

The Japan-India-Bangladesh Strategic Triangle Unfastened

Purnendra Jain

- The Japan-India-Bangladesh triangular cooperation framework, developed during Sheikh Hasina's tenure (2009-2024), has faltered following her ouster through a student-led revolution against her repressive policies.
- Under interim leader Muhammad Yunus, Japan-Bangladesh ties remain stable, but India-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated to their lowest in decades. Mutual accusations of hostile policies have bred distrust and even animosity, undermining the previously flourishing triangular cooperation. This political discord on both sides of the border casts uncertainty over the framework's future, stalling progress and jeopardising what was once a promising regional partnership.

Introduction

The Japan-India-Bangladesh triangular partnership, once robust, faltered after Sheikh Hasina's government ended in August 2024, leading to her exile in India. The interim government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, aims to restore political stability, implement reforms, and rebuild trust in democratic institutions. However, Dhaka faces significant foreign policy challenges, especially strained ties with India, which undermine the triangular partnership. Progress has reverted to bilateral engagements rather than trilateral cooperation. Japan, a trusted partner of India and Bangladesh, played a key role in fostering this partnership, which grew from strong bilateral relations. Trilateral cooperation often evolves from informal ties to formal and then institutionalised partnerships, such as Japan-Australia-US. This paper examines the rise, fall, and potential revival of the Japan-India-Bangladesh triangle, exploring its historical development, recent setbacks, and the prospects of this once-promising triangular partnership amid changing regional dynamics.

Japan-India-Bangladesh Triangle

During the Hasina government (2009-2024), Japan's relations with Bangladesh flourished in multiple areas of mutual interest. India-Bangladesh relations also had an upward trajectory overall. Indian Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh

(2004-2014) and Narendra Modi since 2014 established a personal rapport with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2006-2007; and 2012-20). India-Japan relations have remained strong in the post-Abe period.

Similarly, in her fifteen years in office, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, developed strong ties with India and Japan. These positive bilateral ties created a triangular partnership, albeit informal, promoting trade, investment, infrastructure, financial aid and, above all, a strategic relationship between the three.

India-Bangladesh relations have deteriorated fast since the fall of the Hasina government. Political rhetoric and temperatures are rising on both sides of the borders, with street protests across many cities and around land ports hampering trade and other exchanges. On the other hand, Japan's relations with India and Bangladesh stand on an even keel. And so is the Japan-Bangladesh relationship. Can Japan act as a bridge between India and Bangladesh to smoothen their deteriorating bilateral relationship?

India-Bangladesh Relations

Bangladesh's relations with India under Hasina were the most cordial. No two other South Asian countries had such good bilateral ties as India and Bangladesh. The long-standing land-border disputes were resolved. Bilateral trade flourished,

The Japan-India-Bangladesh Strategic Triangle Unfastened

reaching \$15 billion in 2022. India's exports to Bangladesh exceeded many of the world's economies, such as Japan, France, and Germany. India has been a significant donor to Bangladesh, with lines of credit amounting to US\$8bn between 2015-2023. India also provided grant assistance for various infrastructure projects. Private investment from India to Bangladesh also flowed. Although asymmetrical, the relationship was generally friendly and cooperative during the Hasina regime. A 2024 Pew opinion poll result bears out positive views of each other.

Bangladesh-Japan Relations

Under Hasina and Abe, Japan-Bangladesh ties reached a new height. Bangladesh became a strategic partner, and Japanese aid, trade, and investment flowed to Bangladesh like no other in South Asia except India. Abe and Hasina, and later Kishida and Hasina, developed friendly ties at the leadership level. Japan has not only supported multi-billion-dollar big infrastructure projects such as the Matarbari deep seaport, BIG-B (The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt) and Dhaka Metro, but Bangladesh was one of the first four countries to receive the first round of Official Security Assistance (OSA), signifying Bangladesh's strategic importance for Japan.

Japan-India Relations

Japan-India relations flourished in the twenty-first century and significantly accelerated during the Abe second government from 2012-2020. Many Japanese and English books capture the developments of bilateral ties over the two and half decades of the new century.

Trilateral Cooperation

Cordial and strong bilateral ties led to an informal trilateral cooperation format. This was characteristically displayed in the development of India's Northeast, popularly known as the seven sister states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, and the addition of a 'brother' state of Sikkim. Japan supported the development of Northeast India by financing infrastructure projects to connect India's northeast with Bangladesh and Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand. India and Bangladesh enthusiastically partnered with Japan and each other towards this goal and made significant progress. However, this has come to a standstill in the aftermath of the downfall of the Hasina government.

Hasina's Fall from Disgrace

The writings on the wall appeared for a long time against

Hasina's style of governance. This accelerated after the general election in 2024 when Hasina secured a fifth term, almost unopposed, as the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, boycotted the polls. Distrust in the Hasina government grew further. The last straw that broke her back was the clamp down on Dhaka University students and the unleashing of state-led brutal force on students and civilians. The student-led revolution finally forced her to flee the country and seek refuge overseas, which the Modi government provided in India.

Derailment of Trilateral Cooperation

Since the coming of the interim government in Dhaka and the fast deterioration in India-Bangladesh relations, the emerging trilateral framework has come unstuck. Japan-Bangladesh and Japan-India relations remain on firm footing, but the third leg of India-Bangladesh ties has caused the trilateral to suffer immensely. How, when, and if this will be revived is unclear.

Escalating Tensions

Diplomatic tensions between India and Bangladesh are escalating. Bangladesh's interim government demands India extradite Sheikh Hasina, who is in exile, a request India is unlikely to honour. Hopes for improved ties following the Indian foreign secretary's December 2024 visit to Dhaka faded as both nations have summoned diplomats over border fencing and other border-related issues. India's concerns centre on minority treatment, especially the Hindus in Bangladesh, while Bangladesh decries India's "Big Brother" stance. Dhaka opposes Hasina's making political statements against the interim government from exile.

Way Forward?

Restoring the Japan-India-Bangladesh triangular framework requires rebuilding trust and cooperation between India and Bangladesh. With its strong ties to Bangladesh and regional development focus, Japan could mediate through quiet diplomacy, leveraging its understanding of South Asia's connectivity needs. However, Japan's role depends on its willingness and India-Bangladesh acceptance. Continued strained relations harm Bangladesh's economy and India's regional influence. It is a lose-lose situation. Given New Delhi's already delicate ties with neighbouring countries, repairing relations with Dhaka is critical for long-term stability, economic growth and partnership.

(Purnendra Jain/ The University of Adelaide)