keeping alignment with these ideals, India has introduced the ‘Neighborhood First Policy,’ where it has consistently highlighted the importance of its neighbors in its foreign policy. Neighborhood First Policy is the leading strategy of the Narendra Modi government, which prioritizes improving ties with its close neighbors in the region in which Bangladesh is envisaged as a crucial facet because Bangladesh is in a unique geographical position, sharing a 4,096-kilometer border with India and both have a strong political, historical, and cultural affinity (Singh, 2014). This shared history has resulted in a diverse bilateral partnership, including trade, security, connectivity, and cultural interactions (Ahmad et al., 2024).

The neighbors’ response to the ‘Neighborhood First’ approach has been notably unfavorable. Many specialists indicated that India’s Neighborhood First policy would become progressively unstable, presenting a significant barrier to its economic expansion and security (Behuria et al., 2012). It has multiple bilateral disputes with neighboring nations about borders, illegal migration, security, trade, transit, and water allocation. For example, the Kashmir dispute and transboundary terrorism are the most significant bilateral issues influencing regional peace and prosperity with Pakistan. In addition, Afghanistan serves as an essential source of contention between the duo. Although Sri Lanka has maintained a persistent relationship with India, disagreements regarding fishing grounds, maritime boundaries, and Tamil matters have resulted in a degree of caution (Sahoo, 2016).

Furthermore, issues concerning the Neighborhood First policy have received significant hurdles, especially in light of Bangladesh-India relations. Recent Political instabilities, CAA, NRC, and disputed issues like Teesta Water shared between Bangladesh and India have significantly affected diplomatic ties. Simultaneously, the increase of China’s influence in Bangladesh through strategic partnership and investment ties has interfered with a new twist to the bilateral relation, thus challenging India’s dominance in Bangladesh.

The objective of this study is to present a critical analysis of the consequences of India’s Neighborhood First policy on Bangladesh, especially in the post-Hasina

regime, examining both its successes and shortcomings. This paper aims to clarify the impact of this approach on Bangladesh-India relations and its implications for regional stability by analyzing critical areas of collaboration, sources of discord, and the overarching regional context.

Bilateral Relations between Bangladesh and India: A Brief Overview

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India has developed into a very effective institution, especially in trade, transshipment, tourism, and strategic intergovernmental ties. This relationship was formalized on December 6, 1971, with India's recognition of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Ali, 2023). Bilateral relations have been conditioned by factors such as history, economic dependence, security, and the roles assigned by the regions.

Historical Context and Foundational Framework: India's direct assistance and considerable aid to the Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi liberation warriors) with supplies and military training during the 1971 Liberation War had a significant impact on Bangladesh's ambition to achieve independence. Additionally, following the military assault on March 25, 1971, over one crore (10 million) refugees from East Pakistan took refuge in India.

India helped Bangladesh's liberation war, aiming to facilitate the establishment of a democratic, liberal and secular government, and simultaneously enhancing bilateral relations and promoting the mutual interests of both nations (Romke, 2024). It was expected that an administration representing the will of the people would address political unrest, protect the rights of minorities, and bring calm to the area. The 1972 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Bangladesh and India sought to guarantee mutual security and strengthen amicable relations, particularly following India's backing for Bangladesh's independence (Pattanaik, 2010).

Nevertheless, the trajectory of this partnership encountered obstacles following the fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's autocratic rule in 1975 and the subsequent emergence of military rule in Bangladesh. The separation happened when Major Ziaur Rahman assumed power and began advocating for Bangladeshi nationalism and the abolition of secularism from the country's constitution. Nevertheless, the partnership was reestablished in the early 1990s following the restoration of

democracy in Bangladesh. The ties got a new dimension after the Awami League formed the government in 2009 under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina.

Border Management and Connectivity Initiatives: The longest international border between India and Bangladesh is approximately 4,096 kilometers long and spans five Indian states. The most critical bilateral initiative between Bangladesh and India may yet be the attempt to resolve the long-standing border dispute, such as the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and the exchange of enclaves (Chhitmahals). After prolonged negotiation, the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement, negotiated by Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was ratified in 2015 through India's 100th Constitutional Amendment. The historic agreement facilitated the transfer of 111 enclaves from India to Bangladesh, and conversely, India received 51 enclaves, which were in Bangladesh (Banerjee et al., 2017). This milestone represented a substantial improvement in the relationship between Bangladesh and India.

To improve the connection between the two nations, the 'Maitree Express' passenger train service between Kolkata and Dhaka was established in 2007, following 43 years of bilateral relations (Gupta, 2017). In April 2017, the bus service between Kolkata and Khulna-Dhaka began (Ali, 2023). Also, approximately 38 checkpoints exist along the Bangladesh-India border for the entry and exit of commodities and individuals (Neil Walker, 2019). India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers that flow across their borders. The NW-2 (National Waterway 2) is the main route that allows goods and transportation between Kolkata-Sundarban-Chalna-Khulna-Mongla, Kaukhali-Barisal-Narayanganj-Aricha-Dhubri, Pandu-Silghat (Debates, 2022).

Trade and Tourism Industry: Historically, India has had a significant trade surplus with its neighbor, and Bangladesh has been one of its main export destinations. India is Bangladesh's second-largest export partner, accounting for almost 12% of total exports. In addition, Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia. Bangladesh is a significant market for India's textile and agricultural exports. In the fiscal year 2023, India's overall trade turnover was US\$14.22 billion, with US\$1.22 billion in imports from Bangladesh and US\$12.20 billion in exports to Bangladesh (IBEF, 2024). India is a crucial supplier of essentials, as Bangladesh imports about US\$1.5 billion in agricultural commodities annually, including wheat, sugar, onions,

and spices. (Shahin, 2023). Exports to Bangladesh rose from US\$ 6.4 billion in 2014-15 to a peak of US\$16.2 billion in 2021-22. On the other hand, imports from Bangladesh rose from US\$ 0.6 billion to a peak of US\$2 billion in 2022-23 (Pandey & Sharma, 2024).

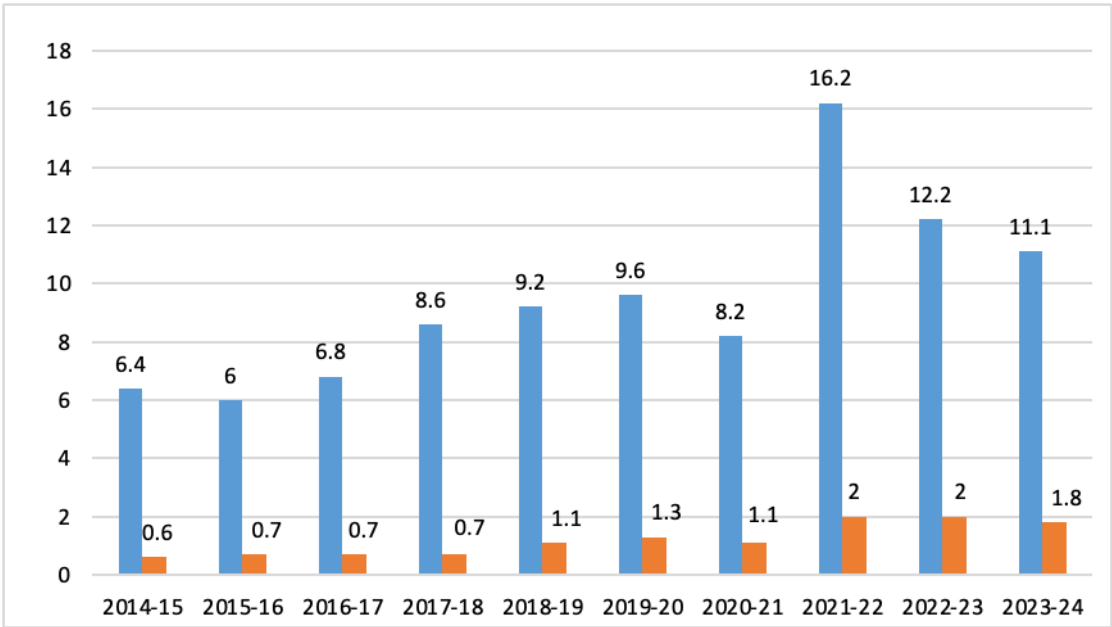


Figure 1: Exports to and Imports from Bangladesh
■ Export (\$US Billion) ■ Import (\$US Billion)

Source: Pandey & Sharma, 2024

In addition, Bangladesh is one of India’s leading tourism destinations. With the second-highest number of arrivals in 2022, Bangladesh is one of the primary sources of international visitors to India (TBS, 2023). The Indian High Commission in Dhaka issues around one million visas annually, making it India’s largest visa service operation globally.

Security Cooperation and Regional Collaboration: India and Bangladesh have fostered close cooperation in the security domain. For security cooperation, Bangladesh and India signed three anti-terrorism agreements: Criminal Mutual Legal Assistance, Terrorism, Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, and Sentenced

Person Transfer (Ali, 2023). Also, in 2017, India and Bangladesh signed a MoU on cyber security (Ali, 2023). At the regional level, India and Bangladesh collaborated to mitigate the global pandemic's effects of COVID-19. In November 2020, the Serum Institute of India and Beximco Pharma in Bangladesh executed an agreement to expedite the dispatch of 30 million COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh, and Bangladesh received the initial shipment on January 21, 2021 (Ali, 2023).

The bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh is dynamic, reflecting the evolution of cooperation in historical, mutual interest, and dependency contexts. In addition to historical ties, the relationship is underscored by geographical proximity. Bangladesh possesses considerable economic and strategic significance for India, rendering its neglect a possible geopolitical error. As a fast-rising consumer market with over 170 million people, Bangladesh provides tremendous prospects for trade development and economic engagement. Additionally, its geographic location is crucial for India's connectivity with its northeastern states, reducing transit times and costs. Ignoring Bangladesh might clear the way for China to increase its influence via infrastructure projects and commerce linked with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Such alterations could destabilize the regional equilibrium of power, undermining India's strategic aims.

India's Neighborhood First Policy: A Brief Understanding

Although India's diplomacy is officially based on the conventional approach of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries with the goal of stabilizing its neighbors, the country is accused of intervening in the domestic affairs of different countries, especially in neighboring South Asia. Indira Gandhi stated in 1972 that India's foreign policy aimed to protect its independence rather than to dominate or isolate other countries. She emphasized the significance of concentrating on the Neighborhood, necessitating India's attention and active involvement to preserve stability and autonomy (Pattanaik, 2010).

Since India gained independence in 1947, the 'Neighborhood First Policy' has served as the cornerstone of its overall foreign policy. However, the Neighborhood First Policy went into effect in 2008. It was aimed to strengthen ties with select priority nations, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Drishti IAS, 2024). Building on this vision, since 2014, Prime

Minister Narendra Modi has tried to revive the Neighborhood First Policy in India for managing relations and policies with its neighbors, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. During the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Modi stated that “a nation’s destiny is linked to its neighborhood,” underscoring his government’s high priority on advancing friendship and cooperation in the region (Roche, 2014). The significance of Modi’s neighborhood strategy lies in its use of soft power diplomacy and multilateral frameworks such as SAARC and BIMSTEC to enhance regional collaboration. However, the strategy embodies a mix of optimism and ignorance.

This policy prioritizes improving physical, digital, and people-to-people connectivity between India and its neighbors while boosting trade and commerce. The Standing Committee on External Affairs recently presented its report on ‘India’s Neighborhood First Policy’ on July 25, 2023. It addressed various critical issues as a neighboring nation, including terrorism and illegal migration, ties with China and Pakistan, investment in border infrastructure, defense and maritime security, development in the Northeastern area, and tourist promotion (PRS India, n.d.).

India has proactively initiated over 100 infrastructure and connectivity projects in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, covering the construction of roads, air transport, ports, railways, and telecommunications. Key initiatives include the BBIN Initiative (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) for enhancing road and rail connectivity and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, connecting India with Myanmar and further with Southeast Asia (NDTV, 2024). India frequently provides grants and financial aid to its neighboring countries, demonstrating its dedication to economic and developmental collaborations. However, Indian investment in its neighboring states is comparatively low, and wherever India invests, it is only for its own interests. There is limited investment in the educational and health sectors, and India pays no transit fees across Bangladesh. The following table highlights India’s increasing investments in neighboring states-

Table 1: India's Investment in Neighboring State

Country	2015 (In USD)	2023 (In USD)
Bangladesh	2.8 billion	7.9 billion
Nepal	1.3 billion	1.6 billion
Sri Lanka	1.7 billion	2.7 billion
Maldives	80 million	1.4 billion

Source: Shivamurthy, 2024

However, the basis of the foreign policy towards neighbors is much more pragmatic and less friendly for India. For instance, the Maldives' predicament was viewed by the Modi administration as a strategic neighborhood strategy where nationalist politics and strategic interests impact bilateral relations. Approximately 88 Indian military personnel were stationed in the Maldives to operate humanitarian and surveillance equipment, which included two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft that India had donated to the Maldives (TBS, 2024). Subsequent to the "India Out" campaign launched by the ruling party and the election of President Mohamed Muizzu, India substituted its military forces with technical staff (TBS, 2024).

Similarly, India encounters contentious issues in its relationships with China and Pakistan. Pakistan-India relations are strained by historical animosities, war, border conflicts, and cross-border militancy. India regularly refers to Pakistan as a "failed state" due to its economic and political instability. Pakistan's geopolitical significance is further augmented by China's considerable investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects China to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port (Chakravarti, 2024). This infrastructure initiative challenges India's influence in the region.

Also, the Pakistan-India Kashmir dispute fuels the crisis in their relationship. In this context, India is confronted with a dual challenge: the border dispute with China and Pakistan's actions, which include cross-border militancy and China-Pakistan collaborations such as the CPEC. These relationships undermine India's regional supremacy and complicate India's ability to shape either the balance of power or regional dynamics in South Asia. Thus, the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and other neighbors of India are concerned about their respective agendas and strategies.

Revisiting India's 'Neighborhood' First Policy in Post-Hasina Regime

India has adopted the Neighborhood First policy, which focuses on strengthening relations with neighboring countries, but significant issues have arisen in its implementation, particularly with Bangladesh. Government-to-government relations are currently strained due to growing rivalry and a breakdown in mutual trust. The following section examines some aspects of India's Neighborhood First policy toward Bangladesh, focusing on the recent mass uprising in Bangladesh, which has exposed the policy's flaws.

Post-Uprising Tensions in Bangladesh-India Diplomatic Relations

Following the July revolution in Bangladesh, the relationship between India and Bangladesh deteriorated, exposing long-standing problems. Since the revolution, Indian media outlets and social media have aggressively circulated disinformation and allegations of attacks and atrocities against minorities. The situation worsened on December 2, 2024, when an attack was carried out by members of an organization called Hindu Sangharsh Samiti on the premises of the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in North Agartala, in the northeastern state of Tripura, India (TBS, 2024). They announced that all hotel services in Tripura state will be temporarily closed to Bangladeshi nationals in response to the detention of Chinmoy Krishna Das in Bangladesh. Chinmoy Krishna Das, a former leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon) and spokesperson for the Sanatani Jagaran Jote, was arrested by authorities in Bangladesh on conspiracy charges (Das, 2024). He faced charges in a sedition case along with 18 others for purportedly raising a saffron flag above Bangladesh's national flag at the New Market crossroads in Chittagong on October 25 (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). They also burned an effigy of Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the head of the interim government in Bangladesh. These incidents reveal the fragility of the relationship, where intolerance of religious sensibilities and misinformation govern the popular platforms, eradicating diplomatic and people's diplomacy.

Communal Disinformation and Political Transitions

The Bangladeshi fact-checking initiative Rumor Scanner has determined that approximately 72 percent of Indian social media profiles propagate disinformation and misinformation regarding Bangladesh (BSS, 2024). The Indian media, including social media, is persistently propagating falsehoods about the interim administration after the overthrow of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, by mass uprising. The Rumor Scanner discovered that numerous incidents were fraudulently propagated as communal attacks, even though many attacks were directed due to their political affiliations or grievances. This presentation of Bangladesh as an anti-Hindu country helps some political entities in India to fuel anti-Islamic sentiment, framing Bangladesh as posing a threat to Hindus. The following cases⁴ might be relevant to explain the facts related to communal misinformation.

Case 1: Khukurani Biswas is the wife of Aurobindo Biswas from Boramara (Sikdarpara) village in Maijpara union of Narail Sadar upazila. On December 2, she visited India through Benapole port to attend her nephew's wedding ceremony. In the meantime, after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government, ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, who led the movement demanding security for minorities, was arrested in a sedition case, and a lawyer named Saiful Islam Alif was hacked to death by Chinmoy's fanatic followers. At that time, an Indian Bengali news channel, ABP Ananda, interviewed her at the Petrapole border. In that interview, Khukurani Biswas stated, "Hindus and ISKCON are in trouble. Currently, they are being prevented from performing religious rituals, including worship properly here. They are being disallowed from blowing conch shells. Hindus are now fleeing Bangladesh and going to India. Hindus have no place; only a Muslim state will be established in Bangladesh. They are insecure about their lives." The woman later admitted that she had told baseless and false information under pressure from the Indian media (Shahi, 2024).

The above case of Khukurani Biswas clearly shows how India constructs and uses factional propaganda during political instability in Bangladesh. Her statement fits a communal rhetoric that portrays Bangladesh as anti-minority or a serious threat to the Hindus. However, her later admission of the forced statement reveals a severe breach

⁴ Both case studies were conducted based on Bangla Dailies.

of journalistic ethics and shows how vulnerable people may be manipulated for political or ideological gain.

Case 2: A sixty-year-old Hindu woman from Narail named Usha Rani Roy was pressured by the Indian Bengali news channel ABP Ananda to spread false, baseless, and fictional statements about Hindu oppression in Bangladesh. In the broadcast statement, she stated, "I saw the war of 1971. What I did not see in the activities of the Pakistanis and Razakars then, I see now. What the Jamaat-Shibir-BNP is doing, I cannot say all the things. We have to go back to Bangladesh again..... We are in a panic. We are prohibited from talking. Again, I sometimes hear that girls must wear burqas (Veil, a cloth women wear to cover the whole body). They have to go to school wearing burqas." (Shahi, 2024).

Both portrayals of the grim scenario of Hindu minority persecution in Bangladesh are based on false information. The cases illustrate the communal disinformation using the minority weapons that question the neighborhood first policy of India towards Bangladesh. This intentional portrayal fuels anti-Islamic sentiment in India, framing Bangladesh as a threat to Hindus and other minority groups, which is far from the neighborhood policy.

Visa Complications in India

The population of Bangladesh is among the three leading nationalities that currently visit India for shopping, medical treatments, and tourism purposes (Chakravarti, 2024). India derives economic advantages from Bangladeshi tourists, although it upholds stringent visa regulations rather than providing reciprocal privileges. Following the ousting of the Awami League government, the Indian Embassy in Bangladesh briefly halted visa operations, which have since resumed but are currently functioning on a severe emergency and medical basis. Due to India's visa complications, the number of flights from Bangladesh to India has also been reduced by half (Hasan, 2024).

The rigid visa requirements have severely impacted students and professionals. Many students are in trouble because several European countries, including Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, and Austria, do not have embassies in Bangladesh. Therefore, students who want to study in these countries must visit India,

a nearby country, for visa interviews. This lack of reciprocity in facilitating travel damages goodwill and undermines India's Neighborhood-first objectives of fostering connectivity and cooperation. The following case might be relevant to explain the recent fact⁵.

Md. Farhad of Jhenaidah district has been suffering from a spinal cord injury for an extended period. After conducting medical tests, doctors in Bangladesh recommended advanced treatment in India. Accordingly, he took an appointment for spinal surgery at a reputed hospital in Chennai, India. The scheduled date of the surgery was October 23, 2024. Accordingly, he applied for an Indian medical visa twice in September. Both times, it was rejected. He applied again on October 3 of the same year. However, the Indian visa authorities rejected it again. He disappointedly told the researcher, "My application for the medical visa was denied three times. The authority did not grant me a visa even after informing them about the emergency surgery. I accept that there is a conflict going on between India and Bangladesh at present, but it is unexpected to mess politics with medical treatment. Even after all the arrangements for this treatment have been completed, it is disappointing for me not to be able to receive treatment due to visa complications.

Trade Relations in Turmoil

Another critical aspect of the bilateral relationship is the consistent strains in the economic relations between Bangladesh and India. The ongoing conflict also affects the businesspeople in India.

Table 2: India's Trade with Bangladesh

Month /Ex-Im	Jul-23(R)	July - 24(F)	Growth (%)	Aug-23(R)	Aug-24(F)	Growth (%)	Sep-23(R)	Sep-24(F)	Growth (%)	Oct-23(R)	Oct-24(F)	Growth (%)
Export to Bangladesh	723.05	803.51	11.13	943.86	756.98	-19.80	869.71	858.13	-1.33	995.19	1,020.05	2.50

⁵ Md. Shihab Uddin, who is the corresponding author of this research paper, conducted the case study in one of the villages of Jhenaidah, a district situated close to the Indian border on November 08, 2024.

Import from Bangladesh	159.67	168.32	5.42	168.04	156.80	-6.69	163.29	206.28	26.33	177.32	196.16	10.62
-------------------------------	--------	--------	------	--------	--------	-------	--------	--------	-------	--------	--------	-------

Source: Department of Commerce, India, 2025. Available at: <https://tradedat.commerce.gov.in/meidb/Default.asp> * Dated: 12/1/2025, Values in US \$ Million
(F) Final (R) Revised Final

Indian exports fall by nearly 28% in the importation of essential products to Bangladesh, including textile mill products, automobile parts, and food products (TBS, 2024). India's exports to Bangladesh in August 2023 amounted to \$943 million. However, this August (2024) amounted to just \$681 million. Furthermore, India's principal export item, cotton, saw a decline of about 10 percent in shipments to Bangladesh (Star Business Report, 2024). Bangladesh has decided to skip Indian routes to export its products. It has opted to export its textiles to international markets, creating reroutes in the Maldives amidst deteriorating bilateral relations (Star Business Report, 2024b).

According to reports, the West Bengal government prohibited online slot bookings necessary for arranging shipments. This caused disruptions in the import of potatoes through the Hili Land Port, which stopped the movement of potatoes along this essential commercial route from India to Bangladesh (Waliullah, 2024). Despite political tensions between Bangladesh and India, trade, particularly in cotton and yarn, remains steady due to the trade dependency of both countries.

Desecration of National Flag

Some cultural and symbolic disrespect has fueled ethnic tensions more than before. Three people were arrested in West Bengal on December 4, 2024, for disrespecting the Bangladeshi national emblem. The three stepped on the national flag of Bangladesh after drawing it on a road. This flag desecration occurred amid escalating tensions between Bangladesh and India. Barasat police arrested three youths in West Bengal for allegedly desecrating the national flag of Bangladesh (Das, 2024). Additionally, by holding demonstrations in front of the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata, the Bengali Hindu Jagaran, a militant religious group with its headquarters, heightened tensions. The country's flag was burned in front of the

Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata (Ahmed, 2024, p.). Such occurrences weaken respect between the two nations and widen societal gaps.

Indian flag desecration has also occurred in Bangladesh. The placement of the Indian national flag at the gates of Bangladeshi universities BUET, Dhaka University, and Noakhali Science and Technology University has provoked widespread outrage in India after students at these institutions stepped on it. Many have seen the instances as an outrageous act of contempt for India's national symbol, and as a result, they have sparked a torrent of condemnation (Iyer, 2024).

The Deadly Border between Bangladesh and India

The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) continues to deploy deadly force, often with Indian and Bangladeshi border communities. Shoot-to-kill incidents along the shared border create resentment in Bangladesh and damage trust. A report showed that at least 1,236 Bangladeshis were killed and 1,145 injured in shootings by the BSF between 2000 and 2020 (Staff Correspondent, 2024). According to Ain o Salish Kendra, a prominent human rights organization in Bangladesh, 332 people were killed by the BSF between 2013 and 2023 (Rizve, 2024). In 2023, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) murdered approximately 30 Bangladeshis, a rise from 23 in 2022, which included 16 fatalities from shootings, and 17 in 2021, which also included 16 gunshot deaths (Staff Correspondent, 2024). Although not, the Indians claim this violence primarily affects individuals who are involved in cattle smuggling or attempting illegal migration. However, farmers, ordinary citizens, and even juveniles have also been targeted while performing routine tasks along the border. There are countless instances of innocent people being shot without any reason. The most notorious case was the killing of Felani Khatun in 2011. Felani, a teenage girl, was shot by BSF soldiers while attempting to cross the border with her father by climbing a barbed wire fence in the Anantapur border area of Kurigram, and her body was left hanging for thirty hours (Roy, 2022). The image of her body – first alive, then dead – hanging on the fence is enough to make many question the friendship between Bangladesh and India. These shoot-to-kill policies at the border undermine the trust and goodwill of border people.

Dams and Flood Tensions Across Borders

The extensive flooding in August 2024, during which numerous experts and the public criticized India for not informing Bangladesh before the release of water from the Dumbur Hydroelectric Plant in Tripura, has intensified this opinion. A report estimated that 4.5 million people from Feni, Comilla, Noakhali, and Lakshmipur in eastern Bangladesh were impacted (Rizve, 2024). Feni district in Bangladesh, in particular, has not faced such a critical situation in the past.

On August 23, the adviser of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, slammed India for not consulting with Bangladesh before opening the gates of the Dumbur dam (Rizve, 2024). She told reporters on a visit to a flooded area in Bangladesh that India should have given prior notice before releasing water but that the procedure was not followed. Severe flooding in Feni has inundated 70,415 residences, damaging furniture and electrical equipment, as reported by local authorities. An amount of Tk 533.59 crore was lost; thousands of households were displaced, and the people who were trying to rebuild their lives were hampered by flood (UNB, 2024). The recent flood in Feni has inflicted significant damage across many sectors, with projected losses of around Tk 200 crore, decreasing the relations with India (Tribune Desk, 2024).

Impact of China's Investments on Bangladesh-India Relations

China's investment in Bangladesh has affected the relationship between India and Bangladesh and has also changed the landscape of the two South Asian neighbors. China's ascendance as Bangladesh's foremost trading partner, substantial investor via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and principal supplier of military equipment has diminished Bangladesh's reliance on India for trade and developmental assistance. Currently, China is the second highest investor in Bangladesh, following the USA. In November 2024, a cooperative conference was held at the headquarters of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), during which Chinese investors demonstrated a significant interest in establishing joint ventures in the electricity and green technology sectors of Bangladesh (BIDA, 2024). This transition undermines India's historical dominance in Bangladesh and heightens security apprehensions, particularly as China expands its economic and geopolitical presence in the area.

In 2022, China invested 7 billion dollars in Bangladesh and got a contract worth 23 billion (Staff Reporter, 2023). These unfavorable relations with India create a path for China to tie with Bangladesh, lessening dependency on India.

India's 'Big Brother' Approach to Bangladesh

India's "big brother" attitude toward Bangladesh refers to its typically paternalistic and occasionally domineering approach to bilateral ties. India is seen as exercising too significant influence over its smaller neighbor. Several examples and characteristics exemplify this "big brother" approach, including unfair allocation of water resources, trade imbalances, border disputes, and maneuvering communal violence. India often intervenes in Bangladesh's internal affairs, violating the norms of international relations. Consequently, Bangladesh is maintaining a distance from India. This supremacy provokes antagonistic interactions among the nations. In response, Bangladesh is expanding its partnerships with countries such as China and demanding more equitable treatment from India.

How is India Far Away from the Neighborhood First Policy?

Actually, India adopted the Neighborhood First policy on paper; there is little or no actual implementation of the policy, especially in neighboring Bangladesh. From the very beginning, the Bangladesh-India border has become a deadly spot. As an upstream country, India controls the water flow of the rivers, violating the water-sharing agreement. It makes Bangladesh dry in the summer and winter and flooded in monsoon. The recent extensive flood in the southern part of Bangladesh for the heavy water of the Dumbur Dam without any prior warning is apparently a violation of the rights of a neighboring country.

Further tensions were raised due to the student uprising and fleeing of Sheikh Hasina in India. The Indian leaders and activists threaten Bangladesh. We may refer to Pradyot Kishore Debbarma, the founder of TIPRA Motha and ally of the ruling BJP, as a case. He repeatedly threatens Bangladesh over minority concerns. He warns of the power of India to cause the partition of Bangladesh, like Pakistan in 1971. He warned Bangladesh that "history may repeat itself." If Bangladesh continues to treat its minorities similarly, it may have the same outcome, resulting in breaking up once again (Choudhury, 2024). He also threatens the student advisors of Bangladesh, stating that they are essentially digging their own graves (Chakraborty, 2024).

It is evident from the analyses that India is far from the actual implementation of the Neighborhood First policy. Someone may raise questions about the very intention of the policy; instead of being a tool for cooperation and collaboration for mutual interest, development, and prosperity, it has been a mechanism to establish and deepen dominance over the neighboring states like Bangladesh. No neighboring countries are now an ally of India due to its dominating attitude towards them.

Paths to Bangladesh's Self-Reliance

The concept of "Neighborhood First" adopted by India to promote effective relations with its closest neighbors has received a lot of critique, primarily in Bangladesh. The latest diplomatic rifts between the two countries are evidence of a more general mode of unbalanced relations, where India tends to act mainly in its interests. Neglecting its smaller neighbors, such as Bangladesh, means isolating itself in the region as most countries look for other markets to do business within a rapidly developing world. The lack of Indian proprioception in Bangladesh that could foster cooperation and investment might cause China to strengthen its economic and strategic relations with Bangladesh.

Bangladesh needs to embark on multi-sectorial diversification to reduce its reliance on neighbors, which will require economic, health, tourism, and agricultural reforms. First of all, Bangladesh has become the second-largest exporter of garments worldwide. Residents should be convinced to buy local products instead of moving to India to purchase, hence improving the domestic economy and, at the same time, reducing demand for Indian products. Bangladesh government needs to modernize the tourism sector. Encouraging outbound tourism to other regional countries such as the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, and Thailand can also provide alternatives for travel currently directed towards India.

In terms of medical facilities, the government should prioritize building modern healthcare institutions equipped with updated medical facilities in every district and sub-district headquarters. Attracting foreign investment in the healthcare sector should not be a challenge for the government. Until such infrastructure is developed, alternative destinations such as Thailand and Singapore can serve as viable options for medical tourism, although at a higher cost. The government should solicit multinational hospital networks to establish branches in Bangladesh. Moreover,

diminishing superfluous medical travel to India via awareness campaigns can further curtail reliance. Finally, to increase the production of daily-demand agricultural products, we need to formulate and implement a rapid plan for development in the farming sector, which will reduce our dependence on imports of daily necessities from India.

One of the most critical dependencies for Bangladesh is that it depends on India for the visa process of European countries. Recently, Chief Adviser of Bangladesh Muhammad Yunus convened a conference with ambassadors from 27 European Union (EU) nations at the State Guest House Jamuna in Dhaka on December 9, 2024. He urged ambassadors from EU member nations to relocate their visa centers from New Delhi to Dhaka or a neighboring country. His proposal to transfer European visa bureaus highlights the necessity of diminishing reliance on India for administrative affairs. Establishing visa offices in Dhaka or neighboring countries will enhance the procedure for Bangladeshi citizens and indicate a transition towards increased regional autonomy. It will strengthen Bangladesh's relationship with the Europeans and other nations.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh and India will continue their relationship, but it must be based on mutual gain and respect. Both print and electronic media can play an important role in this matter. Bangladesh should highlight its talent, success, and achievements, leaving aside the looks, youth, and love stories of Indian celebrities. Rather than considering all these actions as anti-India sentiment, it will be the highest expression of the nation's patriotism.

The harsh reality is that India has lost all its neighboring countries except for Bangladesh. Bangladesh was, in essence, the only ally of its surrounding nations until August 5. The relations of India with China and Pakistan are everlastingly hostile. Recently, relations with other neighboring states, such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, have become more vulnerable. The Sri Lankan government continues to allege that India assisted the Tamil militants. The killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991, was attributed to the LTTE, resulting in weakened relations between the two countries. In the same way, Bhutan has endeavored to enhance relations with China to establish its own identity. This fosters antagonistic ties between the two states. India has persistently applied considerable

political pressure on Nepal. No anti-Indian regime in Nepal could last for this reason. Nepal is also endeavoring to maintain distance from India due to its hegemonic nature and interference in Nepal's internal affairs.

Following the collapse of the government in Bangladesh during the student uprising, ties between Bangladesh and India have begun to deteriorate. The relationship is nearing its conclusion. Owing to many crises, Bangladeshi visitors are absent in Kolkata. There are no Bangladeshi purchasers in Kolkata's conventional marketplaces. The sales of these establishments have declined by around 60 percent. Furthermore, the difficulty of selling to Bangladesh has lately caused India's raw material market to collapse. The corporate sector is facing challenges. Nonetheless, the influence has been negligible due to the availability of several other options for Bangladesh.

Water is the next oil. The world has seen several wars on oil. Presently, water has become one of the significant elements of conflict, and it is becoming more valuable day by day. Worldwide conflict concerning water sharing is a common scenario today. So, Bangladesh and India are at a critical point in this issue. Experts advise Bangladesh to strengthen regional cooperation with Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan, which also have water disputes with India, and consider addressing the issue on international venues like the UN. Regional organizations like SAARC might substantially enhance cooperation in water management, disaster mitigation, and the sustainable use of shared rivers.

The Bangladesh-India confrontation about border crises, water conflicts, and trade markets has clearly deteriorated mutual confidence. The problems of cross-border smuggling, human trafficking, and extrajudicial executions of Bangladeshi nationals by Indian border guards have resulted in heightened tensions in this region. Nevertheless, Bangladeshis are categorized into two factions. One faction has anti-Indian views, while another faction, including Hindus, supports India. Disregarding India will be much more challenging but not impossible. The relations will only be on the basis of mutual respect.

Conclusion

India's 'Neighborhood First' policy aims to boost trade, regional connectivity, and security cooperation with its neighbors in papers only. There is no actual implementation of this policy. Several heated issues, primarily generated by mistrust and a lack of confidence, highlight how fragile the two countries' collaboration is. The existing adversarial characteristics can swiftly replace past friendly relationships at any time. In recent years, China's economic and cultural impact has added to the complexity that India traditionally dominated due to trade investments and partnerships. Bangladesh is leaving India as a result of India's hegemonic stance and is currently developing strategies to reduce its dependence on India and to improve its integration with other regional nations.

This paper primarily focuses on the Indian neighborhood first policy in the post-Hasina regime. It also recommends how Bangladesh can reduce its reliance on India. This study underscores the rationale behind this research by advocating for a balanced relationship between the two countries that employs a mutual trust-based diplomatic approach to address critical circumstances, considering all phases of the relationship. Nevertheless, the Neighborhood First policy's effectiveness is contingent upon India's capacity to transform its declarative policy into pragmatic and innovative strategies that do not cause damage to its South Asian neighbors while simultaneously promoting mutually advantageous cooperation and ensuring non-alignment in the long term. Otherwise, Bangladesh would divert its focus from India, as the other neighboring states have done before with the country. This will have a significantly more substantial impact on India than on Bangladesh.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2024, November 29). Bangladesh condemns desecration of national flag in Kolkata -. *The Daily Observer*. <https://www.observerbd.com/news/501156>
- Ahmad, Ishfaq & Kumar, Abdul & Khan, Samim. (2024). From Shared Histories to Strategic Partnerships: Evolving Dynamics of India-Bangladesh Relations. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*. 5. 10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.2704.
- Ali, M. A. (2023). 51 Years of Bangladesh-India Bilateral Relations: Opportunities and Challenges. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373221739_51_Years_of_Bangladesh-India_Bilateral_Relations_Opportunities_and_Challenges

- Al Jazeera. (2019, August 31). Nearly 2 million excluded from India citizens list. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/31/india-excludes-nearly-2-million-people-from-assam-citizen-list>
- Banerji, A. (2021, April 09). India Must Settle the Teesta River Dispute With Bangladesh for Lasting Gains. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/india-must-settle-the-teesta-river-dispute-with-bangladesh-for-lasting-gains/>
- Banerjee, S., Guha, A., & Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (2017, July 24). The 2015 Bangladesh-India land boundary agreement: Identifying constraints and exploring possibilities in Cooch Behar.
- Behuria, A. K., Pattanaik, S. S., & Gupta, A. (2012). Does India have a neighborhood policy? *Strategic Analysis*, 36(2), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2012.646440>
- Bhattacharya, D., & Jahan, N. (2024, November 5). Bangladesh's shared GIs with India: The conflict and the outlook. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/bangladeshs-shared-gis-india-the-conflict-and-the-outlook-3744526>
- BIDA. (2024, November 10). Chinese investors show strong interest in Bangladesh's power sector. <https://bida.gov.bd/details/chinese-investors-show-strong-interest-bangladeshs-power-sector>
- BSS. (2024, December 11). 72pc accounts spreading anti-Bangladesh misinformation located in India: Rumor Scanner | News. BSS. <https://www.bssnews.net/news/229982>
- Chakraborty, T. (2024, December 18). Pradyot: Bangladesh digging own grave, slams student advisors' statement against India. India Today NE. <https://www.indiatodayne.in/tripura/story/pradyot-bangladesh-digging-own-grave-slams-student-advisors-statement-against-india-1139852-2024-12-18>
- Choudhury, R. (2024, September 26). Bangladesh May Go Pak Way: Tripura Party Warns About Violence Against Minorities. Wwww.Ndtv.Com. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bangladesh-may-go-the-pak-way-tripura-partys-warning-about-violence-on-minorities-6657241>
- Das, R. (2024, December 5). 3 arrested in West Bengal for desecrating Bangladesh flag. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/367204/3-arrested-in-west-bengal-for-desecrating>
- Debates, R. (2022, September 4). The 'Golden Chapter' of Bangladesh-India Diplomacy. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-golden-chapter-of-bangladesh-india-diplomacy>
- Dey, A. (2024, April 22). Trade deal with Japan will boost Bangladesh's post-LDC success. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/trade-deal-japan-will-boost-bangladeshs-post-ldc-success-3592676>

- Dhaka Tribune. (2024, November 27). Who is Chinmoy Krishna and why is he being charged with sedition? <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/366367/who-is-chinmoy-krishna-and-why-is-he-being-charged>
- Drishti IAS. (2024, March 20). Relooking India's Neighborhood First Policy. Drishti IAS. <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/relooking-india-s-neighborhood-first-policy>
- Ghoshal, B. (2017, November 9). India's Responses to the Complex Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar | East-West Centre | www.eastwestcentre.org.
- Gupta, J. (2017, April 15). Maitree Express chugs out of Kolkata in new avatar. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/maitree-express-chugs-out-of-kolkata-in-new-avatar/articleshow/58188874.cms>
- Hasan, R. (2024, Sep 12). Passenger numbers plummet on Bangladesh-India routes following August 5. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/passenger-numbers-plummet-bangladesh-india-routes-following-aug-5-3701146>
- IBEF. (2024, March). Exploring India Bangladesh trade and economic relations | ibef. India Brand Equity Foundation. <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/Bangladesh-India-trade>
- Iyer, S. (2024, November 30). "Insult to India": Bangladeshi students step on Indian flag at universities' gates, sparks outrage | See Pics. Asianet Newsable. <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/india/insult-to-Bangladesh-Indiai-students-step-on-indian-flag-at-university-gates-sparks-outrage-see-pics-snt-snr3rn>
- Korobi, S. (2024, April 26). A nation-wide nrc: Potential fallout for Bangladesh-India relations. South Asian Voices. <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-bd-r-nrc-Bangladesh-India-relations-04-26-2024/>
- Mahmud, K. U. (2023, April 16). Why does Bangladesh hold a strong position in India's Neighborhood first policy? The Geopolitics. <https://thegeopolitics.com/why-does-bangladesh-hold-a-strong-position-in-indias-Neighborhood-first-policy/>
- NDTV. (2024, June 8). Explained: India's Neighborhood first policy. NDTV.Com. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/what-is-india-s-neighborhood-first-policy->
- NeilWalker. (2019, September 5). Analyzing integrated check post in the India's border with Bangladesh. Border Security Report. <https://www.border-security-report.com/analysing-integrated-check-post-in-the-indias-border-with-bangladesh>
- Pattanaik, S. S. (2010). India's neighborhood policy: Perceptions from Bangladesh. Strategic Analysis, 35(1), 71–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2011.530985>
- Pandey, R., & Sharma, R. (2024, September 18). How the Bangladesh unrest may impact India's trade. <https://www.nipfp.org.in/media/medialibrary/2024/09/19092024.pdf>

- PRS India. (n.d.). Committee Reports on India's Neighborhood First Policy. PRS Legislative Research. Retrieved December 31, 2024, from <https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/india-s-neighborhood-first-policy>
- Rizve, Saqlain. (2024a, February 23). The deadly border between Bangladesh and India. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/the-deadly-border-between-bangladesh-and-india/>
- Rizve, Saqlain. (2024b, September 4). Bangladesh's new border stance signals a shift in its approach to India. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/bangladeshs-new-border-stance-signals-a-shift-in-its-approach-to-india/>
- Roche, E. (2014, September 28). Narendra Modi's UN speech impresses analysts in India, abroad. Mint. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/9PdqdSyoMd6YNNg0VGZpaM/Narendra-Modis-UN-speech-impresses-analysts-in-India-abroad.html>
- Romke, Rowshon. (2024). Nexus between India and Bangladesh in the Liberation War of Bangladesh: Consequences of International Agreement. *American Journal of Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation*. 52-59. 10.54536/ajiri.v3i4.3771.
- Roy, S. (2019, December 13). Bangladesh ministers cancel visit to India. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bangladesh-ministers-cancel-visit-to-india-citizenship-amendment-bill-6164430/>
- Roy, S. D. (2022, January 7). 11 years of Felani killing: Family still waiting for justice. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/11-years-felani-killing-family-still-waiting-justice-2934311>
- Sahoo, P. (2016). A history of India's neighborhood policy. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 20(3), 66–81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505294>
- Shahin, S. (2023, January 9). Bangladesh imports 51% of consumer goods from India and China. <https://www.kalerkantho.com/english/online/national>
- Shivamurthy, A. G. (2024). Debating partisanship in India's Neighborhood First policy. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/debating-partisanship-in-india-s-Neighborhood-first-policy>.
- Shuvo, A. H., & Pieal, J. N. (2024, February 8). The Tangail saree fiasco: Why cry over GI tag when we can't make use of it? *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/tangail-saree-fiasco-why-cry-over-gi-tag-when-we-cant-make-use-it-789718>
- Singh, N. (2014). India and Development Partnership: Special Reference with Bangladesh in 21st Century. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 157, 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.11.017>
- Staff Correspondent. (2024, July 09). Border killings go unabate. *New Age*. <https://www.newagebd.net/post/foreign%20affairs/239678/border-killings-go->

- Staff Reporter. (2023, April 28). China invested 7 billion dollars in Bangladesh, https://www.bonikbarta.com/home/news_description/338844/China-invested-7-billion-dollars-in-Bangladesh-got-contract-worth-23-billion
- Star Business Report. (2024, September 18). India's exports to Bangladesh fall 28% in August.
- Star Business Report. (2024a, November 3). Bangladesh skips India, reroutes global textile exports through Maldives. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/bangladesh-skips-india-reroutes-global-textile-exports-through-maldives-3743021>
- TBS. (2023, August 13). Bangladeshis account for second highest foreign tourist arrivals in India last year. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladeshis-account-second-highest-foreign-tourist-arrivals-india-last-year-681462>
- TBS. (2024a, February 8). Indian troops in Maldives will be replaced by “technical personnel”: MEA. https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/indian-troops-in-maldives-will-be-replaced-by-technical-personnel-mea-124020801124_1
- TBS. (2024b, September 18). India's exports to Bangladesh slip 28% in Aug; Crisil flags risk to export-oriented units. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/south-asia/indias-exports-bangladesh-slip-28-aug-crisil-flags-risk-export-oriented-units>
- TBS. (2024c, December 2). Bangladesh assistant high commission attacked in India, Hasnat announces protest procession. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-assistant-high-commission-attacked-india-hasnat-announced-protest-procession>
- Tribune Desk. (2024, September 8). Feni flood inflicts 200C in business losses. Dhaka Tribune. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/357669/feni-flood-inflicts-200c-in-business-losses>
- UNB. (2024, September 6). Feni officials estimate losses from flood amount to over Tk500cr. The Business Standard. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/feni-officials-estimate-losses-flood-amount-over-tk500cr-935191>
- Waliullah, H. R. (2024, December 6). Trade steady amid Bangladesh-India political tensions. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/7f991ff0de22>.
- Shahi, Shahidul Islam. (2024, December 20). ‘Forced statement on Hindu persecution in Indian media goes viral! (in Bengali). Jugantor. <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/893142> (accessed 31 December 2024)