



Tillotoma Foundation

Bangladesh Scenario & India-Bangladesh Relations in the Wake of the Regime Change

Analytical Seminar Report



Rajiv Bhatia
Jitendra K. Ojha
Aneek Chatterjee
Namrata Kothari

Baladas Ghoshal
Shweta Singh
Udai Bhanu Singh
Kamakshi Wason

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India-Bangladesh Relations in the Wake of the Regime Change

Seminar Report



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Preface

On 5th August, 2024, after days of intensive student and public protests, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina resigned from her office and left the country, later taking up shelter in India. An interim government was sworn in on 8th August, 2024 with Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus as the Chief Advisor or head. Yunus was in Paris when the previous administration fell, he returned subsequently to take charge of the interim government.

Tillotoma Foundation organized an Analysis Seminar on '**India-Bangladesh Relations in the Wake of the Regime Change**' on 14th August, 2024 with a stellar panel of distinguished experts. There was a highly erudite discussion at the seminar. Each distinguished speaker focused on specific aspects of the topic, based on their respective expertise and experience, thereby covering a wide range of perspectives, suggestions and arguments. This included examining and critiquing key concepts like regime change, revolution, democracy, neighbourhood policy, gender, role of women in leadership and mass movements, intelligence, strategy, national security, identity politics, rights of minorities etc. in the context of the recent incidents in Bangladesh. The seminar also attempted to explore the potential implications of the regime change for South Asian regional dynamics, especially the India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship as

well as the impact on regional multilateral forums like BIMSTEC. This included identifying the important lessons from Indian Foreign Policy in South Asia in the past decade. The role of the western powers like the United States was also covered in the analysis. The present circumstances in Bangladesh was discussed in the context of both the past events as well as the probable future trajectory. I am happy to present this Seminar Report, published by Tillotoma Foundation with the detailed analysis by all the distinguished contributors, who are leading experts on South Asia.

- **Soham Das**

Director,

Tillotoma Foundation

director@tillotomafoundation.org

List of Distinguished Contributors –

Introduction by - **Kamakshi Wason**, Global COO & Director of Academic Programmes, Tillotoma Foundation

1. **Amb Rajiv Bhatia**: Former Ambassador to Myanmar and Mexico & High Commissioner to South Africa, Kenya and Lesotho
2. **Prof. Baladas Ghoshal**: Head of Research (South & Southeast Asia), Tillotoma Foundation; Former Professor of Southeast Asia and South-West Pacific Studies and Chairman of the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies (CSSAS), Jawaharlal Nehru University.
3. **Dr Shweta Singh**: Associate Professor of International Relations, Department of International Relations, South Asian University; International Studies Association (ISA) Program Co-Chair 2024.
4. **Mr Jitendra Kumar Ojha**: Geopolitical, Governance and National Security Strategist. Former Joint Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India.
5. **Prof. Aneek Chatterjee**: Professor of Political Science, Author and Analyst on International Relations and Politics
6. **Dr. Namrata Kothari**: Assistant Professor of Political Science, South Calcutta Girls College
7. **Dr Udai Bhanu Singh**: Senior Fellow and Head, Indo-Pacific Centre, Tillotoma Foundation



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Introduction

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal crossroads, ensnared in a profound political crisis that has reverberated beyond its borders, casting ripples across the South Asian region and posing significant challenges for its closest neighbours, particularly India. The resignation and subsequent exit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a figure synonymous with the country's political landscape, on August 5th 2024, have unleashed a torrent of unrest and uncertainty. This upheaval has not only destabilized the internal dynamics of Bangladesh but has also threatened the delicate balance of peace and security in the region. The violence that has erupted in the wake of these events has claimed lives and frayed the intricate socio-political fabric of the nation, revealing the deep-seated vulnerabilities within its democratic institutions.

In this context, it becomes imperative for scholars, policymakers, and regional stakeholders to engage in a comprehensive analysis of the current situation in Bangladesh. Such an inquiry must delve into the root causes of the crisis, scrutinize the forces at play, and explore the broader implications for the region, with particular emphasis on the evolving relationship between India and Bangladesh. The complexity of the socio-political environment in Bangladesh is underscored by a confluence of factors, including economic grievances, political repression, and the growing influence of Islamist groups. These dynamics do not exist in isolation but are interwoven with regional and global currents that necessitate a nuanced and multi-faceted examination.

The political turmoil in Bangladesh presents not only an internal challenge but also a critical test for India, which must navigate its role as a close neighbour, ally, and regional power. The implications of this crisis extend far

beyond the borders of Bangladesh, raising concerns about regional stability, security, and the future trajectory of bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Moreover, the potential for the unrest to spill over into neighbouring countries adds an urgency to the need for a considered and strategic response.

Reflecting on my visit to Bangladesh in 2022, I am struck by the resilience and determination of its people, particularly the young women who embody the aspirations of a nation striving for progress and stability. The ongoing crisis threatens to derail these aspirations, casting a shadow over the prospects for a peaceful and prosperous future. It is therefore incumbent upon us to advocate for the restoration of order, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights, with particular attention to the safety and well-being of minority communities, including Hindus, who are often disproportionately affected in times of political unrest.

On August 16, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a telephonic call from Professor Muhammad Yunus, the current Prime Minister of the interim government of Bangladesh. During their conversation, they exchanged views on the prevailing situation in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's unwavering support for a democratic, stable, peaceful, and progressive Bangladesh. In turn, Professor Yunus assured the protection, safety, and security of Hindus and all minorities in Bangladesh, emphasizing his government's commitment to safeguarding their rights amidst the ongoing turmoil. Additionally, on August 17, accepting India's invitation, Professor Yunus participated virtually at the 3rc Voice of the Global South Summit,

further highlighting his engagement with regional and global leaders during this critical period.

This publication seeks to provide a thorough exploration of the current crisis in Bangladesh, offering critical insights into the historical context, the economic and political dynamics at play, and the role of external powers such as the United States and China. The involvement of these global actors introduces an additional layer of complexity, as their strategic interests in the region could either exacerbate existing tensions or contribute to a resolution. India's strategic position and its potential role in supporting Bangladesh during this turbulent period will also be critically examined, with a focus on the delicate balance between non-interference and regional responsibility.

The insights and analyses presented in this publication are informed by the contributions of distinguished experts in International Relations, Security Studies, and South Asian Affairs. Their perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the crisis, illuminating the intricate interplay between domestic and international forces and the potential pathways to stability. The insights shared explore the various dimensions of India's strategic options, from diplomatic engagement to economic assistance, and the broader implications for regional cooperation and security.

As we navigate this complex and evolving situation, it is essential to consider the broader implications of the crisis in Bangladesh, not only for India itself but for the entire South Asian region. The unfolding events challenge us to think critically about the future of regional cooperation, the role of

international organizations in conflict resolution, and the mechanisms that can be implemented to prevent similar crises from recurring.

Through this publication, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse by offering a rigorous analysis of the current crisis, its root causes, and its far-reaching consequences. It is not merely an academic exercise; it is a call to action. The situation in Bangladesh underscores the fragility of peace and the ease with which it can be disrupted. It is our collective responsibility to work toward solutions that are just, sustainable, and inclusive, ensuring that the people of Bangladesh, and indeed, the broader South Asian region, can look forward to a future marked by peace, prosperity, and democratic governance. We at the Tillotoma Foundation, through our platform, want this to be a starting point for generating ideas, proposing solutions, and committing to actions that will contribute to the restoration of stability in Bangladesh and the promotion of regional peace and security.

- Kamakshi Wason

Global COO & Director of Academic Programmes,
Tillotoma Foundation

vp@tillotomafoundation.org



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Analysis Summaries

Detailed Analysis by Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia

Introduction and Context

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia began his presentation by expressing his longstanding admiration for the Tillotoma Foundation, particularly lauding its youthful leadership. He emphasized the importance of raising awareness about recent political developments in Bangladesh, particularly among the youth, as understanding these changes and their broader implications is crucial. Bhatia asserted that a comprehensive, 360° analysis of the situation is necessary for stakeholders to grasp the nuances of the crisis and its potential impacts on the future of India-Bangladesh relations. He structured his presentation around five key facets of the ongoing crisis, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the situation and its ramifications.

1. Factors Triggering the Change in Government

The first major question Bhatia addressed was what led to the recent change in government in Bangladesh. He identified several interlinked factors that contributed to this political upheaval. Initially, the crisis was sparked by widespread student agitation against a High Court decision regarding the quota system, which allocates government jobs and university placements based on various social and economic criteria. The student protests quickly evolved into a broader movement demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government.

Bhatia noted that the situation was exacerbated by the police's failure to manage the protests, leading to widespread violence across the country. This failure of law enforcement highlighted deep-seated issues within the state's security apparatus and contributed to the escalation of the crisis. A critical turning point in the unfolding events was the military's decision to remain uninvolved, which many viewed as a significant factor in the government's

downfall. The military's stance raised questions about its motivations and the extent to which it was aligned with or opposed to the government's actions.

Another important factor Bhatia highlighted was the role of opposition parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), in possibly manipulating the student-led protests from behind the scenes. These parties, long opposed to Hasina's Awami League, are suspected of using the protests as a tool to destabilize the government. Underlying all these factors is a deep and enduring political schism in Bangladesh, which Bhatia described as a divide between pro-Liberation and anti-Liberation forces. This divide dates back to the country's independence in 1971 and continues to shape its political landscape.

2. Characterization of the Events

The second key question Bhatia explored was how to characterize the chain of events that led to the change in government. He noted that different stakeholders have offered various interpretations, reflecting the complexity and contentious nature of the situation. The Chief Adviser of the interim government, for instance, described the events as “the second Liberation” and a “student-led revolution,” suggesting that the movement was a significant and positive step towards a new political order.

In contrast, a leading newspaper in Dhaka characterized the crisis as “a slow-moving tragedy,” implying that the situation could have been averted at multiple stages if different decisions had been made. This perspective suggests a more critical view of the events, highlighting missed opportunities for resolution and the avoidable nature of the ensuing chaos. Ambassador Bhatia appreciated the fact that the Tillotoma Foundation, which hosted Bhatia's presentation, referred to the situation as a “regime change,” a term that underscores the significant shift in political power but remains neutral on whether the change was positive or negative.

Bhatia emphasized that it is still too early to reach a consensus on how to label these events definitively. He suggested that the actions of the military, their motivations, and their plans in the coming months would play a crucial role in determining how history will judge this period. The military's role remains a central concern, as its decisions could either stabilize the situation or further exacerbate the crisis.

3. Consequences of the Political Change

The third major area of analysis in Bhatia's presentation concerned the consequences of the political change in Bangladesh, both for the country itself and for the broader region. He warned against a purely India-centric analysis, noting that such a perspective might miss the broader implications of the crisis. The change in government could have profound effects on Bangladesh's internal dynamics, influencing its social, economic, and political stability.

Bhatia argued that the consequences of the crisis would likely extend beyond Bangladesh's borders, affecting the entire South Asian region. For instance, the instability in Bangladesh could disrupt regional cooperation initiatives, such as those under the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Additionally, the political change could alter Bangladesh's relationships with major global powers, such as the United States, China, and India, as these countries reassess their strategic interests in light of the new government's policies.

Bhatia also pointed out that the crisis could have significant implications for Bangladesh's economic development. Political instability often leads to economic uncertainty, which can deter foreign investment and slow down economic growth. If the new government fails to restore stability quickly, Bangladesh's recent economic progress could be jeopardized, with serious consequences for the country's population.

4. Role of External Powers

The fourth aspect of Bhatia's presentation examined the role of external powers in the unfolding political drama in Bangladesh. While the full story of "who did what" may only emerge later, Bhatia speculated on the countries and groups that might benefit from the change in government. He suggested that the United States, China, and Pakistan could be among the external powers that stand to gain from the current situation. Additionally, he mentioned that domestic political groups like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami might also see the change as advantageous to their respective agendas.

Bhatia reflected on the disturbing imagery of the vandalized statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, and the broken bust of Rabindranath Tagore. These acts of vandalism symbolize the deep-seated divisions within Bangladesh and raise questions about the country's future direction. Bhatia cited the famous adage by a French journalist, "The Revolution Devours its Children," to emphasize that revolutions and political upheavals often betray their original ideals and lead to outcomes that their instigators never intended.

5. Impact on India-Bangladesh Relations

The final area of focus in Bhatia's presentation was the potential impact of the political change on India-Bangladesh relations. He argued that the change in government could have significant and potentially negative consequences for the bilateral relationship. There are concerns on both sides of the border about how the new government will approach its relationship with India, particularly in light of the longstanding ties between the Awami League and the Indian government.

Bhatia noted that the ouster of Sheikh Hasina's government represents a setback to several of India's strategic initiatives. These include the Neighbourhood First policy, which prioritizes strong relations with India's

neighbouring countries; the Act East policy, which aims to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations; and efforts to accelerate economic development and ensure security in India's North East Region. The change in government could disrupt these initiatives, particularly if the new Bangladeshi leadership takes a less cooperative stance towards India.

Despite these challenges, Bhatia advocated for a pragmatic and calm response from India. He emphasized the importance of maintaining open lines of communication and working to navigate the complexities of the bilateral relationship through the emerging fault lines. Bhatia expressed hope that with careful diplomacy, both countries could manage the transition and avoid a significant deterioration in relations.

Conclusion and Broader Reflections

In response to a specific question from the moderator, Ambassador Bhatia highlighted a broader regional concern: the simultaneous instability in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. He noted that this is the first time in many years that India's two eastern neighbours have entered a zone of serious crisis and instability at the same time. This situation, he argued, does not bode well for India's strategic, political, and economic interests. The instability in these two countries could have ripple effects across the region, potentially leading to increased security concerns, economic disruptions, and challenges to regional cooperation initiatives.

Bhatia also raised concerns about whether the developments in Bangladesh would further delay the upcoming BIMSTEC summit, scheduled to be held in Thailand in September. BIMSTEC, which includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan, is a key regional organization aimed at promoting economic cooperation and regional integration. The summit's postponement or cancellation due to the crisis in Bangladesh would be a significant setback to regional cooperation efforts.

In conclusion, Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia's presentation provided a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the recent political changes in Bangladesh. He highlighted the complexity of the situation, noting the various factors that contributed to the crisis and the diverse interpretations of the events. Bhatia emphasized the far-reaching implications of the political change, both for Bangladesh itself and for the broader region, particularly in the context of India-Bangladesh relations. His analysis underscored the importance of careful diplomacy and strategic thinking as India and other regional players navigate the challenges posed by the current crisis.

- Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia,
Former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar and Mexico
Former Indian High-Commissioner to South Africa

Detailed Analysis by Professor Baladas Ghoshal

Introduction: Contextualizing the Current Crisis

Prof. Baladas Ghoshal's presentation delves deeply into the ongoing political turmoil in Bangladesh, offering a nuanced analysis that situates the current crisis within both a historical and a contemporary geopolitical framework. His argument challenges simplistic narratives that liken the current events to a revolution, instead framing them as a regime change driven by economic mismanagement, political discontent, and external influences. By comparing the present situation to the events of 1971, when Bangladesh fought for its independence from Pakistan, Prof. Ghoshal seeks to draw out both the continuities and the divergences in Bangladesh's political trajectory, emphasizing the implications for both domestic stability and regional geopolitics.

The Events of 1971: A Historical Benchmark

The Liberation War:

In 1971, Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, engaged in a brutal war of independence against West Pakistan. The conflict was marked by widespread atrocities, including mass killings and the displacement of millions of people. The war culminated in the creation of an independent Bangladesh, and the events of this period have since become a foundational moment in the nation's collective memory. Prof. Ghoshal highlights the significance of 1971 as a benchmark for understanding the current situation, noting that the liberation war was not merely a political upheaval but a profound transformation that reshaped the state and society.

Comparing 1971 with the Current Crisis:

While there are superficial similarities between 1971 and the present crisis—both involve significant violence and popular unrest—Prof. Ghoshal argues that the underlying dynamics are fundamentally different. The liberation war was a revolutionary struggle aimed at overthrowing a repressive regime and establishing a new, independent state. In contrast, the current unrest is characterized more by frustration with economic conditions, political

mismanagement, and disillusionment with the ruling Awami League, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Therefore, while both periods are marked by turbulence, the nature and implications of the conflicts are distinct.

Political Dynamics: From Liberation to the Present Day Sheikh Hasina's Leadership and Governance:

Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the founding father of Bangladesh), has been a central figure in Bangladesh's politics for decades. Her leadership has been marked by significant economic progress, particularly in terms of GDP growth, poverty reduction, and improvements in women's rights. However, her tenure has also been marred by allegations of authoritarianism, corruption, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Prof. Ghoshal critically examines Hasina's governance, arguing that while her economic achievements are notable, they have been overshadowed by growing political discontent and a sense of alienation among significant segments of the population.

The 2018 Elections and Growing Discontent:

The 2018 general elections in Bangladesh were a turning point in the country's recent history. The elections were marred by widespread allegations of fraud, voter intimidation, and the suppression of opposition parties. The Awami League's overwhelming victory, which many viewed as illegitimate, exacerbated political tensions and fuelled public discontent. Prof. Ghoshal points out that the elections marked the beginning of a deepening crisis, as many Bangladeshis, particularly the youth, began to lose faith in the democratic process. This disillusionment has contributed to the current unrest, as people feel increasingly disenfranchised and disconnected from the political system.

Economic Challenges and Popular Unrest:

Bangladesh's economic trajectory has been a mixed one under Sheikh Hasina's leadership. While the country has achieved impressive GDP growth and made strides in reducing poverty, these gains have not been evenly distributed, leading to growing inequality and economic discontent. The

COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn exacerbated these challenges, leading to rising inflation, unemployment, and public frustration. Prof. Ghoshal emphasizes that economic factors have played a significant role in fueling the current unrest, as people grapple with the rising cost of living and declining job prospects. The government's request for an IMF loan in response to dwindling foreign exchange reserves further highlights the economic challenges facing Bangladesh.

The Role of Corruption and Governance Failures:

Corruption has been a persistent issue in Bangladesh, undermining governance and contributing to public disillusionment with the political system. Prof. Ghoshal points to widespread allegations of corruption within the Awami League and the government's failure to address these issues as key factors contributing to the current crisis. Mismanagement and lack of accountability have eroded public trust in the government, leading to increased support for opposition movements and protests. The perception that the government is more interested in maintaining power than addressing the needs of the people has fueled popular anger and unrest.

The Student Movement and Youth Alienation

Origins of the Student Movement:

One of the most significant aspects of the current unrest is the role of the student movement, which has emerged as a powerful force in challenging the government. The movement began as a protest against the quota system in government jobs, which students felt was unfair and discriminatory. However, it quickly evolved into a broader movement against the government, reflecting the deep sense of alienation and frustration among the younger generation. Prof. Ghoshal highlights that the student movement is driven by a desire for greater democratic participation, transparency, and accountability, values that many feel are being eroded under the current regime.

Youth Disillusionment and Political Engagement:

The youth of Bangladesh, who make up a significant portion of the population, have become increasingly disillusioned with the political system.

Many young people feel that they are not being adequately represented in the political process and that their voices are being ignored by the government. This sense of alienation has driven many to join the student movement and other forms of protest. Prof. Ghoshal argues that the government's failure to engage with and co-opt young people into the political mainstream has been a critical misstep, leading to a deepening crisis of legitimacy.

The Role of Social Media and Digital Activism:

Social media has played a crucial role in mobilizing the student movement and amplifying the voices of young people. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been used to organize protests, share information, and raise awareness about the issues facing the country. Prof. Ghoshal notes that digital activism has become a powerful tool for the youth in challenging the government and demanding change. However, the government has responded by attempting to censor and control online content, further fuelling tensions and contributing to the perception that it is out of touch with the needs and aspirations of the younger generation.

Geopolitical Influences: External Factors and Regional Implications Shifting Alliances and International Relations:

Bangladesh's geopolitical position has always been influenced by its relationships with major powers, including India, China, and the United States. Prof. Ghoshal discusses how the current crisis has been shaped by these external influences, with different powers seeking to protect and advance their strategic interests in the region. He notes that Sheikh Hasina's government has historically maintained close ties with India, but recent developments, including a disappointing visit to China, suggest that these alliances may be shifting. The suggestion that India might take over certain development projects in Bangladesh indicates a potential realignment of regional powers, with significant implications for Bangladesh's future.

China's Influence in Bangladesh:

China has become an increasingly important player in Bangladesh's development, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Prof.

Ghoshal examines China's role in Bangladesh, noting that while Chinese investment has been welcomed by the government, it has also raised concerns about debt dependency and sovereignty. The recent cooling of relations between Bangladesh and China, as evidenced by Sheikh Hasina's less successful visit, suggests that Dhaka may be seeking to balance its relationships with Beijing and New Delhi more carefully. This balancing act reflects the broader regional dynamics, where smaller states like Bangladesh must navigate the competing interests of major powers.

India's Strategic Interests and Regional Security:

India has long viewed Bangladesh as a key partner in ensuring regional stability and security, particularly in the context of its broader neighbourhood policy. Prof. Ghoshal discusses India's response to the current situation in Bangladesh, noting that New Delhi has adopted a cautious and measured approach. India has welcomed the caretaker government led by Muhammad Yunus, seeing it as a stabilizing force in a volatile situation. However, India is also acutely aware of the potential risks posed by the crisis, including the possibility of large-scale migration and the rise of Islamist groups, both of which could have significant implications for regional security.

The Role of the United States:

The United States has historically maintained a strategic interest in Bangladesh, particularly in the context of its broader regional policy in South Asia. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the US's role in the current crisis, noting that Washington has been vocal in its support for democratic governance and human rights in Bangladesh. The US has expressed concerns about the erosion of democratic institutions under Sheikh Hasina's government, and there are indications that it may seek to exert pressure on Dhaka to enact political reforms. However, the US's influence is complicated by its broader strategic interests in the region, particularly in relation to China and India.

The Role of the Military: Historical Context and Current Dynamics

Historical Role of the Military in Bangladesh:

The military has played a significant role in Bangladesh's political history,

having intervened in politics on multiple occasions since the country's independence. The army's influence has often been a double-edged sword, providing stability in times of crisis but also contributing to the erosion of democratic institutions. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the historical context of military involvement in Bangladesh, noting that the army has traditionally been seen as a guarantor of national stability, but its interventions have often led to authoritarian rule.

Current Military Dynamics and the Interim Government:

In the current crisis, the military's role has been more ambiguous, supporting the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus but remaining in the background. Prof. Ghoshal examines the potential implications of the military's involvement, suggesting that while the army has so far acted as a stabilizing force, there is a risk that it could become more directly involved in politics if the situation deteriorates further. He draws parallels to the Pakistani military, suggesting that the Bangladeshi army's increasing recruitment from rural areas, where communal sentiments are stronger, could influence the political process in favor of Islamist-oriented groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP.

Islamic Fundamentalism and the Army:

Prof. Ghoshal raises concerns about the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism within the military, particularly in relation to the recruitment patterns that have favored rural, more religiously conservative areas. He suggests that this trend could have significant implications for the future of Bangladesh's political landscape, particularly if the military becomes more sympathetic to Islamist groups. The rise of Islamist groups like Jamaat-e-Islami, coupled with the army's potential alignment with these elements, could lead to significant shifts in the political landscape, potentially undermining the secular foundations of the state.

The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism: Implications for the Political Landscape

Islamic Groups and Political Power:

Islamic fundamentalism has been a growing force in Bangladesh's political landscape, particularly at the grassroots level. Groups like Jamaat-e-Islami have sought to gain political power by appealing to the religious sentiments of the rural population, often at the expense of the country's secular traditions. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the complex relationship between the secular elite and the more communal rural population, noting that the latter often targets Hindu minorities for their property. This dynamic has led to a rise in communal violence and an increasing polarization of society along religious lines.

The Role of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami:

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami have historically been the main political opponents of the Awami League, often forming alliances to challenge the ruling party. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the role of these parties in the current crisis, noting that they have capitalized on the growing discontent with Sheikh Hasina's government to strengthen their political position. However, their rise also poses a risk to the secular nature of the state, as Jamaat-e-Islami, in particular, has a history of promoting an Islamist agenda that is at odds with the country's secular foundations.

Future Scenarios and the Rise of Political Islam:

Looking ahead, Prof. Ghoshal expresses concerns about the potential for political Islam to gain greater influence in Bangladesh, particularly if the current crisis leads to a weakening of the secular political establishment. He suggests that the growing influence of Islamist groups, coupled with the army's potential alignment with these elements, could lead to a significant shift in the country's political landscape. This could result in a less secular and more religiously oriented government, with potentially serious implications for minority rights, social cohesion, and regional stability.

Bangladesh-India Relations: Strategic Interests and Regional Implications

Historical Ties and Current Relations:

India and Bangladesh share a long history of cultural, economic, and political ties, and the relationship between the two countries has been a key factor in South Asian geopolitics. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the current state of Bangladesh-India relations, noting that while the two countries have maintained a close partnership, particularly under Sheikh Hasina's government, there are underlying tensions that could be exacerbated by the current crisis. Issues such as border security, illegal immigration, and the treatment of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh have been persistent sources of friction between the two neighbours.

India's Cautious Response to the Crisis:

India's response to the current situation in Bangladesh has been cautious, reflecting its strategic interest in maintaining stability in its neighbourhood. Prof. Ghoshal notes that India has welcomed the caretaker government and adopted a wait-and-watch approach, seeking to avoid any actions that could further destabilize the situation. However, India is also acutely aware of the potential risks posed by the crisis, particularly the possibility of large-scale migration from Bangladesh into India, reminiscent of the 1971 refugee crisis. This has led to concerns about the impact of the crisis on India's domestic politics, particularly in states like West Bengal and Assam, where there are significant Bengali-speaking populations.

Perceptions of India in Bangladesh:

The presentation also delves into the perceptions of India within Bangladesh, particularly regarding its relationship with Sheikh Hasina. Many Bangladeshi intellectuals have criticized India for not doing enough to warn Hasina about the growing alienation of the younger generation. Prof. Ghoshal acknowledges that while it is important for India to consider the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people in its foreign policy, this is complicated by the fact that perceptions are often shaped by the regime in power and the media. Issues

like border killings and the presence of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India further complicate the bilateral relationship, leading to a complex and often ambivalent attitude towards India among the Bangladeshi public.

Geopolitical and Economic Considerations:

Prof. Ghoshal underscores the importance of India's relationship with Bangladesh, particularly in terms of trade, security, and regional stability. The cooperation between the two countries has been mutually beneficial, particularly in areas like the garment industry and infrastructure development. However, the current instability in Bangladesh, coupled with challenges in other neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Nepal, poses a significant challenge to India's neighbourhood policy and regional influence. India's ability to navigate these challenges will be critical in shaping the future of South Asian geopolitics.

Broader Regional and Global Context: South Asia at a Crossroads

South Asia's Geopolitical Landscape:

The current crisis in Bangladesh is unfolding against a backdrop of broader regional instability in South Asia. Countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are also grappling with political and economic challenges, contributing to a sense of uncertainty and volatility in the region. Prof. Ghoshal places the current situation in Bangladesh within this broader context, noting that while South Asia had remained relatively stable compared to other conflict-ridden regions like the Middle East and Ukraine, the recent developments now threaten this stability. The region is at a critical juncture, with the potential for increased turmoil that could have far-reaching consequences for both regional and global geopolitics.

Implications for Regional Security and Stability:

The instability in Bangladesh, combined with the challenges in neighbouring countries, poses significant risks to regional security and stability. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the potential for increased cross-border tensions, migration, and the spread of extremism as key risks that could destabilize the region further. The involvement of major powers like China, India, and the

United States adds another layer of complexity, as these countries seek to protect and advance their strategic interests in an increasingly volatile environment. The future of South Asia will depend on the ability of its leaders to navigate these challenges and work towards greater regional cooperation and stability.

The Role of Global Powers:

The involvement of global powers in South Asia's affairs has always been a significant factor in the region's geopolitics. Prof. Ghoshal discusses the role of the United States, China, and Russia in shaping the current crisis in Bangladesh, noting that each of these powers has a vested interest in the outcome. The US, for example, has been vocal in its support for democratic governance and human rights, while China has focused on economic investment and infrastructure development. Russia, though less directly involved, has also sought to maintain its influence in the region, particularly through its relationships with India and China. The interplay of these global powers will be critical in determining the future trajectory of South Asia's political landscape.

Conclusion: A Pessimistic Outlook for Bangladesh and the Region

Prof. Baladas Ghoshal's presentation offers a comprehensive and deeply pessimistic analysis of the current political crisis in Bangladesh, highlighting the significant challenges facing the country and the broader region. While the situation in Bangladesh shares some similarities with the events of 1971, particularly in terms of the scale of violence and unrest, the underlying dynamics are fundamentally different. The current crisis is driven by a combination of economic mismanagement, political discontent, and external influences, rather than a revolutionary struggle for independence.

Prof. Ghoshal expresses concerns about the potential for increased military involvement in politics, the rise of Islamist groups, and the influence of external powers, all of which could contribute to a more volatile and unstable future for Bangladesh. He also highlights the broader regional implications of the crisis, noting that the instability in Bangladesh could have significant consequences for South Asia's security and stability.



Looking ahead, Prof. Ghoshal suggests that the future of Bangladesh and the region is highly uncertain, with the potential for increased turmoil and conflict. The involvement of major powers like the United States, China, and India adds another layer of complexity, as these countries seek to protect their strategic interests in an increasingly volatile environment. The future of Bangladesh and South Asia will depend on the ability of its leaders to navigate these challenges and work towards greater regional cooperation and stability. However, Prof. Ghoshal's analysis suggests that this will be a difficult and uncertain path, with significant risks and challenges ahead.

- Prof Baladas Ghoshal,
Distinguished Fellow & Head of Research (South & Southeast Asia),
Tillotoma Foundation

Detailed Analysis by Dr Shweta Singh

Introduction and Context

Dr. Shweta Singh began her presentation by expressing her gratitude for being part of the Tillotoma Foundation forum. She stated that she was very pleased to find the question that was posed to her by the Foundation because this was something which is often not being talked about - how one sees or where one locates the women in the context of the protest movements. Her presentation focused on two main aspects: the role of women in the recent political upheavals in Bangladesh, and the implications of these changes for India's foreign policy, particularly in relation to Bangladesh. As a feminist scholar with a deep interest in South Asian politics, Dr. Singh highlighted the often-overlooked contributions of women in political movements and emphasized the importance of understanding how India is perceived in Bangladesh during this sensitive period.

1. The Role of Women in Bangladesh's Political Movements

Dr. Singh's first point addressed the critical role that women have played in the recent protest movements in Bangladesh, which some are now referring to as the "July Revolution." She noted that Bangladesh has a rich history of feminist traditions and movements, and this legacy has continued to shape the country's political landscape. Women have been at the forefront of the widespread protests that have ultimately led to significant political changes, including the resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

One of the key figures highlighted by Dr. Singh was Nusrat Tabassum, one of the six coordinators of the student protest movement. Despite the significance of her role, Dr. Singh pointed out that very little has been written or reported about Nusrat Tabassum, which underscores a broader issue of women's contributions being underreported or overlooked in political discourse. However, the powerful images emerging from the protests, particularly those captured by journalist Shafikul Alam, showcase the diverse and active participation of women in the movement. These images, according to Dr. Singh, reflect the "intersecting constellations" of women's identities and their central role in challenging authoritarianism in Bangladesh.

Dr. Singh also mentioned Sheikh Hasina's attempt to leverage the quota system as a political tool by presenting it as beneficial for women. However, this tactic was largely seen through by the protestors, indicating a growing awareness and rejection of such superficial measures. The protests thus represented not just a challenge to the political status quo, but also a broader assertion of women's rights and voices in Bangladesh's political arena.

Looking forward, Dr. Singh raised critical questions about the future role of women in Bangladesh's politics, particularly in the interim administration that is expected to follow the regime change. She expressed concern about whether women's involvement will be substantive or merely tokenistic. This distinction is crucial, as tokenism could undermine the progress that women have made in these movements, while substantive involvement could pave the way for more significant changes in the political landscape.

Dr. Singh argued that women's continued activism and involvement in politics are essential for ensuring that the gains made during the protests are not lost. She called for greater attention to be paid to how women will be integrated into the new political structures and how their voices will be heard in the shaping of future policies.

2. The Nature of Civil Society in Bangladesh and Minority Rights

Moving on to the second aspect of her presentation, Dr. Singh discussed the nature of civil society in Bangladesh and its implications for minority rights. She agreed with Professor Ghoshal's assessment that Bangladesh's civil society has strong secular credentials, which distinguishes it from other South Asian countries. This secular nature is particularly important in the context of protecting the rights of minorities, including the Hindu community in Bangladesh.

Dr. Singh pointed out recent actions by figures like Professor Mohammad Yunus, who, as part of the interim government, visited the Dhakeshwari Temple—a significant gesture towards reaffirming the protection of minority rights. Additionally, the student movements that have been at the heart of the recent protests have also made statements reaffirming their commitment to minority rights. However, Dr. Singh also acknowledged the significant urban-rural divide in Bangladesh, which could affect how minority rights are upheld across different regions. She pointed out that while urban areas, particularly

in cities like Dhaka, have strong civil society movements advocating for secularism and minority rights, rural areas may have different dynamics that could challenge the uniform application of these principles.

The protection of minority rights will be a critical factor in shaping the future relationship between India and Bangladesh. Dr. Singh expressed cautious optimism, noting that while there are promising signs from civil society, much remains to be seen in how these principles are implemented in practice by the new government. She emphasized the need for ongoing vigilance and engagement to ensure that the rights of minorities are not sidelined in the political transition. She argued that India must engage with Bangladesh in a way that supports the protection of minority rights without appearing to interfere in Bangladesh's domestic affairs.

3. India's Relationship with Bangladesh: Perceptions and Strategic Considerations

Dr. Singh then turned to the issue of India's relationship with Bangladesh, particularly in light of the recent political changes. She argued that it is essential for India's foreign policy establishment to understand how India is perceived in Bangladesh, especially during this period of transition. Historically, India has had a close relationship with Sheikh Hasina and her government, which has contributed to strong bilateral ties. However, with Hasina's ouster, there is a risk that anti-Hasina sentiment could spill over into anti-India sentiment.

Dr. Singh stressed the importance of acknowledging and respecting the agency of the people in Bangladesh who have driven this regime change. She warned against dismissing the movement as merely the result of external conspiracy theories, arguing instead that it reflects the genuine political will of the Bangladeshi people. Understanding this perspective is crucial for India to navigate its relationship with Bangladesh effectively in the coming months.

One of Dr. Singh's key recommendations was for India to pay close attention to the ground sentiment in Bangladesh. This includes being aware of how closely associated India is with the previous regime and how that association might impact public perception. She praised India's cautious approach in the immediate aftermath of the regime change, particularly the measured statements made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who emphasized

restraint and caution. These statements reflected India's awareness of the delicate situation and its desire not to be seen as interfering in Bangladesh's domestic affairs.

Dr. Singh also highlighted the importance of India being open and willing to engage with the new interim administration in Bangladesh. This engagement should be guided by a careful consideration of how India is perceived in Bangladesh, ensuring that India's actions are aligned with the sentiments of the Bangladeshi people.

4. Broader Implications for India's Foreign Policy in South Asia

Recent Regime Changes in South Asia

In her concluding remarks, Dr. Singh expanded her analysis to consider the broader implications of the recent political changes in Bangladesh for India's foreign policy in South Asia. She pointed out that there have been several regime changes in the region recently, including in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and now Bangladesh. These changes suggest a broader pattern of political instability that could have significant implications for regional security and cooperation.

Dr. Singh raised important questions about the coordination mechanisms within India's foreign policy establishment, particularly in relation to its liaisons with the National Security Council Secretariat, diplomatic missions, and intelligence agencies. She questioned whether India had been caught by surprise by the recent developments in Bangladesh and whether there had been sufficient attention paid to the ground sentiment in the country. This, she argued, is crucial for India's strategic interests in the neighbourhood.

Strategic Reassessment and Proactive Engagement

Dr. Singh emphasized the need for India to reassess its approach to regional diplomacy, ensuring that it is responsive to the changing political dynamics in South Asia. This includes being proactive in engaging with new governments and ensuring that India's strategic policies, such as the Neighbourhood First policy, are effectively implemented in light of these changes.

She argued that India must be prepared to adapt its strategies to the evolving political landscape in South Asia, particularly in the context of regime changes. This requires a deep understanding of the political dynamics in each country and a willingness to engage with new administrations in a way that respects their sovereignty while also advancing India's strategic interests.

Coordination Among India's Strategic Institutions

Dr. Singh also called for improved coordination among India's strategic institutions, including the foreign policy establishment, the National Security Council, and intelligence agencies. She argued that these institutions must work closely together to ensure that India's response to political changes in the region is timely and effective. This coordination is particularly important in the context of regime changes, which can have significant implications for regional security and India's strategic interests.

Conclusion

Dr. Shweta Singh's presentation provided a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the recent political changes in Bangladesh, focusing on the role of women in the protest movements, the nature of civil society, and the implications for India's foreign policy. She highlighted the importance of understanding how India is perceived in Bangladesh and the need for India to engage with the new government in a way that respects the agency of the Bangladeshi people. Dr. Singh's insights underscored the importance of a feminist perspective in analyzing political developments and the need for strategic thinking in India's approach to its neighbours in South Asia.

Her analysis emphasized that the recent changes in Bangladesh are not isolated events but part of a broader trend of political shifts in the region. These shifts require India to adopt a more nuanced and responsive approach to its foreign policy, particularly in engaging with new governments and understanding the ground sentiment in neighbouring countries.

Dr. Singh's presentation also highlighted the need for India to reassess its strategic priorities and coordination mechanisms, ensuring that it is prepared to respond effectively to the changing political dynamics in South Asia. This

reassessment is crucial for maintaining regional stability and advancing India's strategic interests in the region.

Overall, Dr. Singh's analysis provided valuable insights into the complexities of the recent political changes in Bangladesh and their broader implications for India and the region. Her emphasis on the role of women, civil society, and strategic considerations offered a comprehensive perspective that is essential for understanding the current and future dynamics of South Asian politics.

- Dr Shweta Singh,
Associate Professor of International Relations,
South Asian University

Detailed Analysis by Mr Jitendra K. Ojha

Mr. Jitendra Kumar Ojha's presentation delves into the complex geopolitical and security dynamics surrounding Bangladesh, particularly focusing on the period around 2006-2008, and the implications for India. His insights, drawn from personal experience and a deep understanding of regional politics, offer a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and potential strategies for India in dealing with its neighbour to the east.

Backdrop of Bangladesh's Political Turmoil

Mr. Ojha begins by recalling developments since 2006 end, when the political landscape in Bangladesh was highly volatile, with the government led by Khaleda Zia of BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), in coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami, had made every possible move to rig the upcoming elections (scheduled in early 2007). The political environment was marked by growing Islamist radicalism, largely due to the influence of Jamaat-e-Islami, which had made Bangladesh a proxy for Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). There were 40 odd terrorist groups that were once active in Bangladesh as the world had neglected Bangladesh, and even Pakistan until 9/11 terrorist attacks. BNP-Jamaat rule since 2001 had seen numerous terrorist attacks both in India, with help of Bangladesh based groups, as well as in Bangladesh, signalling serious threat to regional security. The political discord and distrust in Bangladesh were such a that a mechanism of caretaker government had been instituted to oversee the elections those days. However, the caretaker government under President Iajuddin Ahmed in 2007 had failed to maintain neutrality, leading to widespread distrust. This situation necessitated the intervention of the Bangladesh Army, which, under General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, played a crucial role in stabilizing the country. The army's intervention led to the preparation of digital electoral rolls and photo ID cards for the first time, which uncovered over 1.1 crore bogus voters, ensuring the most free and fair elections in history of Bangladesh in 2008 that also witnessed the highest ever -participation of nearly 80%.

The Challenge of Geopolitical Security

Mr. Ojha emphasizes that when people like him talk about geopolitics and security, they always factor in the worst possible scenarios to ensure that the all concerned stayed prepared to defend the national security interests of India. He noted that despite the success of the 2008 elections, Bangladesh's political landscape remained fraught with challenges. The rebellion in the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) shortly after Sheikh Hasina's electoral victory highlighted the fragility of the situation. The rebellion posed a significant threat to her government, illustrating the deep-seated hostility towards her within the military and security institutions of the country.

Sheikh Hasina's Governance and Criticisms

Mr. Ojha acknowledges the mixed legacy of Sheikh Hasina's government. While her economic achievements are commendable, with a fivefold increase in GDP and significant improvements in per capita income, her governance has also been marked by arrogance and a failure to foster second-rank leadership within the Awami League. He particularly praised her strong action against Islamist radicals but also pointed out all- pervasive influence of business interests within the party, which led to a commercialization of politics and governance, undermining the effectiveness of her administration and her own political credibility.

Despite these criticisms, Mr. Ojha defends Sheikh Hasina against accusations of personal corruption, noting that she and her family have maintained a relatively clean record. However, the concentration of power in her hands, combined with a lack of strong internal checks, had led to a governance model that is increasingly autocratic.

The Impact of Domestic Politics on International Relations

Mr. Ojha emphasizes the profound impact of domestic politics on international relations, using Bangladesh as a case study. He notes that internal political struggles and instability often spill over into foreign policy and regional dynamics. In Bangladesh, the rivalry between Sheikh Hasina's

Awami League and Khaleda Zia's BNP, compounded by the influence of Islamist groups, has created a volatile environment that affects not only domestic governance but also the country's interactions with its neighbours, including India.

The polarization between these political factions has led to frequent shifts in policy, making it difficult for neighbouring countries to establish consistent and reliable diplomatic relations. Mr. Ojha underscores the importance of understanding these internal dynamics to effectively engage with Bangladesh and to anticipate how domestic political shifts might influence regional security and cooperation.

Economic Development vs. Political Stability

A significant part of Mr. Ojha's presentation explores the tension between economic development and political stability. Bangladesh has experienced impressive economic growth under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, with advancements in various sectors including textiles, which has bolstered its global economic standing. However, this economic progress has not been matched by corresponding political stability.

Mr. Ojha points out that while economic growth can enhance a country's global standing and improve living standards, it does not necessarily translate into political stability. In Bangladesh, the lack of political inclusivity and the centralization of power have led to ongoing instability, despite economic achievements. This highlights the need for a balanced approach that ensures economic development is accompanied by robust political institutions and inclusive governance practices.

The Role of Media and Public Perception

The role of media in shaping public perception and its influence on political stability is another critical aspect discussed by Mr. Ojha. In Bangladesh, media coverage often reflects and amplifies political divides, contributing to the polarized environment. The manipulation of media by political actors and

the spread of misinformation can exacerbate conflicts and undermine efforts at stabilization and reconciliation.

Mr. Ojha emphasizes the need for a free and responsible media environment that supports transparency and accountability. He argues that media plays a crucial role in fostering an informed citizenry and in holding political leaders accountable. For both Bangladesh and India, ensuring that media outlets operate independently and responsibly is essential for maintaining political stability and promoting democratic values.

The Threat of Islamist Radicalism

A significant portion of Mr. Ojha's presentation focuses on the threat posed by Islamist radicalism in Bangladesh, particularly the influence of Jamaat-e-Islami. He traces the roots of this radicalism back to the early 20th century, noting the steady decline in the Hindu population in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and the rise of radical Islamic movements. Jamaat-e-Islami, in particular, has been a driving force behind this radicalism, promoting an agenda that is both anti-secular and anti-India.

Mr. Ojha underscores the organizational strength of Jamaat-e-Islami, noting that while they may not have significant electoral success, their ability to mobilize and engage in street violence gives them a disproportionate influence in Bangladesh's politics. This has created a volatile environment where radical elements can potentially destabilize any elected government through violent means.

Cross-Border Security Issues

Mr. Ojha also addresses cross-border security issues, particularly focusing on the security challenges arising from the porous border between India and Bangladesh. The influx of refugees and migrants, often driven by political instability and economic hardships in Bangladesh, poses significant challenges for India, particularly in states like West Bengal and Assam.

The presence of insurgent groups and extremist elements along the border further complicates security management. Mr. Ojha suggests that India and Bangladesh need to enhance their border security cooperation to address these challenges effectively. This includes improving intelligence sharing,

conducting joint patrols, and implementing measures to prevent illegal activities and mitigate security threats.

China's Influence and the Global Shift in Geopolitics

Mr. Ojha draws attention to the growing influence of China in the region, particularly its efforts to export its model of governance. He notes that China's increasing domination in South Asia, and beyond, has been accompanied by a deliberate effort to promote autocratic regimes and undermine the appeal of Western-style democracy. This trend is particularly concerning in the context of Bangladesh, where China's influence could potentially embolden Islamist elements and other forces hostile to India.

He also highlights the paradox of China's relationship with Islamist groups, pointing out that while China suppresses its own Muslim population, it has no qualms about supporting Islamist movements in other countries if it serves its geopolitical interests. This creates a complex dynamic where China's actions could indirectly contribute to instability in Bangladesh and other parts of South Asia.

India's Strategic Interests and Diplomatic Challenges

In discussing India's strategic interests in Bangladesh, Mr. Ojha identifies two primary concerns: ensuring peace, security, and stability in Bangladesh, and preventing Bangladesh from being used as a platform for anti-India activities by third countries. He notes that instability in Bangladesh has historically led to significant migration into India, exacerbating social and economic tensions in border regions. Moreover, the presence of radical elements in Bangladesh poses a direct threat to India's security.

Mr. Ojha advocates for a nuanced approach to diplomacy, one that balances short-term engagement with long-term strategic goals. He argues that India must engage with whoever is in power in Bangladesh while also making it clear that its security interests are non-negotiable. This requires a delicate balance between tact and accommodation at one level and assertiveness on the other, ensuring that Bangladesh remained a stable and friendly neighbour while discouraging any activities that could threaten India's security.

The Role of Western Powers and the Need for Regional Innovation

Mr. Ojha touches upon the role of Western powers, particularly the United States, in influencing Bangladesh's political landscape. He notes that while the U.S. has at times urged action against Islamist radicals, its overall influence has been limited. This underscores the need for India to take a more proactive role in shaping the political dynamics in its neighbourhood.

He also calls for innovation in India's diplomatic and governance models, suggesting that India needs to develop its own approach to democracy and development that is better suited to the realities of the region. This includes fostering a culture of political trust and reducing the space for identity politics, whether based on religion or other factors. Mr. Ojha advocates for a model of governance that emphasizes inclusivity, rule of law, and long-term stability, rather than short-term electoral gains.

The Broader Implications for South Asia and Beyond

Expanding his analysis to the broader South Asian region, Mr. Ojha highlights the unique challenges faced by India due to its geographic and demographic situation. He notes that South Asia has a disproportionately large population relative to its landmass, creating intense pressure on resources and governance structures. This makes the region particularly vulnerable to instability, whether from internal factors like radicalism or external influences like China's geopolitical manoeuvres.

Mr. Ojha stresses the importance of building resilient institutions in India and its neighbours, arguing that this is essential for long-term peace and stability in the region. He suggests that India should take the lead in promoting a model of governance that can be replicated across South Asia, one that balances democratic principles with the need for effective governance and economic development.

Conclusion: A Call for Statesmanship and Strategic Vision

In conclusion, Mr. Ojha's presentation is a call to action for both India and Bangladesh. He urges Bangladesh's leaders to rise above personal and partisan interests and focus on the long-term well-being of the country. At the same time, he calls on India to adopt a more strategic and innovative approach

to its foreign policy, one that recognizes the unique challenges of the region and seeks to address them in a holistic and sustainable manner.

Mr. Ojha's insights reflect a deep understanding of the complex interplay between geopolitics, security, and governance in South Asia. His emphasis on the need for innovation, both in diplomacy and governance, underscores the importance of adapting traditional models to the specific needs and realities of the region. As India continues to navigate its role as a major power in an increasingly multipolar world, the lessons from Bangladesh's experience will be crucial in shaping its strategic vision for the future.

Key Points and Lessons Learned

- **Political Instability in Bangladesh (2006-2008):** The period was marked by intense political turmoil, with the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami coalition attempting to rig elections. The intervention of the Bangladesh Army was crucial in stabilizing the situation and ensuring a fair electoral process.
- **Sheikh Hasina's Governance:** While Sheikh Hasina's government made significant economic strides, her administration was also criticized for being increasingly autocratic and failing to foster second-rank leadership. Her reliance on business interests within the party further complicated governance. Mr Ojha described it as failure of prevailing model of democratic governance.
- **Islamist Radicalism:** Jamaat-e-Islami's influence remains a significant threat to Bangladesh's stability. Their ability to mobilize street violence and promote radicalism poses a direct challenge to secular governance in the country. Pakistan, despite being driven out from Bangladesh, has maintained significant influence in both Islamist groups as well as Bangladesh Army and security forces. This makes a lethal combination of threats for any secularist-nationalist government, even if it enjoys mass support. Pakistan's deep tentacles in organised crime give it a unique advantage to sabotage governance in Bangladesh and destabilize it with an element of deniability.

- **China's Influence:** China's growing presence in South Asia, and its efforts to export its model of governance, represent a significant challenge for regional stability. China's complex relationship with Islamist movements in general and Pakistani deep state in particular adds another layer of complexity to the situation.
- **India's Strategic Interests:** India's primary concerns in Bangladesh are ensuring stability and preventing anti-India activities. This requires a balanced approach to diplomacy, combining engagement and accommodation with assertiveness. In the end, it is security, stability and development of Bangladesh that suits India the most.
- **Western Powers and Regional Innovation:** The role of Western powers, particularly the U.S., has been limited in influencing Bangladesh's political dynamics. India needs to take a more proactive role in shaping the region's future, including developing innovative models of governance.
- **The Need for Resilient Institutions:** Building resilient institutions is essential for long-term stability in South Asia. India and its neighbours must focus on effective governance and inclusive development to address the region's challenges.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Based on his analysis, Mr. Ojha offers several recommendations for policymakers in India:

1. **Infuse Innovation and Trust in Diplomatic Engagement:** Given its unique geography, India needs innovation in its diplomatic engagement with all its smaller neighbours, particularly Bangladesh. A stereotypical model of diplomacy is not going to work in the region as these smaller neighbours can be both outpost of India's national security and at the same time provide launchpads to external forces to target India. Hence, India must engage all stakeholders without being politically partisan in any of the smaller neighbouring countries, with

primary focus of pushing good governance, political stability, social inclusivity and rule of law. India also has to be careful and help the local stakeholders to guard against malicious meddling by extra regional powers and third countries that wish to radicalise Bangladesh or use its territory for their own agenda.

2. **Enhance Border Security:** Improve border management and security cooperation with Bangladesh to address cross-border issues and prevent illegal activities. Joint efforts in intelligence sharing and border patrols can enhance security.
3. **Help In Institution Building:** India must help Bangladesh build credible and dynamic regulatory mechanisms, with an element of predictability and stability so that Indian corporate sector as well as third countries finds it easier to invest in development of Bangladesh
4. **Increase People to People Level Contacts:** India must foster greater people to people level contacts and emphasize on common cultural, social and historical ties. This will automatically reduce space for distrust and malicious agenda of third powers.
5. **Set a Good Example through Resilient Institutions:** India has to set a good example of robust institutions for good governance. Internally resilient and vibrant institutions and healthy political culture at home shall have a positive impact all around India. India needs wider innovation in all its institutions, including bureaucracy and diplomacy, to foster excellence in output.
6. **Proactive Approach and Closer Observation:** India needs to stay informed of all relevant developments in the regional geopolitical landscape to prevent and pre-empt anything that could be detrimental to security and stability of the entire region. Flexibility and foresight to anticipate and address every possible situation shall be crucial in navigating a dynamic and complex environment to ensure our national security in a difficult neighbourhood.

Mr. Ojha's presentation provides a thorough analysis of the geopolitical and security challenges facing Bangladesh and the broader South Asian region, offering valuable insights into the strategies that India might employ to navigate these complex dynamics. As India continues to play a pivotal role in regional and global affairs, the lessons from Bangladesh's experience underscore the importance of a strategic, informed, and adaptable approach to foreign policy. By addressing both immediate concerns and long-term goals, India can work towards a more stable and prosperous South Asia, contributing to peace and stability in the broader international context.

- Mr Jitendra Kumar Ojha,
Geopolitics, Governance & National Security Analyst
Former Joint Secretary, Government of India

Detailed Analysis by Professor Aneek Chatterjee

Prof. Aneek Chatterjee's presentation provides a comprehensive analysis of the recent political upheaval in Bangladesh, its internal dynamics, and the significant implications for India's security and foreign policy. He draws on historical context, contemporary developments, and the potential future trajectory of Bangladesh's political landscape. This summary will expand on these key themes and their relevance to both Bangladesh and India.

Historical Context: The 1971 Crisis and Its Echoes

Prof. Chatterjee begins by referencing the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, a pivotal moment in South Asian history that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation. During the conflict, millions of refugees fled to India, particularly to West Bengal, Assam, and other northeastern states. This massive influx had a profound impact on the region, straining its economic resources and creating significant social challenges. The memory of this crisis looms large in the collective consciousness of these states, particularly given the porous nature of the India-Bangladesh border, which spans over 4,000 kilometers.

In 1971, the economic and social fabric of these Indian states was deeply affected by the refugee crisis. Prof. Chatterjee notes that even today, there is a palpable fear in these regions that a similar crisis could recur, especially if political instability in Bangladesh leads to another mass migration. The situation in Jalpaiguri, where Bangladeshi nationals gathered with the intent to cross into India, but were stopped by the Border Security Force (BSF), serves as a recent example of these ongoing tensions. The stability of this border region is crucial, not just for India's security, but also for maintaining the economic equilibrium of the northeastern states.

India's Foreign Policy Response: Successes and Failures

The presentation critically examines India's foreign policy towards Bangladesh, particularly in the context of recent political developments. Prof. Chatterjee emphasizes that it is impossible to label any country's foreign policy as entirely successful or entirely a failure. In the case of Bangladesh,

India's policy has been a mixed bag, with some notable successes and some areas where it has fallen short.

India's engagement with Bangladesh has historically been shaped by a desire to maintain stability in its eastern neighbour, which is crucial for India's own security and economic interests. In the wake of the recent political unrest in Bangladesh, India has taken a cautious and measured approach. While some Western media outlets have been critical of India's response, suggesting that it has been inadequate, Prof. Chatterjee argues that India's policy has been relatively mature. India has sought to engage with the new interim government led by Mohammad Yunus, indicating a willingness to maintain diplomatic channels and ensure that bilateral relations remain stable.

However, there are significant challenges that India faces in this regard. The political landscape in Bangladesh is highly volatile, and the rise of fundamentalist forces within the country poses a direct threat to India's security. Prof. Chatterjee stresses the importance of India not engaging in an Indo-centric analysis of the situation, but rather adopting a broader perspective that takes into account the regional and global implications of Bangladesh's political developments.

Internal Dynamics in Bangladesh: A Complex Landscape

The presentation delves into the internal dynamics of Bangladesh, painting a picture of a country at a crossroads. The recent political movement in Bangladesh has been described by some as a "mass uprising" or a "second liberation movement" against the oppressive rule of the previous government led by Sheikh Hasina. However, Prof. Chatterjee cautions against taking this narrative at face value. He argues that while there may have been genuine popular discontent with the Hasina government, the movement has also been significantly influenced, if not outright hijacked, by fundamentalist forces both within and outside the country.

The role of Jamaat-e-Islami, a fundamentalist political organization, is particularly concerning. Historically, Bangladeshi politics has been dominated by a binary between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), with Jamaat playing a secondary role. However, during the recent unrest, Jamaat has emerged as a major political force, leveraging the dissatisfaction with the Hasina government to gain influence.

This shift has profound implications for the future of Bangladesh's political landscape, particularly in terms of the secular-versus-religious dynamics that have long shaped the country's politics.

Prof. Chatterjee also highlights the role of students in the recent political developments. Students have historically been a significant force in Bangladeshi politics, and this time is no different. In fact, the interim government, including its head, Mohammad Yunus, was almost handpicked by student leaders, reflecting the powerful voice that the student community holds in the country. This involvement of students is a double-edged sword; while it reflects a vibrant political engagement, it also underscores the volatility and unpredictability of the political situation.

Minority Rights and Social Stability

A significant concern raised by Prof. Chatterjee is the situation of minorities in Bangladesh. The country has a history of communal tensions, particularly involving the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian minorities. During the recent unrest, there were widespread fears that these communities would face violence and persecution, particularly in rural areas where the reach of the central government is weaker.

The optimism expressed by some leaders within the interim government about protecting minority rights is viewed with skepticism by Prof. Chatterjee. He points out that such assurances often fail to translate into reality, especially in times of political turmoil. The fear among minorities in Bangladesh is not unfounded, and their safety and security remain a significant concern, not just for Bangladesh but also for India, given the potential for cross-border migration in the event of communal violence.

Economic Factors: Fuelling Discontent

Prof. Chatterjee attributes a significant part of the unrest in Bangladesh to economic factors, particularly the frustration among the country's youth. According to a leading Bangladeshi economist, who Prof. Chatterjee met in Kolkata, around 40% of the population in the age group of 15 to 25 are both unemployed and uneducated. This large, disaffected youth population has been a driving force behind the recent political unrest.

The failure of the Hasina government to address the economic grievances of this demographic is a critical factor that has fuelled the movement against her rule. The lack of employment opportunities and access to education has created a sense of hopelessness and frustration among the youth, making them more susceptible to radicalization and participation in social unrest. This economic discontent is not just a domestic issue for Bangladesh; it has regional implications, particularly for India, which has a vested interest in ensuring stability in its neighbouring countries.

India's Strategic Concerns: Security and Diplomacy

The presentation outlines the strategic concerns that India faces in light of the recent developments in Bangladesh. One of the primary concerns is the potential for Bangladesh to become a haven for anti-India insurgent groups and other hostile elements. The rise of fundamentalist forces within Bangladesh could lead to a situation where these groups find safe haven in the country, using it as a base to carry out operations against India.

Trade is another area of concern. India and Bangladesh have developed robust trade relations over the past decade, and any political instability in Bangladesh could disrupt these economic ties. Prof. Chatterjee emphasizes the importance of maintaining stable bilateral relations to ensure that trade and other forms of cooperation continue to flourish.

India's diplomatic approach to Bangladesh must be multifaceted. While it is important to engage with the interim government and keep diplomatic channels open, India must also be prepared for the possibility of a more hostile government coming to power in Dhaka. This could involve strengthening border security, enhancing intelligence cooperation, and taking other measures to protect India's interests.

Implications for Indian Foreign Policy

The challenges in Bangladesh present one of the toughest tests for Indian diplomacy in recent times. India's foreign policy towards Bangladesh will need to be dynamic and responsive to the rapidly changing situation. This may involve re-evaluating traditional alliances, engaging with new political actors, and finding ways to mitigate the impact of instability in Bangladesh on India's own security and economic interests.

India must also be prepared to deal with the humanitarian aspect of the crisis, particularly if there is another influx of refugees. The experience of 1971 serves as a stark reminder of the potential scale of such a crisis and the strain it can place on India's resources. Coordinating with international organizations, enhancing border management, and working with local governments in the northeastern states will be crucial in managing any potential fallout.

Future Prospects: A Pessimistic Outlook

Prof. Chatterjee concludes his analysis with a rather pessimistic outlook on the future of Bangladesh. He expresses doubt about the revival of secularism and democracy in the country, given the current trajectory of political developments. The rise of fundamentalist forces, the involvement of the military, and the disillusionment of the youth all point to a bleak future for Bangladesh's democratic institutions.

The possibility of an army takeover or the establishment of a government dominated by fundamentalist forces is a real concern. Such a scenario would have significant implications for India, not just in terms of security but also in terms of its broader regional strategy. India has historically supported secular and democratic forces in Bangladesh, and the potential collapse of these forces would be a significant setback.

Conclusion

Prof. Aneek Chatterjee's presentation provides a sobering analysis of the situation in Bangladesh and its implications for India. The country is at a critical juncture, with significant internal and external pressures shaping its future trajectory. For India, the challenges are multifaceted, involving security, diplomacy, trade, and humanitarian concerns.

India's response to these challenges will need to be nuanced and multi-dimensional, balancing immediate security concerns with long-term strategic interests. The rise of fundamentalist forces in Bangladesh, the involvement of the military in politics, and the economic discontent among the youth are all factors that will shape the future of the region. For India, maintaining stability in Bangladesh is not just a matter of foreign policy but a critical element of its national security strategy.

As the situation in Bangladesh continues to evolve, it will be crucial for India to remain vigilant and adaptable. Engaging with all stakeholders in Bangladesh, while also preparing for worst-case scenarios, will be key to navigating this complex and potentially volatile situation. The future of India-Bangladesh relations will depend on the ability of both countries to manage these challenges effectively, ensuring that the region remains stable and prosperous.

- Professor Aneek Chatterjee,
Professor of Political Science, Author &
Analyst of International Relations and Politics

Detailed Analysis by Dr Namrata Kothari

Introduction

Dr. Namrata Kothari began her presentation with a note of gratitude to the forum's organizers and other speakers. Acknowledging her self-perceived lack of expertise compared to the earlier scholarly presentations, Dr. Kothari outlined her focus on the trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations, recent political upheavals in Bangladesh, and the implications of these developments for India's foreign policy. Her remarks were aimed at offering a nuanced perspective on the ongoing political dynamics and the lessons that can be drawn for India's diplomatic strategies.

Historical Context: The Legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina

Dr. Kothari commenced with a historical reflection on the significant relationship between India and Bangladesh, especially focusing on Sheikh Hasina's political journey. She recalled the tragic events of August 1975, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, was assassinated during a military coup. This violent upheaval resulted in the death of nearly his entire family. At that time, Sheikh Hasina and her sister Rehana sought refuge in India, with Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, intervening personally to ensure their safety. This intervention was a testament to the close ties between India and Mujibur Rahman and underscored India's role as a supportive neighbour during crises.

In contrast, Sheikh Hasina's current status is a dramatic departure from her past. From being a housewife and daughter of a freedom fighter, she has evolved into one of the longest-serving female leaders globally, having held the office of Prime Minister for four full terms. Her tenure has been marked by significant achievements, including substantial economic improvements and infrastructure development, earning her the moniker "Iron Lady of Bangladesh." Under her leadership, Bangladesh has seen advancements in ports, roads, railways, and other infrastructure projects.

However, Dr. Kothari pointed out that despite these achievements, Hasina's administration has faced significant criticism. The presentation highlighted the contrast between the positive economic turnaround and the growing disconnect with the masses. This disconnect has become increasingly apparent as Hasina's tenure has progressed, raising concerns about her governance style and its impact on the country's political stability.

Recent Political Unrest: The Anti-Quota Protests and Government Response

Dr. Kothari then focused on the recent political unrest in Bangladesh, specifically the anti-quota protests that have erupted in response to Sheikh Hasina's controversial statements. The protests were triggered by Hasina's remarks questioning whether quotas for the descendants of freedom fighters should be created for the 'Razakars,' a derogatory term for collaborators with the Pakistani army during the Liberation War.

Hasina's inflammatory comments exacerbated the situation, leading to widespread student protests. The slogans chanted during these protests, such as "tumi ke, ami ke, razakar razakar, chaite gelam odhikar, hoye gelam razakar," reflected deep frustration with the government's handling of the situation and its perceived insensitivity to public grievances. Dr. Kothari criticized Hasina's approach to managing these protests, arguing that the administration's response was inadequate and only served to further inflame the unrest.

The presentation emphasized that the mishandling of the protests highlighted broader issues of governance and public dissatisfaction under Hasina's administration. The failure to address the root causes of the unrest and the ineffective response to the protests have contributed to a volatile political environment in Bangladesh.

Economic Challenges and Corruption

Dr. Kothari's presentation also delved into the economic challenges facing Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, focusing on several critical issues:

1. **Rampant Corruption:** Dr. Kothari highlighted that corruption has been a significant barrier to Bangladesh's economic progress. The involvement of business elites in bribery and money laundering has undermined the effectiveness of economic policies and hindered development. She provided an example of a businessman who, despite being a member of the Prime Minister's Council of Advisers, was implicated in money laundering. This corruption has had a detrimental effect on economic stability and growth.
2. **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic:** The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing economic challenges in Bangladesh. Dr. Kothari noted that the pandemic has strained the country's economic resources, contributing to a decline in economic performance. The pandemic's impact has been particularly severe in developing countries like Bangladesh, highlighting the vulnerabilities in the country's economic structure.
3. **Currency Depreciation and Inflation:** The presentation also addressed the significant depreciation of the Bangladeshi taka, which has fallen by 28% in recent times. This depreciation has led to high inflation, further straining the economic situation and contributing to public discontent. The decrease in currency value has had a direct impact on the cost of living and overall economic stability.
4. **Unemployment:** High unemployment rates have exacerbated public dissatisfaction. Dr. Kothari pointed out that unemployment, coupled with economic mismanagement and corruption, has fueled protests and unrest among the youth. The failure to create sufficient job opportunities has been a significant factor in the growing frustration among the population.

Dr. Kothari emphasized that these economic challenges, combined with corruption and poor governance, have created a volatile environment in Bangladesh, making the country susceptible to political unrest.

India's Diplomatic Response and Lessons Learned

Dr. Kothari examined India's diplomatic response to the crisis in Bangladesh, noting several key points:

1. **Diplomatic Presence and Engagement:** Despite India's significant presence in Bangladesh, with four consulates and various developmental projects, Dr. Kothari argued that India failed to adequately address or acknowledge the growing discontent with Sheikh Hasina's government. The failure to engage with opposition parties and civil society groups limited India's influence and effectiveness in addressing the situation.
2. **Balancing Diplomatic Relations:** Dr. Kothari criticized India's approach for being overly aligned with Sheikh Hasina's government while neglecting engagement with opposition factions and civil society. This one-sided approach has strained India's diplomatic relations and limited its ability to effectively address the evolving political dynamics in Bangladesh.
3. **Pragmatism and Flexibility:** Drawing parallels with India's handling of the Afghan refugee crisis, Dr. Kothari noted that India's refusal to grant visas to Afghan allies tarnished its reputation as a dependable partner. In contrast, India's decision to allow Sheikh Hasina to stay in India temporarily was seen as a pragmatic move. Dr. Kothari advised that India should continue to adopt a pragmatic approach and avoid turning its back on allies during crises.
4. **Avoiding Communal Binaries:** Dr. Kothari criticized the Modi government's approach to regional relations, which often reduces complex issues to communal binaries. She argued that India's concern for minorities in Bangladesh should be expressed discreetly and

through meaningful actions rather than through blunt measures. The Modi government's approach has sometimes been criticized for being overly simplistic and not addressing the complexities of regional issues.

5. **Geopolitical Sensitivity:** Dr. Kothari warned against allowing the region to become a battleground for US and Chinese rivalries. She highlighted China's growing influence in South Asia, including its investments and strategic ties with Bangladesh. The US's inconsistent stance on democratic issues, particularly its response to the Bangladesh crisis compared to other countries, further complicates the situation.

Future Directions and Recommendations

In concluding her presentation, Dr. Kothari offered several recommendations for India's future approach to Bangladesh and its broader regional strategy:

1. **Maintaining a Balanced Approach:** India should aim for a balanced diplomatic approach that engages with all political factions in Bangladesh. This involves recognizing the grievances of opposition groups and civil society and avoiding an exclusive focus on the ruling party. A balanced approach will help India maintain its influence and address the complexities of the political landscape.
2. **Addressing Economic and Democratic Issues:** Dr. Kothari emphasized the need for India to address both economic and democratic issues in Bangladesh. Economic progress alone cannot compensate for democratic backsliding. India should advocate for democratic reforms and human rights within the region, promoting a stable and inclusive political environment.
3. **Geopolitical Strategy:** India must carefully navigate its geopolitical strategy in South Asia, balancing its relationships with major powers like the US and China while protecting its strategic interests. India should avoid allowing regional conflicts to become arenas for larger

power rivalries, and instead focus on building cooperative relationships that benefit all parties involved.

4. **Supporting Democratic Values:** Dr. Kothari underscored the importance of supporting democratic values in regional diplomacy. She referenced an old dictum about the importance of nurturing democracy for long-term stability and urged India to apply this principle in its foreign policy. Supporting democratic values and promoting human rights should be central to India's regional strategy.

Conclusion

Dr. Namrata Kothari's presentation provided a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the evolving dynamics between India and Bangladesh. By examining historical context, recent political unrest, economic challenges, and diplomatic responses, Dr. Kothari offered valuable insights into the complexities of regional relations. Her recommendations emphasized the need for a balanced and pragmatic approach, addressing both economic and democratic issues, and navigating geopolitical complexities with sensitivity. Her analysis highlights the importance of supporting democratic values and maintaining cooperative relationships in the pursuit of regional stability and progress.

- Dr Namarata Kothari,
Assistant Professor of Political Science,
South Kolkata Girls' College

Detailed Analysis by Dr Uday Bhanu Singh

Introduction:

Dr. Uday Bhanu Singh begins his presentation by expressing gratitude to the Tillotoma Foundation for the opportunity to address a gathering of specialists on a subject of significant importance: India's interests in Bangladesh and the broader Southeast Asian region. He acknowledges that much has already been discussed by the preceding speakers and sets the tone for his presentation by focusing on India's strategic concerns, foreign policy objectives, and the complex geopolitical environment in which these interests are situated.

India's Strategic Interests in Bangladesh:

At the core of India's strategic interests in Bangladesh is the desire to maintain stability and order in its immediate neighbourhood. Bangladesh, sharing a 4,000-kilometer border with India, represents a critical component of India's border management and security framework. The challenges associated with this extensive border, particularly in the context of illegal migration and cross-border terrorism, have made it increasingly difficult for India's Border Security Force (BSF) to manage the situation effectively.

Dr. Singh highlights that one of India's primary objectives in Bangladesh is to see law and order restored, especially in light of the illegal migration that has been exacerbated by political instability in the country. This instability has led to the targeting of minorities, particularly Hindus, and members of the ruling Awami League. India, therefore, has a vested interest in ensuring the protection of these vulnerable groups as part of its broader foreign policy objectives in Bangladesh.

Political Dynamics and India's Concerns:

India's relations with Bangladesh have historically been shaped by its interactions with the ruling Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina. Dr. Singh notes that while India has enjoyed good relations with Sheikh Hasina's government, there is growing concern over her increasingly authoritarian tendencies. Domestically, Sheikh Hasina has faced criticism for curbing

democratic freedoms and silencing opposition voices, which has led to growing unrest within the country.

India's concerns are further compounded by the possibility of a political shift in Bangladesh. Dr. Singh expresses India's apprehension about the potential rise of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, in the next elections. The BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, is perceived by India as a political force that could strengthen the Pakistan-China nexus, which would have significant implications for India's security and regional influence. This distrust of the BNP and its allies stems from historical tensions and their perceived alignment with forces hostile to India's interests.

Despite these concerns, Dr. Singh argues that it is in India's best interest to engage with whichever government is in power in Bangladesh. The pragmatic approach suggests that India should focus on maintaining and securing its strategic interests rather than becoming overly entangled in Bangladesh's internal political dynamics.

Strategic Access and Connectivity:

One of the critical aspects of India's relationship with Bangladesh is its strategic importance in providing access to the northeast of India and the Indian Ocean. The instability in Myanmar, which has traditionally served as an outlet to the Indian Ocean for India's northeastern states, has forced India to increasingly rely on Bangladesh as an alternative route. Dr. Singh emphasizes that Bangladesh's role in this regard cannot be overstated, as it provides both connectivity to the Indian Ocean and access to the rest of India through its territory.

The strategic significance of this connectivity extends beyond mere transportation and trade routes. For India, ensuring secure and reliable access to the Indian Ocean is vital for its economic and security interests, particularly in the context of the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Bay of Bengal, in which Bangladesh occupies a central position, serves as a critical gateway for India's maritime trade and naval operations. Thus, any instability or shift in

Bangladesh's political landscape that affects this connectivity would have direct implications for India's strategic posture in the region.

Regional Dynamics and the Act East Policy:

Dr. Singh situates India's interests in Bangladesh within the broader context of its Act East policy, which aims to enhance economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. Bangladesh's stability and cooperation are crucial for the success of this policy, particularly given the challenges posed by the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. The Act East policy is designed to integrate India's northeastern states with Southeast Asia, promoting economic development and enhancing regional connectivity.

However, the turmoil in both Myanmar and Bangladesh has posed significant challenges to the implementation of key connectivity projects, such as the Kaladan multimodal project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. These projects are critical for linking India's northeastern states with Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, providing alternative routes for trade and transportation. The instability in Myanmar, coupled with growing concerns about Bangladesh's internal situation, threatens to derail these strategic initiatives, making it imperative for India to find ways to address these challenges.

Dr. Singh also points to the broader regional context, where India's neighbourhood has been marked by turmoil. He references the recent crises in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Afghanistan as examples of the instability that has plagued the region. These developments have underscored the need for India to adopt a proactive approach to managing its neighbourhood, particularly in the context of its neighbourhood first policy. For India, maintaining stability and fostering cooperation in its immediate neighbourhood is essential for ensuring its own security and promoting regional development.

China's Influence and the Indo-Pacific Strategy:

The rise of China as a regional and global power has had significant implications for India's foreign policy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Dr. Singh highlights India's concerns about the increasing influence of China

in Bangladesh and Myanmar, both of which are critical components of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. China's growing economic and military presence in these countries poses a challenge to India's strategic interests, as it could potentially encircle India and undermine its influence in the region.

In the case of Myanmar, Dr. Singh notes that the country had, during its military rule, become heavily dependent on China for economic support and military supplies. This dependency has allowed China to exert significant influence over Myanmar's political and economic decisions, often to the detriment of India's interests. The fear is that Bangladesh could follow a similar path, becoming increasingly reliant on Chinese economic and military assistance, which would further complicate India's efforts to maintain stability and influence in the region.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy, which seeks to counterbalance China's influence by fostering closer ties with other regional powers, such as Japan, the United States, and Australia, is critical in this context. Dr. Singh emphasizes the importance of Japan's role in supporting India's infrastructure projects in the northeast and its broader involvement in the region. Japan's investments and strategic partnership with India are seen as vital components of India's efforts to counter China's growing presence in South and Southeast Asia.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes India, Japan, the United States, and Australia, is also a key element of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Dr. Singh suggests that the QUAD can play a crucial role in addressing the challenges posed by China's influence in Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, he also acknowledges that the success of this strategy depends on the willingness and ability of the QUAD members to engage actively in the region and support India's efforts to maintain stability and counterbalance China's growing presence.

Diplomatic and Military Engagement:

Dr. Singh underscores the importance of diplomatic and military engagement as tools for managing India's relationships with Bangladesh and Myanmar. He suggests that second-track diplomacy, which involves informal, non-governmental interactions between the two countries, can be an effective way to build trust and address mutual concerns. People-to-people relations, which

foster cultural and social ties between India and Bangladesh, are also seen as critical for maintaining goodwill and cooperation.

Military diplomacy, particularly in the form of joint exercises and defense cooperation, is another important aspect of India's engagement with Bangladesh and Myanmar. Dr. Singh highlights the role of the Indian military in providing training and support to the armed forces of these countries, which helps to build stronger defense ties and enhance mutual security. This form of engagement is seen as essential for addressing the security challenges posed by cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, and the potential rise of Islamic extremism in the region.

Dr. Singh also points to the role of regional organizations, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in fostering regional cooperation. However, he notes that the instability in Bangladesh and Myanmar has hindered the progress of these organizations, making it difficult for them to achieve their full potential. Reviving SAARC and enhancing BIMSTEC's role in regional development are seen as important steps for promoting stability and cooperation in the region.

Challenges and Criticisms of India's Approach:

Throughout his presentation, Dr. Singh reflects on the challenges and criticisms of India's approach to its relationship with Bangladesh. One of the key issues he raises is whether India has adequately responded to the signals coming from Dhaka, particularly in light of the growing unrest and political dissent in the country. He questions whether India may have ignored early warnings of the potential for a political crisis in Bangladesh, particularly following Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian actions and the opposition's protests against her government.

Dr. Singh also addresses the question of whether there has been an intelligence failure on India's part in anticipating the developments in Bangladesh. While he argues that New Delhi was kept informed of the situation, he suggests that there may have been a failure in analyzing and interpreting the intelligence that was received. This raises concerns about the

effectiveness of India's decision-making processes and the potential for structural issues within the government to hinder its ability to respond effectively to regional challenges.

One of the structural issues Dr. Singh highlights is the diffusion of responsibility within India's national security apparatus. The emergence of new institutions, such as the Office of the National Security Advisor (NSA), the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), may have led to a lack of clear accountability and coordination in addressing the developing situation in Bangladesh, although no blame can be pinned on any one individual. This, in turn, could have contributed to delays in formulating and implementing a coherent strategy for dealing with the crisis.

The Role of All-Party Meetings and Consensus Building:

Dr. Singh concludes his presentation by emphasizing the importance of consensus-building and collaborative approaches to addressing India's challenges in Bangladesh and the broader region. He cites the example of the all-party meeting convened by the Government of India in New Delhi on the Bangladesh issue, which he describes as a positive development. Such meetings, he argues, provide an opportunity for different political parties and stakeholders to come together, share their views, and develop a unified approach to dealing with complex issues.

The value of brainstorming and engaging with contrary views is highlighted as a key element of this process. By bringing together diverse perspectives, India can develop more nuanced and effective strategies for managing its relationships with Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries. This approach also helps to build domestic political support for India's foreign policy initiatives, ensuring that they are more sustainable and resilient in the face of changing regional dynamics.

Conclusion:

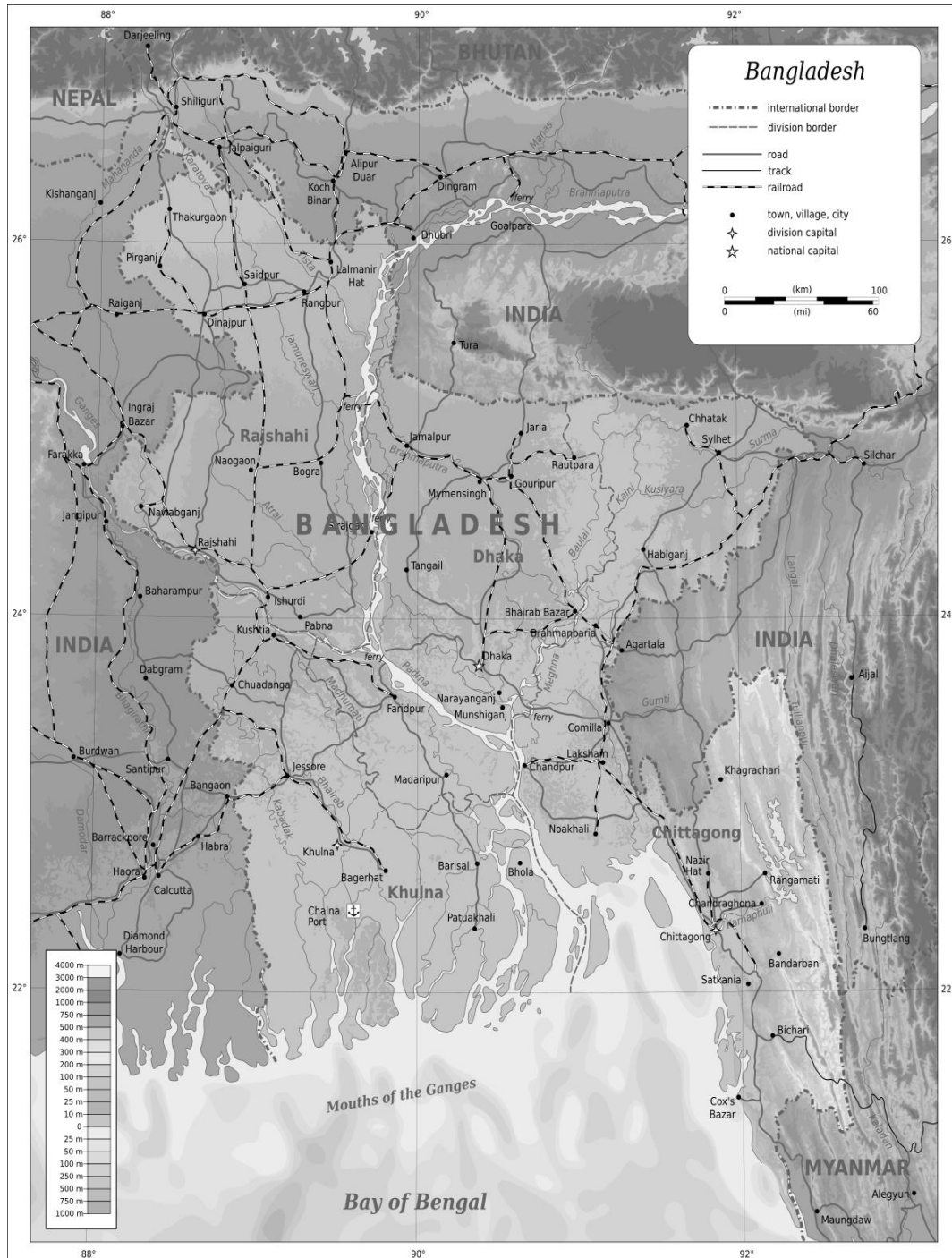
Dr. Udai Bhanu Singh's presentation offers a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of India's strategic interests in Bangladesh and the broader Southeast Asian region. He highlights the complex interplay of political, economic, and security factors that shape India's relationship with Bangladesh, emphasizing the importance of maintaining stability, fostering connectivity, and countering external influences, particularly from China.

The challenges posed by the instability in Bangladesh and Myanmar are significant, but Dr. Singh suggests that India has the tools and strategies to address these challenges effectively. Through a combination of diplomatic engagement, military cooperation, regional partnerships, and consensus-building at home, India can navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of South and Southeast Asia and secure its strategic interests in the region.

In the final analysis, Dr. Singh calls for a pragmatic and proactive approach to India's foreign policy, one that recognizes the realities of the regional environment while also seeking to shape it in ways that align with India's long-term goals. By engaging with its neighbours, leveraging regional organizations, and working closely with international partners, India can enhance its influence, promote stability, and contribute to the overall security and development of the Indo-Pacific region.

- Dr Udai Bhanu Singh,
Senior Fellow & Head (Indo-Pacific Centre),
Tillotoma Foundation

Map of Bangladesh





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For queries, write to [director@tillotomafoundation.org](mailto:director@tillotomafoundation.org) or  
[tillotomafoudation@gmail.com](mailto:tillotomafoudation@gmail.com).

[tillotomafoundation.org/](http://tillotomafoundation.org/)