

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Is Bangladesh Eyeing India's Northeast? An Emerging Security Dilemma

Anand Kumar

May 20, 2025

S*ummary*

The possibility of a three-pronged strategic encirclement involving China, Pakistan and an unstable Bangladesh necessitates a recalibrated Indian approach.

India played a pivotal role in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, offering support, sanctuary and strategic assistance to the Muktiyodhas (freedom fighters) who fought against the oppressive regime of West Pakistan. The Indian Northeast served as the principal base for the liberation struggle, and the people of this region extended generous support and solidarity during Bangladesh’s hour of crisis.

Logically, one would expect enduring gratitude and cooperation from Bangladesh, especially towards the Northeast. Instead, the India–Bangladesh relationship has witnessed periodic turbulence—often stemming from illegal immigration, cross-border insurgency and rhetorical provocations. The latest controversy has sparked renewed concerns about Bangladesh’s intentions towards India's strategically sensitive Northeast.

A Provocative Statement with Dangerous Undertones

The controversy was ignited when Major General (Retd) ALM Fazlur Rahman, a former chief of the Bangladesh Rifles (now Border Guard Bangladesh), made a startling and incendiary claim. In the aftermath of the heinous Pahalgam terrorist attack on 22 April 2025, in which 26 Hindus were killed, Rahman suggested that if India were to retaliate against Pakistan, Bangladesh should seize the opportunity to occupy all northeastern states of India. He went further, proposing a military alliance with China to achieve this strategic ambition.¹

This statement has shocked observers across the region, even though no serving government official has echoed Rahman’s remarks. As a former top-ranking officer and recently appointed chairman of the National Independent Commission by the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, Rahman is not a fringe figure. His statement is not merely a personal musing but a dangerous provocation that hints at broader ideological undercurrents.

Bangladesh Government’s Attempt at Damage Control

In response to widespread outrage, the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly issued a media release on 2 May 2025, distancing the government from Rahman's remarks. The ministry emphasised that the comments “do not reflect the position or policies of the government of Bangladesh” and reaffirmed Bangladesh’s

¹ [“If India Attacks Pakistan, Bangladesh Will...”: Muhammad Yunus Aide's 'Northeast' Warning Over Pahalgam Terror Attack](#), *Hindustan Times*, 3 May 2025.

commitment to “sovereignty, territorial integrity, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence”.²

Shafiqul Alam, press adviser to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, reiterated that the statement was Rahman's personal opinion and not government policy. However, such disavowals have not fully dispelled the concerns in Indian strategic circles, especially when viewed in the context of several other developments pointing to a revival of anti-India elements in Bangladesh’s political landscape.

Muhammad Yunus and the Northeast: Old Ideas, New Threats

The current interim regime in Bangladesh, headed by economist and Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, assumed office in August 2024, following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. While Yunus is known for his work on microfinance and poverty alleviation, his interim administration has displayed a worrying tendency to accommodate Islamist and anti-India voices.

In an earlier statement, Yunus made a geopolitical remark that India’s Northeast is "landlocked" and that Bangladesh should be seen as the "guardian of the ocean" for this region.³ While such geographical assertions may seem benign, in the context of Rahman's military proposal and Yunus’s comments on regional access, they have gained a more sinister interpretation. These statements also align with China's strategic interest in exploiting India’s vulnerabilities, especially through the narrow Siliguri Corridor—often called the “Chicken’s Neck”—that connects the rest of India with the Northeast.

Illegal Immigration: A Silent Infiltration Strategy?

Demographic shifts in India’s Northeast over the decades have added a layer of socio-political complexity to India–Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is one of the world’s most densely populated countries, and its limited natural resources have long struggled to sustain its growing population. Given these constraints, many analysts argue that Bangladesh has pursued a policy—tacit if not official—of encouraging cross-border migration into India.

² [“Fazlur Rahman’s Comments Not Govt’s Position: MOFA”](#), *BSS News*, 2 May 2025.

³ [“‘7 States Of India Are Landlocked’: Yunus Says Bangladesh ‘Only Guardian Of Ocean’, Invites China To Make ‘Extension’”](#), *The Times of India*, 1 April 2025.

This has led to substantial demographic change in parts of Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, and even beyond. The illegal influx of both Hindus (particularly during the partition and the 1971 war) and Muslims (as economic migrants in later decades) has triggered ethnic tensions, violent agitations and political upheavals—especially in Assam and Tripura. India’s attempts to build border fences have repeatedly been obstructed, often provoking sharp protests from Bangladesh.⁴ Incidents where illegal migrants are intercepted or killed have led to diplomatic tensions, even though the underlying issues remain largely unaddressed by Dhaka.

Support for Insurgency in the Past

Bangladesh’s role in destabilising India’s Northeast is not a recent development. During the regimes of General Ershad and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Khaleda Zia, Dhaka reportedly provided sanctuary, training and logistical support to insurgent groups such as ULFA, NSCN (IM), and others. These groups used Bangladeshi territory to launch attacks in India.

Khaleda Zia had controversially referred to these insurgents as "freedom fighters". However, this policy took a decisive turn under Sheikh Hasina, who after narrowly surviving a bomb attack reportedly orchestrated by Islamist elements allied with Northeast insurgents, chose to work closely with India. Her government undertook a bold and risky course correction, cracking down on anti-India militants and enhancing border cooperation with India—moves that earned her recognition in New Delhi but hostility from domestic Islamist and anti-India factions.

The Hasina–Yunus Shift: Implications for the Northeast

The removal of Sheikh Hasina and installation of the interim government led by Yunus in August 2024 has emboldened these latent factions. Yunus’ interim administration has been accused of aligning with elements previously marginalised under Hasina's tenure. His legal adviser, Asif Nazrul, made incendiary remarks on the Pahalgam killings and later deleted them. More worryingly, he reportedly met Harun Izhar, an individual linked with the Pakistan-based terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba.⁵

⁴ [“BSF Faces Opposition By BGB During Fencing At Bangladesh Border, Holds Flag Meeting”](#), *The Indian Express*, 10 January 2025.

⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, [“Bangladesh Interim Regime Adviser Meets Let Operative”](#), *The Economic Times*, 26 April 2025.

Such developments suggest that anti-India and pro-Islamist sentiments are gaining traction under the current regime. The aggressive posture of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), especially in resisting India’s fencing activities along disputed border zones, further reflects a shift in approach. There are reports of increased BGB hostility and attempts to disrupt Indian construction projects, raising red flags for Indian security planners.

Geopolitical Realignment: Bangladesh, Pakistan and China

The broader concern stems from the apparent strategic convergence between Bangladesh, Pakistan and China. With China already claiming Arunachal Pradesh and strengthening its presence in the Indian Ocean, a hostile Bangladesh could serve as a complementary force in the region to keep India geopolitically constrained. Rahman’s advocacy for a China–Bangladesh military alliance, if not reflective of official policy, certainly resonates with this line of thinking.

The possibility of coordinated efforts by Pakistan and Bangladesh—backed tacitly or overtly by China—could present a complex two-front challenge for India. The presence of radical Islamist networks in Bangladesh could also be weaponised by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to foment instability in India’s eastern frontier.

India’s Response and the Way Forward

Recognising the seriousness of the situation, India has already stepped up border vigilance. Forces along the India–Bangladesh and India–Myanmar borders have been placed on high alert. Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a stern warning to Yunus at the April 2025 BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok, cautioning against provocative behaviour. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar’s statement that “cooperation is not about cherry-picking” pointedly criticised Bangladesh’s selective engagement.⁶

India has also reportedly paused some infrastructure and railway projects in Bangladesh, a signal that it is reassessing its strategic investments under the changed political environment in Dhaka. At the same time, India is working with other BIMSTEC partners and engaging with ASEAN and Quad members to ensure that China’s strategic encirclement efforts are countered effectively.

⁶ Shubhajit Roy, “[“Cooperation Isn’t Cherry-Picking’: Jaishankar Jibe At Yunus Over Northeast ‘Landlocked’ Claim”](#)”, *The Indian Express*, 4 April 2025.

Conclusion

The provocative remarks by General Fazlur Rahman, the revival of anti-India rhetoric among Bangladeshi political figures, and the realignment of Dhaka’s foreign policy posture under the Yunus-led interim regime represent a serious challenge for India—particularly for the sensitive Northeast region.

While Dhaka’s official stance has sought to distance itself from these controversial statements, the underlying shifts in political alignments and ideology suggest that India cannot afford complacency. The possibility of a three-pronged strategic encirclement involving China, Pakistan and an unstable Bangladesh necessitates a recalibrated Indian approach—focusing on military preparedness, intelligence coordination and assertive diplomacy.

India must also strengthen socio-economic development and political stability in the Northeast to prevent internal vulnerabilities from being exploited. The unity and resilience of India’s frontier states will be key to thwarting any nefarious designs.

About the Author



Dr. Anand Kumar is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2025