

India's 'Act East' Needs Bangladesh to 'Look East'

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Summary

Bangladesh's 'Look East' strategy is vital to connecting India's 'Act East' policy with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and unlocking the Bay of Bengal's economic potential. Despite shared benefits, political tensions and unresolved disputes have stalled regional connectivity. Both countries must prioritise equitable water-sharing, reciprocal trade and infrastructure cooperation to achieve regional integration and shared prosperity.

Bangladesh should 'Look East' not as diplomatic branding but as an organising principle of geography. It is the bridge that can turn India's 'Act East' policy from aspiration into reality and connect an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) looking westward with South Asia. Aligning these strategies would restore the Bay of Bengal as a highway for Asian commerce, energy, ideas and security.

Bangladesh lies between India's landlocked north-east and the sea while facing Myanmar and Southeast Asia. No efficient eastward strategy can bypass it. The shortest commercial access for Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram runs through Bangladeshi roads, railways, waterways and ports. Chattogram, Mongla, Payra and Matarbari can, therefore, serve both national growth and a wider regional economy.

This logic drove post-2009 gains: restored rail links, coastal shipping, inland-water protocols, port access and reopened routes severed by the Partition. It also informed the [2015 Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement](#). An implementing protocol was agreed in 2025 but full operation still awaits political and administrative follow-through, with Bhutan outside the initial vehicle-movement phase.

The promise exceeds transit. A connected eastern subregion could combine Bangladeshi manufacturing and ports, Indian markets and capital, Nepali and Bhutanese hydropower and ASEAN supply chains. It could turn India's Northeast from frontier into commercial hinge, give ASEAN a western gateway and bring Bangladesh income, investment and strategic relevance – provided arrangements are reciprocal and visibly benefit all citizens.

Bangladesh's upheaval since August 2024 stalled that project. Sheikh Hasina's ouster as prime minister, Muhammad Yunus's interim administration and the February 2026 election dismantled the framework sustaining earlier cooperation. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party won a commanding majority under Tarique Rahman; the Awami League was barred and Jamaat-e-Islami became the principal opposition. New Delhi now faces criticism for investing too heavily in one party and leader.

Relations remain tense. India hosts the former prime minister, while Dhaka seeks her extradition and objects to her political interventions from Indian soil. A proposed Rahman visit to New Delhi has not delivered a reset. Bangladesh's mood is not simply "anti-India"; it

reflects demands for sovereign equality and a relationship able to survive changes of government, alongside grievances over Teesta water, border deaths, trade barriers and unequal connectivity gains.

India's 2026 state elections created a consequential alignment politically within India's federal system. The Bharatiya Janata Party ended Trinamool Congress rule in West Bengal, installing Suvendu Adhikari, while its alliance retained Assam under Himanta Biswa Sarma. New Delhi's ruling party now controls four of the five Indian states bordering Bangladesh. That should reduce federal friction over water, borders and infrastructure, particularly because West Bengal shares the longest border and Assam is central to the north-east. The immediate tests are Teesta and the Ganges treaty. West Bengal blocked a draft Teesta agreement in 2011; central-state alignment removes that excuse. The [1996 Ganges water-sharing treaty](#) expires in December 2026. Yet alignment alone cannot resolve dry-season scarcity, irrigation pressures or climate stress without credible data and basin-wide bargains.

Alignment could also aggravate mistrust. Indian majoritarian rhetoric that portrays Bangladesh chiefly, as a source of illegal migration or security threats, may bring domestic gains but carries a strategic cost. Campaigns that stigmatise Bangladeshis or heighten minority insecurity on either side narrow Dhaka's room for manoeuvre and strengthen claims that connectivity is merely a vehicle for Indian dominance.

The damage would extend beyond bilateral ties. A colder border would delay transport and power projects, raise costs for India's Northeast and weaken Bangladesh's hub ambitions. In April 2025, [India withdrew a facility for Bangladeshi third-country export cargo](#) using Indian ports and airports, citing congestion, although Nepal and Bhutan transit was unaffected. Bangladesh has, meanwhile, [deepened ties with China, Pakistan and Türkiye](#) – normal diversification when strategic options appear uncertain.

Geographic interdependence cannot rest on intimacy with one government, still less on coercive nationalism; it must be institutionalised. India should engage Bangladesh's government, opposition, civil society, businesses and younger generation. Bangladesh should not let legitimate grievances harden into strategic disengagement. Whatever the two governments' ideology, the economic case for cooperation remains compelling.

A reset should start with tangible deliverables. India should pursue an equitable Teesta settlement and basin-wide management of shared rivers. Both sides should publish transparent assessments of transit, port and infrastructure projects, including gains for border districts. They should remove non-tariff barriers, guarantee reciprocal access for Bangladeshi exporters and hold their border forces to a shared objective: a frontier that is both secure and humane.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation should provide a wider frame. It adopted a [transport-connectivity master plan](#) in 2022 and signed a [maritime transport agreement](#) at its April 2025 Bangkok summit; implementation is now the test. Priorities should include interoperable customs, dependable coastal shipping, cross-border rail standards, energy trading and disaster resilience, with the Bangladesh,

Bhutan, India and Nepal initiative as a subregional engine. Rules-based cooperation would reassure smaller states while giving India and ASEAN a credible meeting platform.

The Bay of Bengal has reached a strategic fork. One path leads to a connected subregion in which Bangladesh prospers as a bridge, India gains a viable route to South-east Asia and ASEAN gains a western partner and market. The other leads to harder borders, competing nationalisms and stalled corridors. Political alignment gives New Delhi capacity to act; the test is whether it uses that power to settle disputes or sharpen identities.

India cannot credibly 'Act East' if Bangladesh is unable – or politically unwilling – to 'Look East'. ASEAN cannot effectively look west if the land bridge at the head of the Bay is fractured, nor can Bangladesh fulfil its potential if it sees connectivity only as exposure rather than leverage. These strategies are interdependent. Success requires an India-Bangladesh compact grounded in sovereign equality, political sensitivity and shared prosperity – not generosity but investment in each country's strategic future.

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