

Andrew Garber

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World Geography

Chapter 24-25

The India/Pakistan/Bangladesh tri-partite relationship is a complex one, which has alternately been characterized by cooperation and conflict. The three nations share a common history, being part of the British Empire--known as the "British Raj"--until 1947. The British Raj was divided into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, in 1947. The division was based on religious lines, with the Hindu-majority areas becoming India and the Muslim-majority areas becoming Pakistan. This division was hasty, and violent, as millions of either religion were left on the wrong side of the border. This is not to say that nations should be divided on religious lines, but that was what the prevailing sentiment was at the time and the British were happy to go along with it in order to leave the subcontinent. The division was not clean, and Pakistan and India have been at odds ever since. There have been numerous small conflicts between the two nations, some that have developed into full-scale wars, but a modicum of peace has been maintained recently. The relationship between India and Pakistan is complicated by the fact that both nations are nuclear powers, and have fought wars in the past. The relationship between India and Bangladesh is much more straightforward.

Bangladesh was originally just the Eastern part of Pakistan, but was separated from Pakistan by the whole breadth of India. They eventually fought a war for independence from Pakistan in 1971, and have been a separate nation since then. The relationship between Bangladesh and India is generally good, owing to the fact that India supported Bangladesh in their war for independence, greater cultural and linguistic similarities, and the lack of strategic friction between the two nations. The commercial relationship between India and Bangladesh is strong, with India being Bangladesh's second biggest source of imports--after China, which we will get to--and Western Nations being the greatest source of Bangladesh's exports.

The 800 pound gorilla in a dark corner of the room is China--relatively then, India would be a 600 pound bear--which has been making *literal* inroads in the region. India and China are geostrategic opponents with interests that only occasionally align--support of Russia occasionally being one of them--and have been in a state of rivalry for decades. China, as part of its belt-and-road initiative, has been building infrastructure all around Asia and North Africa, and that includes Bangladesh which has been one of the largest recipients of Chinese investment. While a large part of this investment is certainly a sort of second-degree economic play, whereby lower infrastructure costs in Bangladesh make it easier for China to export raw materials to Bangladesh and import finished goods, it is also a strategic play. Ports, roads, railroads, tunnels, and bridges are all being built by China in Bangladesh using Chinese labor--some percentage of the workforce is local, but state-owned Chinese construction companies are mostly flying in their own workers--to pull Bangladesh closer to China's sphere of influence. Bangladesh is not the only country here, but in doing so for Bangladesh China is gaining one of the fastest growing economies in the world into its strategic orbit for a relatively small investment(something like \$40 billion). Neither India nor the United States, not that the two should be considered strategically aligned, are happy about this.

To wrap up what could become a 20 page essay pretty quickly, the relationship between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh--formerly just one country--is a complex one due largely to the legacy of Imperialism, religious differences, and the strategic interests of the great powers. When China, the *regional* superpower,

is throwing itself into the mix in a Bismarckian fashion, the situation becomes even more complicated. Combined with Russia's interests in the region--specifically energy and arms sales--and the United States' continued desire to support democratic and free-market institutions in the region, the subcontinent earns its third place ranking in the world for geostrategic powder kegs (behind the Taiwan Strait and the area including and surrounding Israel).