

AIR UNIVERSITY ADVANCED RESEARCH: NEXT-GENERATION ISR DOMINANCE

ACCELERATE CHANGE OR LOSE BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Within the next five to ten years, China is likely to use its increased economic, infrastructure and military cooperation with Bangladesh as part of its efforts to combat the Western world order and expand from a regional to a global power broker. China has established an economic foothold in Bangladesh through foreign direct investments and defense cooperation agreements, allowing it to achieve military strategic objectives and enrich the Chinese state. Additionally, China has realized a large-scale infrastructure development plan to ingratiate Bangladeshi society and solidify Chinese presence in the country. China will prioritize military activities in Bangladesh, including increased arms sales, military equipment transference, joint exercises, and possible future basing efforts. The United States may be able to combat China's efforts in Bangladesh by increasing its own efforts in the country, raising global public awareness of China's malign influence, and revitalizing military and diplomatic ties with the country, undercutting future Chinese ambitions for global influence.

Introduction

Within the next five to ten years, China is very likely to increase its economic, infrastructure, and military cooperation with Bangladesh as part of its efforts to combat the Western world order and expand from regional to global power broker. Throughout the last five decades, China has prioritized political alignment, military and economic cooperation with Bangladesh as part of its efforts to establish a regional order favorable to the long-term strategic objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China will use Bangladesh as a pivot point to the Indian Ocean as part of its overall strategic objective to enable its freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the Indian Ocean.

China-Bangladesh Strategic Ties

China formerly supported Pakistan (and East Pakistan...now Bangladesh) since 1949. Following the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, China's relations with Bangladesh were tumultuous but China ultimately recognized Bangladesh in 1975. By the early 2000s, China's tenuous relations with Bangladesh formally changed after China achieved rapid economic growth and several domestic goals and began to expand regionally¹.

Bangladesh has been buying Chinese arms after its independence because the Bangladesh Army was familiar with the use of Chinese weapons, which led to the high demand for Chinese weapons. Naturally, their burgeoning defense relationship developed but it was decisively the 2002 Defense Cooperation Agreement that broadly deepened their relationship, which led to further expansion into the economic and infrastructure sectors. Between 2010 and 2019, China accounted for approximately 74% of Bangladesh's arms imports² and conversely Bangladesh

¹ Shigeo Kobayashi, Jia Baobo and Junya Sano, "Three Reforms" in China: Progress and Outlook," Japan Research Institute, September 1999,

<https://www.jri.co.jp/english/periodical/rim/1999/RIMe199904threereforms/>

² "China spreads its tentacles with arms exports," Asian News International, February 23 2021,

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/china-spreads-its-tentacles-with-arms-exports20210225132552/>

also forms 20% of China's total arms export, making Bangladesh second largest recipient of Chinese arms after Pakistan³. The Defense cooperation was the cornerstone to the relationship building between Bangladesh and China. In 2002, they signed the "Defence Cooperation Agreement" during a five-day visit to China, making China the only country with a broad defense cooperation agreement with Bangladesh; underscoring the further expansion into trade and investments sectors. Then Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia thanked Chinese officials for their substantial progress and stressed that Bangladesh will continue to abide by the 'one-China' policy. As a show of good faith, China strategically converted some loans to grants as a "gift of the Chinese people"⁴. Friendly bilateral relations between the two countries have been steadily developing and deepening, so much so that China is considered by many Bangladeshis as an 'all-weather friend'⁵.

Why Bangladesh

China observed Bangladesh's trend towards "one-party democracy", the need for economic and infrastructure development, and military modernization as a clear sign to invest. For an impoverished country like Bangladesh economic uplift of the country has been a major determinant in forging ties with countries. China accelerated its efforts to bring Bangladesh into its clutches in the early 2010s during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's consolidation of power and inquisition of the opposition party. Shiekh Hasina, in her fourth premiership, seeks to

³ Maryann Xue, "China's arms trade: which countries does it buy from and sell to?," South China Morning Post, July 04 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3139603/how-china-grew-buyer-major-arms-trade-player>

⁴ "China, Bangladesh sign landmark defence pact," Times Of India, December 25 2002, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/32366373.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁵ "China, all-weather friend of Bangladesh," Observer Research Foundation, September 17 2010, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-all-weather-friend-of-bangladesh>

leave a lasting legacy by way of mega infrastructure developments, one which China is more than willing to oblige⁶. Sheikh Hasina has provided political stability and much-needed change for her nation because a disruption in continuity would have been bad business for China.

Bangladesh has been doing quite well economically, with an average of six percent Gross Domestic Product growth year-after-year since 2012⁷, which may propel it to the middle-income country target set by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and she's been actively seeking investments to facilitate this growth⁸. China willingly funded important projects that were rejected by Western financiers⁹. China further courted Bangladesh because they observed favorable conditions to expand, export, and incorporate Bangladesh into the Belt and Road Initiative. The bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh have been further strengthened and elevated to the strategic partnership of cooperation when President Xi Jinping's visited Bangladesh in October 2016, marking the first Chinese head of state visit to Bangladesh in over 30 years. China unveiled that Bangladesh has formally recognized and joined China's Belt and Road Initiative. China and Bangladesh signed at least 21 agreements amounting to \$40 billion investment in Bangladesh. Additionally, China signed off on nearly \$24 billion worth of loans, which was Bangladesh's biggest foreign credit line¹⁰.

⁶ Kanchan Gupta, "Bangladesh now one-party democracy," Observer Research Foundation, December 31 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bangladesh-now-one-party-democracy-46912/>

⁷ Trading economics, "Bangladesh annual GDP growth rate," TE, March 23 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/bangladesh/gdp-growth>

⁸ "PM: Bangladesh to become higher middle income country soon," Dhaka Tribune, March 6 2019, <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/parliament/2019/03/06/pm-bangladesh-to-become-higher-middle-income-country-soon>

⁹ Sudha Ramachandran, "The Belt and Road Initiative Still Afloat in South Asia," Jamestown Foundation, January 5 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-belt-and-road-initiative-still-afloat-in-south-asia/>

¹⁰ Tekendra Parmar, "China's President Xi Jinping Makes 'Historic Visit' to Bangladesh," Time, October 14 2016, <https://time.com/4530974/bangladesh-xi-jinping-visit-china/>

Ports, Submarines and Freedom of Navigation

The strategic location of Bangladesh, facing the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, has created opportunities for it to serve sea-borne trade in the entire region. One of the most strategically important investments China has made are in the development of several deep seaports in Bangladesh¹¹. China also explicitly expressed interest in and actively sought a port of their own in Bangladesh for many years, and just when Bangladesh authorized China to construct a deep sea port at Sonadia, the project was subsequently canceled due to “environmental concerns”. In 2019, possibly as a concession, Bangladesh gave China access to two of its largest seaports—Chittagong and Mongla. Bangladesh’s dropping of the Sonadia port project was a devastating blow for China’s grand strategy. It encouraged China to search out other viable options and alternative deep-sea ports in Myanmar. January 2020, China and Myanmar signed 33 memoranda of understanding (MoUs), and Chinese President Xi Jinping sealed the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone Deep Sea Port Project deal, which is located in western Myanmar’s Rakhine State (location of the 2017 Rohingya genocide) that borders Bangladesh¹² - merely 1200 miles south from Sonadia.

From China’s standpoint, freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean guarantees them access to the vital sea lanes not only to safeguard their strategic economic interests but also to posture/prepare for any future conflicts/war. Chinese submarines in particular could have a strategic impact if they were able to freely traverse in/out/through the Indian Ocean. Once

¹¹ Saifuddin Saif, “Costs, time to complete Payra Sea Port Project increase,” The Business Standard, January 14 2020, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/infrastructure/costs-time-complete-payra-sea-port-project-increase-36333>

¹² Ali Saif Shawon, “Deep sea port project in Matarbari gains pace, Sonadia dropped,” Dhaka Tribune, January 23 2020, <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2020/01/23/deep-sea-port-project-in-matarbari-gains-pace-sonadia-dropped>

through into the Indian Ocean, the submarines could get rearmed or resupplied without having to return to China. Even if the submarines themselves did not call into the port, evading detection, vessels could carry out at-sea replenishment - making a beeline to their base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa. However, the Sunda Strait, together with the Lombok Strait and Malacca Strait, are strategic choke points between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. If the China's People's Liberation Army Navy is to operate more in the Indian Ocean, China will need to consider the safest routes through these choke points, which requires extensive survey operations¹³. The China's People's Liberation Army Navy is rapidly pursuing global capabilities. Chinese government survey ships and the China's People's Liberation Army Navy have been ramping up their survey operations up into the Bay of Bengal and into to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea¹⁴, gathering information for naval planners relevant to submarine warfare¹⁵. However, both China's People's Liberation Army Navy and survey vessels have been intercepted and challenged for conducting operations in the Indian Ocean without broadcasting their position¹⁶. Because China lacks a legitimate argument to freely survey or operate in the Indian Ocean, a port in Bangladesh would offer legitimacy¹⁷.

¹³ H I Sutton, "Chinese Survey Ship Caught 'Running Dark' Give Clues to Underwater Drone Operations," US Naval Institute, January 16 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/16/chinese-survey-ship-caught-running-dark-give-clues-to-underwater-drone-operations>

¹⁴ Rahul Singh, "From submarines to warships: How Chinese navy is expanding its footprint in Indian Ocean," The Hindustan Times, July 5 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/from-submarines-to-warships-how-chinese-navy-is-expanding-its-footprint-in-indian-ocean/story-QeJp31UtBphNjya2z8L7gM.html>

¹⁵ H I Sutton, "Chinese Survey Ship Caught 'Running Dark' Give Clues to Underwater Drone Operations," US Naval Institute, January 16 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/16/chinese-survey-ship-caught-running-dark-give-clues-to-underwater-drone-operations>

¹⁶ Snehes Alex Philip, "Satellite catches Chinese survey ship mapping seabed in eastern Indian Ocean," The Print, 22 January, 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/satellite-catches-chinese-survey-ship-mapping-seabed-in-eastern-indian-ocean/590083/>

¹⁷ H I Sutton, "China's New High-Security Compound In Pakistan May Indicate Naval Plans," Forbes, June 2 2020,

China has also consistently shown keen interest in engaging with South Asian countries as it provides a backdoor to the Indian Ocean. In 2013 China achieved a major milestone for their grand strategy by selling Bangladesh two submarines at a cost of \$203M. Subsequently, Bangladesh also entered into an exclusive agreement with China to build, train and finance the submarine base at a cost of estimated US \$1.2 billion. In late 2016, the Bangladesh navy inducted two 035G diesel-electric Ming class submarines. In 2017, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation stone of the future submarine base, BNS Sheikh Hasina, located in Pekua¹⁸ (coincidentally BNS Sheikh Hasina is located approximately 30 miles from the proposed Sonadia port for China). Furthermore, Chinese personnel will be heavily involved in “supervising the construction and providing the designs” of the submarine base in Pekua and Chinese crews will be attached to the newly minted Bangladesh submariners for training and familiarization purposes¹⁹. Bangladesh also permitted China to extend its sensor net into the Bay of Bengal²⁰. It is difficult to discern why Bangladesh purchased submarines because they do not encounter any conventional maritime-military threats; nonetheless, it means further deepening of China and Bangladesh²¹.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/06/02/chinas-new-high-security-compound-in-pakistan-may-indicate-naval-plans/?sh=37bb16ed1020>

¹⁸ Sorwar Alam, “Bangladesh navy inducts first ever submarines,” Anadolu Agency, December 3 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-navy-inducts-first-ever-submarines/769760>

¹⁹ BenarNews, “China To Help Bangladesh Build Submarine Base, Senior Official Says,” Radio Free Asia, September 12 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/bangladesh-submarine-09122019173617.html>

²⁰ “Why China’s Submarine Deal With Bangladesh Matters,” The Diplomat, January 20 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/why-chinas-submarine-deal-with-bangladesh-matters/>

²¹ Vivek Raghuvanshi, “Purchase of Chinese Subs by Bangladesh 'An Act of Provocation' Toward India,” Defense News, November 23 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2016/11/23/purchase-of-chinese-subs-by-bangladesh-an-act-of-provocation-toward-india/>

Assessment

Upon completion of the submarine base, it is likely that China will “strong-arm” Bangladesh into gaining access to the submarine base. The deliberate ambiguity of the “Defence Cooperation Agreement” afforded China leeway for expanding the strategic cooperation in the future. Consequently, another Chinese milestone was achieved in April 2021 when China and Bangladesh agreed to advance bilateral military cooperation by increasing the high-level visits, deepen cooperation in equipment technology, broaden exchanges in specialized fields, and forge closer military relations²². As a short-term strategy, China may propose to increase bilateral naval exercises in Bangladesh under the guise of bolstering the knowledge and proficiency of the Bangladeshi submariners. Although Bangladesh is prematurely purporting that Chinese submarines will not use the facility, this would not be the first time Bangladesh backtracked on its words. In January 2016, Bangladesh told Reuters that they had never hosted a naval ship from China and had no plans to do so²³; however, weeks later, two Chinese guided-missile frigates and a supply ship docked at Chittagong before conducting drills with the Bangladesh Navy²⁴.

With a potential Chinese submarine base in Bangladesh or an ‘all-access’ to BNS Sheikh Hasina submarine base, China can further its strategic objectives uncontested. During peacetime, Chinese submarines could enter the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal from the Strait of Malacca overtly. Through the Chinese development of deep-sea ports and submarine base construction, China is leaving a permanent footprint in Bangladesh. Pakistan can be considered

²² Smruti S. Pattanaik, “The Geopolitics of Power Configuration in South Asia: Understanding Chinese Defence Minister’s Visit to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka,” Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies, June 02, 2021,

https://idsa.in/issuebrief/china-defe-minister-visit-bangladesh-sri-lanka-ss-pattanaik#footnote7_piwro6m
²³ Sanjeev Miglani, “Indian leader heading to Bangladesh with China on his mind,” Reuters, May 27 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-bangladesh-china-idUSL3N0YG2QG20150527>

²⁴ Ananth Krishna, “In a first, Chinese Navy frigates dock in Bangladesh,” India Today, January 28 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/in-a-first-chinese-navy-frigates-dock-in-bangladesh-306014-2016-01-28>

the “Buckle” in the Belt and Road Initiative as it is (geographically) at the heart of the BRI’s route map; thus, Bangladesh can also be seen as a “notch” to their grand strategy to fully close/secure the overland belt and the maritime road.

Concerns and Opportunities

Despite the fact of increasing Chinese influence over the recent years, Bangladesh is currently the least susceptible South Asian country becoming overly dependent on China²⁵. Bangladesh is a part of BRI but also wants to be part of the “Indo-Pacific relationship”—a clear reference to the U.S. Indo-Pacific policy. Bangladesh wants to diversify its engagements with multiple foreign partners in order to bolster its ability to act independently and diversify its foreign loan portfolio. Bangladesh provides a strategic opportunity for the United States. By pursuing a deeper partnership with Bangladesh, the U.S. can counterbalance Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific region²⁶. The U.S. can capitalize on Bangladeshi’s intent by providing Bangladesh with two key needs: infrastructure and military hardware.

With U.S. strategic capital and infrastructure development plans it will counterbalance China and BRI but the U.S. has to move with a sense of urgency and outpace China. Bangladesh’s concerns and intentions are purely internal economic stability and improving the quality of life for its citizens—it wants to modernize its infrastructure (roads, rails, bridges, highways, telecommunication, ports, etc.). Although China today is the largest trading partner of Bangladesh, Bangladesh government wants to shrink the trade deficit (US \$17.3 billion, a

²⁵ Deep Pal, “China’s Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries,” The Carnegie Endowment, October 13 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-south-asia-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85552>

²⁶ Anu Anwar, “America Should Bet on Bangladesh,” Foreign Policy Magazine, December 21 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/01/us-bangladesh-relations-dhaka-india-china-bri/>

16-fold increase in the last two decades) that favors China²⁷. The U.S. should seize the opportunity hereby increasing economic and infrastructure investments in Bangladesh and also encourage U.S. allies to do the same in order to counter China.

The growing trade deficit extends to the military arms purchases sector as well. Bangladesh's armed forces have raised several concerns over the quality and longevity of Chinese military equipment. Defects have been detected in new Chinese frigates for the Bangladesh Navy, and aircraft for the Bangladesh Air Force to name a few²⁸. The U.S. should seize the opportunity by increasing Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing to Bangladesh to counter China. The Department of Defense should increase slots for Bangladeshi Officers to attend U.S. Professional Military Training courses. Additionally, the U.S. Navy should increase its presence in the Indian Ocean and make frequent port calls to Bangladesh. Currently, the U.S. Navy relies on the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise to visit Bangladesh. While China is heavily invested in modernizing the Bangladesh Navy, the U.S. Air Force still has time to counterbalance the Chinese naval footprint in Bangladesh. It should increase bilateral training exercises with the Bangladesh Air Force and provide the Bangladesh Air Force with U.S. aircraft. Lastly, the absence of the U.S. affords China greater access to Bangladesh, which will increase the difficulty of conducting Agile Combat Employment in that region as it increases China's operational reach. Within the next five to ten years, the U.S. should consider and pursue Bangladesh as a potential partner to conduct Agile Combat Employment with, as this wouldn't be a farfetched or first-ever idea. During

²⁷ "Bangladesh" The Observatory of Economic Complexity, Accessed March 23 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/bgd?depthSelector2=HS4Depth>

²⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Chinese arms to Dhaka fail quality and longevity tests, one after the other," Economic Times Bureau, November 04 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chinese-arms-to-dhaka-fail-quality-and-longevity-tests-one-after-the-other/articleshow/87516127.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

World War II, allied and U.S. forces used the China, Burma, India theater to strategically resupply (by air over the Himalayas or by land from India to Kunming) allied forces in China combating Japanese forces²⁹. Ironically, the U.S. can apply the same concept to counter China in future conflicts. Bangladesh is a prime location for prepositioned equipment to support forward aircraft or naval operations. The right way for the U.S. to approach Bangladesh is to genuinely build better relations under the pretext of mutual benefit. The wrong way to approach Bangladesh is to push anti-China rhetoric. Bangladesh's core foreign policy is 'Friendship to all, malice towards none' thus they do not side with "any one nation"³⁰. U.S. diplomacy must be cautious and mindful of Bangladesh's sensitivities. If Bangladesh perceives that the U.S. is pressuring them, then Bangladesh would be reluctant to get closer to the U.S. The lack of U.S. action/interest will be a detriment in the long run, hence the need to accelerate now or lose.

Conclusion: Accelerate changes or lose Bangladesh

If China continues unabated, the West risks China's expanded offensive naval capabilities, up to and including future nuclear-armed submarines based and operating off the coast of India. If Chinese influence across the economic, infrastructure and military sectors go unchecked, then within the next five to ten years, China is very likely to solidify its hold over Bangladesh. The U.S. may be able to combat this expansion by increasing investments in Bangladesh, raising global public awareness of China's malign influence, and revitalizing military and diplomatic ties with the country. That being said, this is a wake-up call for the U.S. to realize the full potential of its ties with Bangladesh and increase its economic, military, and people-to-people ties.

²⁹ "China-Burma-India, WW II's Forgotten Theater," Library of Congress, Accessed March 25 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-cbi.html>

³⁰ "Bangladesh's foreign policy must reflect national interest," New Age Bangladesh, December 16 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/157454/bangladeshs-foreign-policy-must-reflect-national-interest>

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http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/32366373.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
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