

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## The Unease amid Newfound Warmth in Pakistan–Bangladesh Relations

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### **S***ummary*

Pakistan–Bangladesh bilateral relations may be witnessing some warmth due to Bangladesh's changed domestic political situation, but the ghost of 1971 still casts a shadow.

It has been more than a year since the downfall of the Awami League government in Bangladesh and the installation of a caretaker setup with Muhammad Yunus as its Chief Advisor. For some in the region and beyond, it was a shocking development. At the same time, politico-security elites in Pakistan saw it as an opportunity to reconfigure the bilateral relations, which were almost frozen during Sheikh Hasina's long tenure. Pakistan's overtures were positively received and responded favourably in the power corridors of Dhaka. The newfound warmth generated a kind of euphoria in Pakistan, where analysts and observers were busy suggesting ways to improve the bilateral relationship with Bangladesh and keep India out of the picture. Some even suggested the evolution of a trilateral alliance involving Bangladesh, China and Pakistan.

Burhanul Islam, a retired Bengali diplomat who opted for Pakistan after the 1971 debacle, suggested several policy measures to exploit the developing situation in Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> Most of these were worked upon immediately by Pakistan, including inter alia increasing diplomatic footprints in Dhaka and revamping political, economic and cultural ties. The results of these efforts were soon visible to everyone—three ministerial visits to Dhaka, two meetings between Muhammad Yunus and Shehbaz Sharif at the sidelines of international events, a foreign secretary-level meeting, a high-level military delegation to Pakistan, followed by an ISI delegation to Dhaka, a high-level business delegation to Dhaka, ease of visa restrictions and improved economic and cultural ties. All this indicates the enthusiasm and energy the two sides have invested in improving their relations. The bilateral trade has increased from US\$ 628 million in 2023–24 to US\$ 865 million in 2024–25. Pakistan's exports to Bangladesh have risen by 28 per cent, whereas Bangladesh's exports to Pakistan have increased by 20 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar embarked upon a much-awaited and widely publicised visit to Dhaka on 23 August. Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan visited on 22 August (in a visit that spanned four days). Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi had earlier visited Dhaka in July.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Kamal Khan was present in Dhaka during Ishaq Dar's visit and accompanied him in important interactions with Bangladesh officials. This was the first state visit of a Pakistani Foreign Minister to Bangladesh in the last 13 years. The previous visit by a foreign minister (Hina Rabbani Khar) was in November 2012 to invite Sheikh Hasina to the D-8 Summit in Islamabad. The relations between the two countries suffered a setback in 2013 when Islamabad condemned the execution of Jamaat-e-Islami leader Abdul Quader Mollah, who was convicted for committing

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<sup>1</sup> Burhanul Islam, [“Need for a New Strategy and Positive Approach on Bangladesh”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 22 September 2024.

<sup>2</sup> [“Dhaka Seeks More Trade Ties with Islamabad”](#), *The Daily Star*, 22 August 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [“Naqvi Arrives in Dhaka for ACC Meeting”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 24 July 2025.

crimes against humanity during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The relations remained at their lowest ebb when Sheikh Hasina ruled Bangladesh.

Ishaq Dar’s two-day state visit aimed to discuss ways to strengthen coordination and intensify re-engagement and cooperation with Bangladesh. Dar addressed a press conference at the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka, during which he underlined Pakistan’s “strong desire to forge a cooperative and forward-looking relationship with Bangladesh”. He also discussed the commonality of views on several regional and international issues, including the revival of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

During his stay in Dhaka, Dar tried to tick as many boxes as possible. Besides meeting the Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus, Foreign Advisor Touhid Hossain and Commerce Advisor Sheikh Bashir Uddin, he received three separate delegations comprising leaders of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the National Citizen Party (NCP).<sup>4</sup> Dar also met ailing BNP Chairperson and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and visited Jamaat-e-Islami Emir Dr Shafiqur Rahman at his residence. The meetings with the BNP Chairperson and the Jamaat Emir were more than ‘courtesy’ calls. These, in fact, were intended to revive the old linkages with pro-Pakistan forces in Bangladesh in a completely changed political scenario in the country. Both the BNP and Jamaat are historically known for their pro-Pakistan and anti-India stance. It is not a coincidence that during the Khaleda Zia government, India–Bangladesh relations were strained and deteriorated due to increased cross-border terrorism and illegal migration.

During Ishaq Dar’s crucial meetings with Muhammad Yunus, Touhid Hossain and Sheikh Bashir Uddin, a wide range of issues were discussed, including the revival of old connections, youth linkages, connectivity, trade and economic cooperation, people-to-people relations, revitalisation of regional cooperation, rejuvenation of SAARC, resolution of Palestine and Rohingya issues, etc.

The visit resulted in the signing of the following agreements, MoUs and other instruments:

- An agreement on Visa Abolition for Diplomatic and Official Passport Holders.
- An MoU on the Establishment of a Joint Working Group on Trade.
- An MoU for Cooperation between the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS).

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<sup>4</sup> “[Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister’s Visit to Bangladesh](#)”, Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 24 August 2025.

- An MoU between the Foreign Service Academy of Pakistan and the Foreign Service Academy of Bangladesh.
- An MoU between the Associated Press of Pakistan and the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha.
- A Cultural Exchange Programme.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, Pakistan launched the ‘Pakistan–Bangladesh Knowledge Corridor’ to grant 500 scholarships to Bangladeshi students to pursue higher studies in Pakistan. A quarter of these fellowships will be reserved for students pursuing medicine.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan’s Foreign Office also said that 100 Bangladeshi civil servants would be trained in Pakistan for the next five years.<sup>7</sup>

There was no progress on the key unsettled legacy issues, including a formal unconditional apology for crimes committed by the Pakistan Army, a fair division of assets and repatriation of stranded Pakistanis. There is a strong feeling in Dhaka that Islamabad must apologise to the people of Bangladesh who suffered gravely at the hands of the Pakistan Army during the 1971 Liberation War. Under Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League apologised as a pre-condition to any meaningful progress and development in the bilateral relations. Ishaq Dar, while interacting with journalists on 24 August in Dhaka, stated:

On the matter of unresolved issues, what I want to say is that the first settlement took place in 1974...The document of that time is historic for both countries. Later, General Pervez Musharraf came here and publicly and openly addressed the matter. So, it has been settled twice—once in 1974, and again in the early 2000s.<sup>8</sup>

The situation and circumstances in Bangladesh have changed a lot since the ouster and exile of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and a ban on the Awami League under the Anti-Terrorism Act in May 2025, yet the people of Bangladesh are not open to any compromise on critical issues with Pakistan. This was the primary reason behind the rebuttal of Ishaq Dar’s claims on the unsettled issues of 1971 by Foreign Advisor Touhid Hossain. At the Foreign Service Academy in Dhaka, later in the day, Touhid Hossain categorically rejected Ishaq Dar’s claim, saying, “I definitely do not agree. If we had agreed, the problem would have been solved.”<sup>9</sup> *The Daily Star* on 25 August

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [“Ishaq Dar Claims Unresolved 1971 Issues Were Settled Twice”](#), *Prothom Alo*, 24 August 2025.

<sup>9</sup> [“Pakistan FM Claims 1971 Issues Resolved Twice, Dhaka Rejects”](#), *Dhaka Tribune*, 24 August 2024.

published a strong editorial rejecting Pakistan’s unsubstantiated claim. The paper disagreed with Ishaq Dar’s assertion that the 1971 issues were resolved. It wrote:

We do not know where Mr Dar was getting his facts from, but history and media reporting over the years show a constant pattern of Pakistani authorities ignoring demands for an official acknowledgement and apology for the 1971 genocide, the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis or “Biharis,” or Bangladesh’s rightful share of pre-1971 assets.<sup>10</sup>

The bilateral relations between the two countries may have been witnessing some warmth in a completely changed political situation at home in Bangladesh, but the ghost of 1971 still casts a shadow and a kind of unease in Dhaka and Islamabad. The people of Bangladesh have not forgotten the horrors of 1971. It would not be easy for any government in Bangladesh to move ahead without resolving the critical issues to the satisfaction of the people of Bangladesh.

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<sup>10</sup> [\*\*“No, the 1971 Issues Haven't Been Resolved”\*\*](#), *The Daily Star*, 25 August 2025.

## About the Author



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