



INDIA'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA: RESPONDING TO THE RISE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of political Islam in Bangladesh, particularly following the political upheaval of 2024, poses a significant strategic challenge for India. As Islamist forces such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam regain influence in Bangladeshi politics, India is compelled to reassess its foreign policy priorities and regional security posture. This paper examines the domestic factors driving the rise of political Islam in Bangladesh and analyzes its implications for India's border security, bilateral relations, and regional diplomacy. It argues that India faces a strategic dilemma—balancing the need to address security concerns with the imperative to maintain diplomatic engagement. The paper proposes a calibrated response framework combining intelligence cooperation, soft power diplomacy, and regional multilateralism to safeguard India's interests without destabilizing an already volatile neighbourhood.

Keywords: Political Islam, chicken neck,

INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of Bangladesh is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by the re-emergence of political Islam as a potent force. Once envisioned as a secular republic following its independence in 1971, Bangladesh now finds itself grappling with the rising influence of Islamist parties and movements. This ideological shift has profound implications not only for its internal political stability but also for the strategic environment of South Asia, particularly India. As Bangladesh's closest neighbor and strategic partner, India is compelled to reassess its foreign policy and security calculus in light of these developments.

The resurgence of political Islam in Bangladesh is neither abrupt nor accidental. Rather, it reflects a culmination of socio-political trends, including the disenchantment with secular politics, institutional neglect, and the mobilization capacity of Islamist networks. Over the past two decades, Islamist organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam have



leveraged religious identity politics, social conservatism, and populist narratives to expand their support base (Riaz, 2016). The political vacuum created after the 2024 general elections—marked by the exit of the Awami League and a weakened opposition—has allowed these groups to re-enter the mainstream with renewed vigor.

India, which enjoyed stable and cooperative relations with the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government, is now faced with an uncertain strategic environment. The Awami League's tenure had seen unprecedented collaboration between India and Bangladesh on a range of issues, including counterterrorism, border management, infrastructure, and trade (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2022). However, the ideological tilt of the emerging political leadership in Dhaka threatens to reverse many of these gains. Anti-India rhetoric and Islamist mobilization can exacerbate communal tensions, embolden radical elements across the border, and push Bangladesh closer to China and Pakistan—two countries with a history of strategic rivalry with India (Baruah, 2023).

Historically, India has viewed Bangladesh not merely as a neighbor but as a key partner in its "Neighborhood First" policy and its Act East strategy. The Indo-Bangladesh relationship was built on the shared history of the 1971 liberation war, linguistic and cultural ties, and mutual security concerns, particularly regarding insurgency and terrorism in India's Northeast. In recent years, India has invested in cross-border connectivity projects, energy cooperation, and river-water sharing negotiations (Chakravarty, 2020). Yet, the ideological rise of political Islam threatens to reframe this bilateral equation along lines of identity and ideology, complicating India's strategic goals in the region.

Moreover, the radicalization of sections of the Bangladeshi population—particularly through madrasas and religious NGOs—is a growing concern for Indian policymakers. Several incidents involving Bangladesh-based terror groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which have links to West Bengal and Assam, underscore the transnational threat posed by Islamist extremism (South Asia Terrorism Portal [SATP], 2023). The potential for cross-border infiltration, smuggling of arms, and recruitment of Indian Muslims into extremist networks further aggravates India's security dilemma.

At the same time, India must tread cautiously. A heavy-handed or overly reactive approach could alienate the Bangladeshi state and strengthen hardline narratives that frame India as a Hindu hegemon interfering in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. The challenge, therefore, lies in crafting a calibrated policy response—one that addresses security concerns while maintaining



diplomatic engagement. This strategic dilemma encapsulates the core issue of India's evolving neighborhood policy amid rising political Islam in Bangladesh.

This paper seeks to explore the contours of this strategic dilemma. It begins by tracing the domestic drivers behind the resurgence of political Islam in Bangladesh, followed by an analysis of its implications for India's national security and foreign policy. The paper concludes by offering strategic policy recommendations for India to navigate this evolving geopolitical terrain.

2. Rise of Political Islam in Bangladesh: Key Drivers

The resurgence of political Islam in Bangladesh is not a sudden phenomenon but a result of interconnected domestic and transnational developments. The weakening of secular political institutions, coupled with growing socio-economic grievances and external ideological influences, has contributed to the rapid mainstreaming of Islamist forces. Four key drivers explain this transformation: a political power vacuum, a legitimacy crisis, institutional penetration by religious networks, and transnational ideological trends.

2.1 Political Power Vacuum

The 2024 general elections in Bangladesh marked a significant turning point in the country's political trajectory. The exit of Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League—after over 15 years of uninterrupted rule—ushered in a transitional and weak central government, lacking both legitimacy and popular mandate. This created a fertile ground for Islamist actors, who had been politically suppressed and socially delegitimized under Hasina's secular-nationalist regime, to reassert themselves. Islamist parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and organizations like Hefazat-e-Islam repositioned themselves as champions of moral governance and religious justice (Riaz, 2016).

These groups had, during the Awami League's rule, faced widespread crackdowns, legal bans, and public criticism due to their alleged links to war crimes during the 1971 Liberation War and to radical violence. However, the fall of a dominant regime and the erosion of institutional stability allowed them to return to public discourse under the guise of populist and identity-based politics (Ahmed, 2024). In the absence of a strong centrist force, Islamists stepped into the void, promoting themselves as the only "untainted" political alternative.

2.2 Legitimacy Crisis and Popular Support

The legitimacy of secular politics in Bangladesh began eroding even before 2024, with increasing accusations of authoritarianism, human rights abuses, media censorship, and



electoral manipulation under the Awami League (Human Rights Watch, 2023). While the government achieved impressive economic growth and infrastructure development, the benefits were perceived as unevenly distributed. Corruption scandals, extrajudicial killings, and suppression of dissent led to growing public alienation, particularly among young voters and marginalized rural populations.

Islamist groups exploited this disillusionment by framing secularism as corrupt and alien to the nation's Islamic heritage. They promoted religious revivalism and positioned Islamic governance as a more just, morally sound, and culturally resonant alternative (Riaz & Fair, 2011). Through madrasa education, Friday sermons, and social media campaigns, they effectively communicated their narrative to a wide demographic, linking everyday economic hardships to spiritual decline and Westernized governance models. The slogan "Islam is the solution" gained traction in a society increasingly disillusioned by elite-driven politics.

2.3 Institutional Penetration

The resurgence of political Islam in Bangladesh is strongly driven by deep institutional penetration achieved by religious networks. The Qawmi madrasa system, largely beyond state oversight, acts as the ideological and logistical base for Islamist mobilization (Rahman, 2019). Supported by Gulf-based charities and NGOs like Al-Haramain and Rabeta Al-Alam Al-Islami, these institutions have created a parallel infrastructure of religious education, welfare, and political activism (ICG, 2018). Since 2024, this network has been reactivated to support Islamist political entry amid the weakening of secular governance. Additionally, Pakistan's ISI has exploited this environment by channeling covert support through hawala networks and religious charities, particularly to border-area madrasas (Riaz, 2016).

Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam have long-standing ties with Pakistan, enabling ISI to foster digital propaganda and sleeper cells in India's Northeast (Baruah, 2023; SATP, 2023). This nexus of religious radicalism and geopolitical interference presents a growing strategic threat for India.

2.4 Global Trends and Transnational Influence

The rise of political Islam in Bangladesh must also be contextualized within broader global and regional trends. Over the past two decades, Islamist narratives have gained global visibility, from the electoral successes of political Islam in Turkey and Tunisia to the ideological victories of groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan. These developments have



emboldened Islamist actors in Bangladesh by reinforcing the idea that Islam-based governance is both viable and legitimate (Roy, 2021).

Moreover, Bangladesh remains vulnerable to transnational ideological and financial influences. Pakistan's religious outreach and media diplomacy have subtly promoted shared narratives of Islamic solidarity and anti-India sentiment. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, continue to fund religious education and charities in Bangladesh, often without oversight or transparency. Reports suggest that even Taliban-affiliated networks have sought to establish informal ideological connections through online platforms and religious influencers (SATP, 2023).

The interconnectedness of these global and regional networks amplifies the ideological messaging of Bangladeshi Islamists, giving them external validation and operational resilience. In this ecosystem, local grievances are easily fused with global Islamist rhetoric, making political Islam in Bangladesh not merely a domestic issue but a regional strategic challenge for India and South Asia at large.

3. Implications for India

The rise of political Islam in Bangladesh has profound implications for India, particularly in terms of national security, diplomatic relations, internal social harmony, and regional strategic dynamics. As Islamist groups gain legitimacy and institutional control in Dhaka, India faces a complex web of emerging threats and strategic recalibrations.

3.1 Border Security and Radicalization

India shares a 4,096-kilometre-long porous border with Bangladesh, much of it passing through sensitive regions of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. The ascent of Islamist political forces in Bangladesh increases the threat of cross-border infiltration, illegal migration, arms smuggling, and radical messaging. Past incidents—such as the 2014 Burdwan blast—exposed the operations of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in Indian territory, indicating deep interlinkages between Bangladeshi and Indian extremist elements (SATP, 2023). With increased political space, groups like JMB may once again expand their footprint in India's border states, particularly among marginalized youth vulnerable to radicalization (Roy, 2021). Intelligence reports already suggest renewed recruitment activity and social media-driven radical messaging aligned with broader Islamist narratives emerging from Bangladesh (Baruah, 2023).



3.2 Strain on Bilateral Relations

Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League, India and Bangladesh enjoyed a high point in bilateral ties—marked by cooperation in counterterrorism, connectivity, water-sharing, and regional infrastructure (Saran, 2020). However, a government influenced or controlled by Islamist factions could recalibrate Bangladesh's foreign policy in ways detrimental to Indian interests. Such a regime might adopt a more nationalistic and anti-India tone domestically to gain populist legitimacy, oppose cross-border trade deals, delay Teesta water-sharing agreements, or actively seek closer military and economic cooperation with China and Pakistan (Riaz, 2016). This shift would not only reverse decades of diplomatic engagement but also jeopardize India's strategic vision for regional integration in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal.

3.3 Communal Tensions within India

The communal dimension of developments in Bangladesh often reverberates within India, especially in West Bengal and Assam, where there is a significant Bengali-speaking Muslim population. Attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh—such as those following the 2021 Durga Puja violence—have triggered protests, political mobilizations, and communal unrest across Indian states (Chakrabarti, 2022). The legitimization of Islamist political actors in Dhaka is likely to increase the frequency and severity of such incidents, which can fuel religious polarization and social fragmentation in India.

Politicians and fringe groups in India may exploit these developments for electoral gains, thereby undermining communal harmony and increasing the risk of domestic violence and unrest.

3.4 Strategic Realignment in the Region

A more Islamist-oriented Bangladesh may initiate a significant geopolitical realignment in South Asia. With India increasingly viewed as a Hindu-majoritarian state and the West preoccupied with internal challenges, China and Pakistan are poised to fill the vacuum. China has already made deep inroads in Bangladesh through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), port development, and defense sales (Pant & Saha, 2022). An Islamist regime may view Beijing as a non-interfering economic patron and Islamabad as an ideological ally. Such a realignment could marginalize India in the eastern neighborhood, erode its maritime strategy in the Bay of Bengal, and complicate the security calculus for India's Northeast—including the Siliguri Corridor or "Chicken's Neck," which remains a vulnerable lifeline (Singh, 2021).



In this environment, India may have to recalibrate its Bangladesh policy from friendly engagement to defensive containment, with implications for military posture, intelligence coordination, and regional diplomacy.

4. India's Strategic Dilemma

The rise of political Islam in Bangladesh has placed India in a complex strategic predicament. On one hand, India must address the clear and present danger posed by growing radicalization, cross-border infiltration, and geopolitical shifts. On the other, it must preserve its historically strong ties with the Bangladeshi state and society to avoid strategic alienation and preserve regional stability. Navigating this tightrope—between assertive defense and diplomatic restraint—is India's foremost strategic dilemma in the eastern neighborhood.

India's foremost concern is national security. The resurgence of Islamist political forces in Bangladesh—some with ties to violent extremist networks like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)—raises serious alarm about potential spillover effects. Indian intelligence agencies have documented attempts by JMB and affiliated groups to set up sleeper cells in border states like West Bengal and Assam (SATP, 2023). The radical ecosystem in Bangladesh, supported in part by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is increasingly digital, decentralized, and ideologically aligned with broader anti-India narratives (Baruah, 2023). Ignoring these threats could allow extremist groups to regroup and reassert themselves, both inside India and across the Indo-Bangladesh frontier.

However, an overly aggressive Indian response—such as public condemnation, increased border militarization, or support for opposition groups in Bangladesh—may backfire. It could inadvertently strengthen anti-India sentiment within Bangladesh and be exploited by Islamist factions to portray India as an interventionist Hindu nationalist power (Chakrabarti, 2022). This could lead to political polarization in Dhaka, weaken moderate voices, and push Bangladesh into a tighter embrace with rival powers like China and Pakistan. Already, China has cultivated significant economic and military relations with Dhaka through infrastructure investments, arms sales, and vaccine diplomacy (Pant & Saha, 2022). If India is seen as hostile or insensitive, this strategic drift may accelerate.

Furthermore, India's own internal communal environment influences its strategic bandwidth. Domestic political narratives often portray Bangladesh as a source of illegal migration and radical Islam. Any retaliatory policy toward Dhaka that is perceived as religiously motivated could deepen communal divisions within India, particularly in sensitive regions such as



Assam, West Bengal, and the Northeast (Roy, 2021). Thus, New Delhi must balance external firmness with internal cohesion.

To navigate this dilemma, India must adopt a multi-pronged approach. First, enhance covert intelligence cooperation and border surveillance without public confrontation. Second, deepen people-to-people ties, economic engagement, and civil society outreach to prevent alienation of moderate constituencies within Bangladesh. Third, work quietly with regional and global partners to contain transnational Islamist networks without pushing Dhaka into isolation. Fourth, reinforce strategic narratives that emphasize shared cultural heritage, secularism, and regional stability over religious or ethnic binaries.

In sum, India's strategic response must be calibrated, not reactionary—rooted in long-term regional interests rather than short-term optics. The dual challenge of confronting Islamism and maintaining strategic ties requires patient diplomacy, smart power, and domestic political maturity.

5. Strategic Response Options for India

The evolving political dynamics in Bangladesh—marked by the resurgence of political Islam—pose a multidimensional challenge to Indian interests. While the risks are evident, India has both the capacity and opportunity to shape outcomes favorably through a calibrated strategic response.

India must balance national security imperatives with diplomatic finesse, using a combination of hard and soft power tools. The following approaches outline a feasible roadmap.

5.1 Reinforce Intelligence and Border Control

India's foremost priority must be to fortify its border management with Bangladesh. The 4,096 km porous border, often crossing rivers, forests, and villages, has historically been used for illegal migration, smuggling, and militant infiltration (SATP, 2023). Strengthening border surveillance using drones, thermal sensors, and satellite imagery will help detect and deter unlawful crossings. The Border Security Force (BSF) must work in tandem with local police and intelligence units to monitor radical activities in sensitive districts of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura (Roy, 2021). Furthermore, enhancing real-time information-sharing mechanisms with Bangladeshi security agencies—even under Islamist-leaning governments—will be essential for preempting terror plots and neutralizing sleeper cells.



5.2 Engage Pragmatically with the New Regime

Despite ideological discomfort, India must not disengage from a changing regime in Dhaka. History shows that diplomatic boycotts or confrontational rhetoric can drive smaller neighbors toward rival powers like China or Pakistan (Pant & Saha, 2022). A pragmatic, behind-the-scenes engagement with transitional or Islamist-influenced governments in Bangladesh is vital to maintain leverage. Quiet diplomacy can help secure commitments on counterterrorism, refugee control, and the protection of minority communities. For example, India can negotiate joint task forces or intelligence-sharing protocols without publicizing them. Maintaining embassy-level ties, economic cooperation, and parliamentary delegations will also ensure that communication channels remain open during turbulent transitions.

5.3 Cultivate Civil Society and Moderate Voices

India must recognize the importance of civil society in shaping long-term ideological trends in Bangladesh. Soft power diplomacy should be leveraged to empower moderate Muslim voices, secular educators, women's organizations, and youth leaders. Programs offering scholarships to Bangladeshi students, cultural exchanges, and academic fellowships can help foster goodwill (Saran, 2020). India's shared cultural legacy with Bangladesh—including figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Baul music traditions, and Sufi saints—can be highlighted through public diplomacy campaigns and joint media initiatives. These efforts can reinforce pluralism and act as a counterweight to extremist narratives.

NGOs with secular or human rights mandates should be supported to extend India's influence beyond official diplomatic channels.

5.4 Strengthen Regional Alliances

India's regional security cannot be ensured in isolation. New Delhi must enhance coordination through multilateral platforms like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), both of which include Bangladesh. These forums can be used to initiate counter-extremism dialogues, maritime security exercises, and economic integration efforts (Kapur, 2022). Additionally, India should build coalitions with like-minded global partners such as the United States, Japan, France, and the European Union. These countries have a vested interest in maintaining regional stability and curbing extremism. Developmental assistance and infrastructure investments from such partners can offer Dhaka viable alternatives to Chinese debt-diplomacy and ideological alignment with Pakistan.



6. Long-Term Considerations

The rise of political Islam in Bangladesh signals more than just a transient political shift—it reflects a deeper transformation in the country's socio-political landscape. India must therefore treat the current developments not as an isolated challenge but as part of an evolving ideological ecosystem that demands sustained and multidimensional engagement. This transformation is being driven by demographic shifts, the institutionalization of religious networks, and increasing exposure to global Islamist currents (Riaz, 2016).

A narrow security-centric approach will be insufficient. India's long-term strategy must integrate economic development partnerships, people-to-people connectivity, and value-based cultural diplomacy. Initiatives such as joint heritage projects, inclusive education programs, and cross-border tourism—centered on shared histories and secular traditions—can help counterbalance exclusivist ideologies. India's outreach should also promote gender rights, democratic values, and technological collaboration, reinforcing secular civil society in Bangladesh (Saran, 2020). Simultaneously, India must be vigilant about the risk of domestic communal polarization. Reactionary policies or rhetoric—particularly in states bordering Bangladesh—can amplify extremist narratives that portray India as hostile to Islam, thereby strengthening hardline Islamist groups within Bangladesh (Roy, 2021). Maintaining an inclusive, pluralistic image is crucial not just for domestic stability but also for sustaining constructive influence over Bangladesh's internal evolution.

In sum, India's response must evolve from tactical reaction to strategic patience. By addressing ideological shifts with nuance and foresight, India can not only safeguard its national interests but also shape a more resilient regional order that resists extremist encroachments.

7. Conclusion

The ascendance of political Islam in Bangladesh marks a significant inflection point in South Asian geopolitics and presents a complex strategic challenge for India. With the weakening of the secular Awami League and the resurgence of Islamist forces, India's long-standing assumptions about its eastern neighbor are being tested. This development risks destabilizing the Indo-Bangladeshi borderlands, altering regional alignments, and emboldening extremist narratives both within and beyond Bangladesh.

India must respond with a finely balanced approach—one that reinforces national security while avoiding actions that could alienate the Bangladeshi state or public. Strategic patience,



intelligence preparedness, and robust diplomacy will be crucial. Simultaneously, India must invest in soft power and civil society engagement to promote pluralism and counter radical ideologies over the long term.

This evolving scenario demands not just tactical adjustments but a recalibration of India's broader neighborhood policy. The challenge is not merely to contain a political shift but to shape the trajectory of a neighboring society in transition. Only by combining firmness with flexibility, and realpolitik with regional empathy, can India safeguard its interests and contribute to long-term regional stability.

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