

From Comprehensive Partnership to Strategic Partnership: Japan-Bangladesh Cooperation for Peace and Prosperity

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Source: Reuters

Introduction

A new chapter in the diplomatic relationship between Bangladesh and Japan has commenced, as the two countries have decided to move from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership. This transformative shift signifies advancing bilateral relations and has unveiled a fascinating journey of deeper engagement and extensive partnership. Together, they aim to unlock new security, economy, culture, and regional connectivity possibilities. With a shared vision for the future, both countries are poised to embark on an exhilarating adventure, leveraging their unique strengths and resources to shape a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous partnership. As the

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curtains rise on this captivating tale of cooperation, Bangladesh and Japan are ready to script a remarkable narrative that will captivate the region and beyond.

This commentary will trace the origins of this remarkable relationship by briefly observing the historical and cultural connections between the two countries and how Japan has been a long-time partner in Bangladesh's development. Then it will unfold the new strategic partnership and the opportunities and challenges that come with it before coming to a conclusion.

Historical and Cultural Connections

Bangladesh and Japan share a historical and cultural connection that spans several decades. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on 10 February 1972 after Bangladesh gained independence.² Japan is one of the earliest countries to recognize Bangladesh as an independent country, and warm relations have been maintained since then. Japan assisted Bangladesh in the post-war reconstruction. The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) started coming to Bangladesh in 1973.³ JOCV operated with the local communities of Bangladesh, fostering development and trust.

According to a survey, 71% of Bangladeshis view Japan favorably.⁴ The cultural ties are reflected in the popularity of Japanese anime, manga, and cuisine among Bangladeshis. Bangladesh is one of the largest recipient countries of Japanese Government Scholarships to study in Japan in recent times.⁵ Moreover, both nations have collaborated in education, technology transfer, and disaster management. The strong bond between Japan and Bangladesh represents mutual respect, robust cooperation, and the desire to foster a deeper understanding of each other's heritage and traditions. On 10 February 2022, the two countries celebrated 50 years of diplomatic ties marking the relationship as a 'heart to heart' relationship.⁶

² "Japan-Bangladesh Relations", Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh, <https://www.bd.emb-japan.go.jp/en/bilateral/overview.html>.

³ Ito Naoki, "50 years of Bangladesh-Japan ties: A new horizon of 'heart to heart' relationship", *The Daily Star*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/we-must-break-the-silence-around-fistula-3328196>.

⁴ Hussain Shazzad, "50 Years of Japan-Bangladesh Ties: From Economic to Strategic Partnership", *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/50-years-of-japan-bangladesh-ties-from-economic-to-strategic-partnership/>.

⁵ "Japan-Bangladesh Relations", Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh.

⁶ Ito Naoki, "50 years of Bangladesh-Japan ties: A new horizon of 'heart to heart' relationship".



Source: Embassy of Japan

Partners in Development:

Japan has been a key development partner, providing substantial aid and investments to Bangladesh's economic and infrastructure development.⁷ It has been donating to Bangladesh through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and has become Bangladesh's largest bilateral donor.⁸ Bangladesh is also one of the largest receivers of Japan's ODA.⁹ The donations have proved beneficial and non-exploitative in nature. Since independence, Japan has provided Bangladesh over \$30 billion as grants and loans.¹⁰

Japan and Bangladesh have distinct economic and political landscapes that have influenced their relationship. The relationship between these two countries is a good example of cooperation

⁷ "Japan-Bangladesh Relations", Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh.

⁸ Hussain Shazzad, "50 Years of Japan-Bangladesh Ties: From Economic to Strategic Partnership".

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, "Expanding ties between Bangladesh and Japan", *New Age*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/200828/expanding-ties-between-bangladesh-and-japan>.

between developed and developing countries. Japan is known for its advanced industrialization, technological innovation, and economic agility, making it one of the world's leading economies. In contrast, Bangladesh is a developing country with a mixed economy heavily reliant on agriculture and the garment industry. Japan's economic strength has played a significant role in shaping its relationship with Bangladesh.

Japan has been a major donor in Bangladesh, providing financial and technical assistance.¹¹ Japanese companies have invested in industries like textiles, automobiles, and electronics in Bangladesh, contributing to economic growth. Japan is currently funding 33 projects in Bangladesh under the supervision of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).¹²

Japan has supported Bangladesh's development through various initiatives, including education, healthcare, and capacity-building programs. The two countries have also cooperated on regional and international platforms, such as the United Nations. Over time, the economic and political ties between Japan and Bangladesh have expanded. Japan's investments and assistance have helped Bangladesh in its development efforts. At the same time, Bangladesh provides opportunities for Japanese companies to expand their presence in the region.

The cooperation between Japan and Bangladesh comprehends several key areas. In terms of trade, both countries are involved in bilateral commerce, with Japan being a significant market for Bangladesh's ready-made garments, textiles and leather products. Bangladesh mainly imports iron, steel, vehicles and heavy machinery from Japan. Development assistance from Japan focuses on infrastructure projects, including transportation, power generation, and urban development.

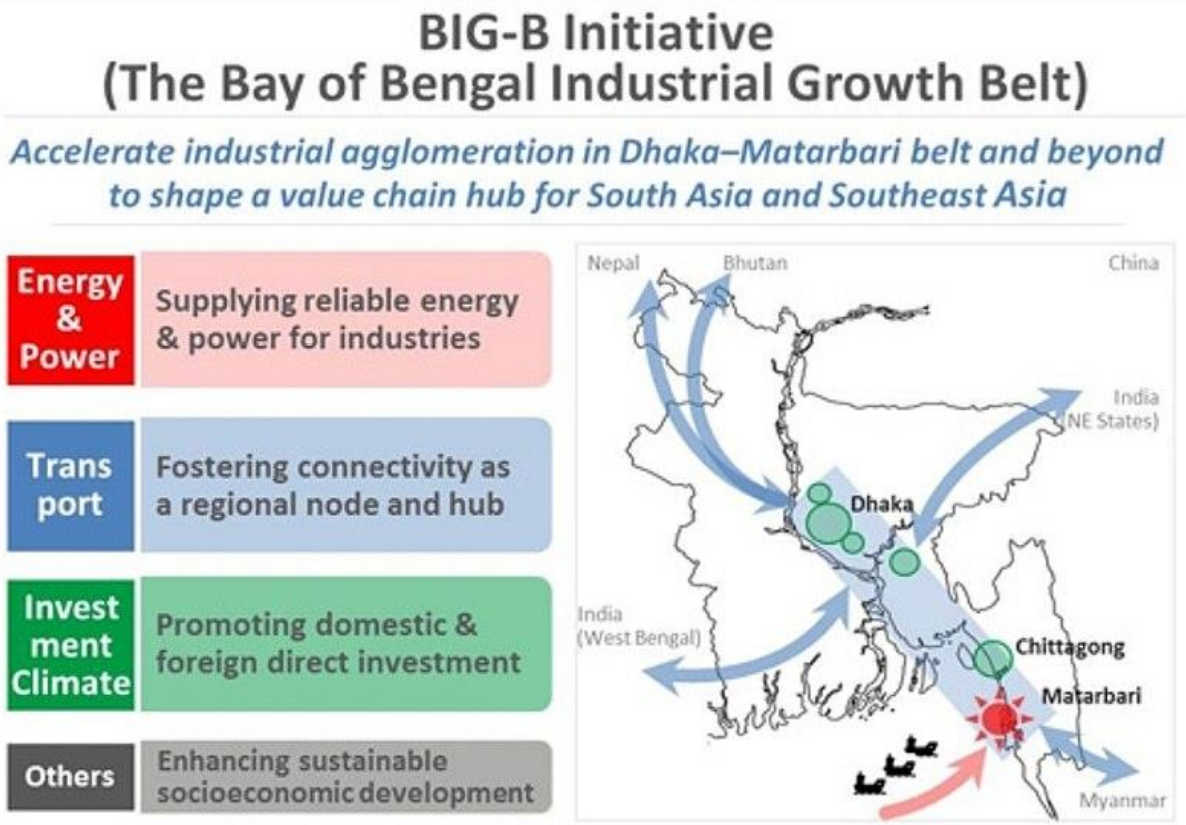
In 2014, a 'Comprehensive Partnership' was established between the two countries, which boosted financial assistance from Japan. Bangladesh and Japan launched the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative.¹³ Several major projects are currently being implemented under the BIG-B initiative, including the MRT line in Dhaka, the deep sea port in Matarbari and Terminal Three of the Dhaka airport. The BIG-B initiative can help Bangladesh to become an industrial hub in South Asia.

¹¹ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, "Expanding ties between Bangladesh and Japan".

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Ito Naoki, "50 years of Bangladesh-Japan ties: A new horizon of 'heart to heart' relationship".

Japan provided \$2.63 billion as aid to Bangladesh in 2020-2021.¹⁴ Moreover, Japan supports Bangladesh in areas like grassroots support, human resource development and disaster management. Regarding security, the two countries collaborate on counter-terrorism efforts and maritime security, including capacity-building initiatives and information sharing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan was among the first countries to provide vaccines to Bangladesh.



From Comprehensive Partnership to Strategic Partnership

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh recently visited Japan in April 2023 at the invitation of the Prime Minister of Japan, where both leaders had a summit meeting. Eight agreements and Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) documents were exchanged at the meeting. After the meeting, it was confirmed that in order to improve the bilateral relationship between the two

¹⁴ Hussain Shazzad, “50 Years of Japan-Bangladesh Ties: From Economic to Strategic Partnership”.

countries, the relationship has been elevated to ‘Strategic Partnership’, which would be the guiding principle for the relationship between the two countries for the next 50 years.¹⁵

The enhancement of Bangladesh-Japan relations from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership signifies an elevation in the bilateral relationship. It set the stage for deeper and more extensive cooperation in various areas. This transition reflects the growing importance of the relationship between the two countries and a shared commitment to strengthening cooperation across multiple sectors. The shift indicates a long-term vision for the future, focusing on strategic objectives and a broader scope of engagement.

The new strategic partnership entails a higher level of engagement between the two countries, characterized by enhanced dialogue and joint efforts in areas of common interest. It signifies a mutual recognition of the strategic significance of the relationship and a commitment to pursuing shared goals and values. The joint statement of the summit meeting indicates the greater importance given to regional peace and stability.

Bangladesh and Japan have reiterated their dedication to establishing an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open. They have emphasized the significance of a maritime order built upon common values, such as the freedom of navigation, which is a crucial foundation for global stability and prosperity. Furthermore, they recognized that utilizing the oceans as a shared resource will contribute to the development of the blue economy.¹⁶

The two Prime Ministers acknowledged that advancing high-quality infrastructure would bolster regional connectivity and foster the growth of Bangladesh and the surrounding region. They emphasized the significance of transparent and equitable development financing to attain sustainable development goals. Additionally, they concurred on the importance of economic security, including enhancing the resilience of supply chains and upholding the rules-based international economic system.

Both countries agreed to continue promoting security cooperation. This includes reciprocal visits by vessels and aircraft, unit-to-unit exchanges, training programs, and goodwill exercises. Both leaders also discussed establishing a Defense Wing in Tokyo and a National Security Wing in

¹⁵ “Japan-Bangladesh Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100496992.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Japan-Bangladesh Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Dhaka within their embassies. They agreed to enhance the dialogue among diplomatic and defense authorities. They also welcomed the commencement of negotiations on an Agreement concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. Both leaders recognized the contributions of their countries to regional security. They confirmed their intention to maintain cooperation in Peacekeeping missions and counter-terrorism activities.

Bangladesh and Japan have pledged to continue their efforts in three key areas: 1) advancing economic infrastructure, 2) enhancing the investment environment, and 3) strengthening regional connectivity within Bangladesh under the BIG-B initiative and the recently introduced concept of the Industrial Value Chain that links the Bay of Bengal with neighboring regions.¹⁷ It has been agreed to resume a bilateral policy dialogue to facilitate the implementation of development cooperation projects.

Bangladesh and Japan have agreed to strengthen cooperation under Japan's Asia Energy Transition Initiative. Emphasizing the significance of cooperation in mitigating earthquake, tsunami, and cyclone-related disaster risks, they expressed their intention to actively work towards the successful implementation of the COP27 decision regarding loss and damage. Bangladesh and Japan have also expressed their commitment to fostering exchanges in multiple domains, including academic institutions, think-tanks, science and technology, youth and sports, tourism, and more.

The shift from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership between Japan and Bangladesh marks a significant milestone. It signifies a deeper commitment to cooperation and a broader scope of engagement. The strategic partnership has opened doors for enhanced trade and investment, expanded development assistance, and strengthened security cooperation.

Opportunities and Challenges of the New Partnership

Promoting of the bilateral relationship between Japan and Bangladesh from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership presents several opportunities for both countries. It sets the stage for deeper cooperation across various areas.

Regional Stability: The strategic partnership has emphasized the establishment of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Both countries have recognized the importance of a safe and secure maritime

¹⁷ “Japan-Bangladesh Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

order for regional stability and prosperity. Their position on the security of the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea in the joint statement indirectly implies efforts to counter Chinese influence in these regions. Japan has recognized Bangladesh as an ‘important partner’ in its new ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ vision.¹⁸ Focusing on regional connectivity and infrastructure development will further enhance regional stability and promote economic growth in Bangladesh and South Asia.

Security Interests: The shared security interests between Japan and Bangladesh are strengthened through the strategic partnership. Both countries aim to enhance security cooperation, including reciprocal visits, joint training programs, and establishing defense wings in their respective embassies. The negotiation of an agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology will further deepen security cooperation and contribute to regional security.

Economic Cooperation: Increased economic cooperation is another key aspect of the strategic partnership. Both countries have committed to advancing economic infrastructure, improving the investment environment, and strengthening regional connectivity. Initiatives such as the BIG-B initiative and the Industrial Value Chain linking the Bay of Bengal and neighboring regions will promote economic growth and facilitate trade and investment between Japan and Bangladesh. The completion of the mega-projects undertaken by Japan would be a ‘game-changer’ for Bangladesh. The BIG-B initiative has the potential to turn Bangladesh into the heart of the regional economy by turning it into a gateway between South and Southeast Asia.¹⁹

Furthermore, the strategic partnership provides opportunities for cooperation in areas such as energy transition, disaster risk reduction, and academic and cultural exchanges. The cooperation under Japan’s Asia Energy Transition Initiative supports the promotion of renewable energy and low greenhouse gas emission development in Bangladesh. Efforts in disaster risk reduction and academic exchanges further enhance cooperation and mutual learning between the two countries. The partnership also has the implicit indication to lessen Chinese influence in the region. Here,

¹⁸ Kamal Uddin Ahmed, “Expanding ties between Bangladesh and Japan”, *New Age*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/200828/expanding-ties-between-bangladesh-and-japan>.

¹⁹ Hussain Shazzad, “50 Years of Japan-Bangladesh Ties: From Economic to Strategic Partnership”, *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/50-years-of-japan-bangladesh-ties-from-economic-to-strategic-partnership/>.

proposing means of improving regional connectivity and enhancing supply chains have been pushed by Japan as a stance against China and its Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia.

While the strategic partnership between Bangladesh and Japan offers significant opportunities, there are some challenges that both countries will need to address in order to make it a success:

Implementation and Coordination: The strategic partnership requires effective implementation and coordination of the agreed-upon initiatives and projects. Both countries must ensure that the Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) documents exchanged during the summit meeting are translated into tangible actions and outcomes. This requires effective communication, coordination, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the partnership develops as planned.

Capacity-Building: Strengthening cooperation across multiple sectors, such as infrastructure development, economy, security, and cultural cooperation, requires capacity-building efforts. Both countries must invest in training programs, knowledge exchange, and skill development to improve the capabilities of their institutions, organizations, and human resources. This will enable them to effectively implement joint projects and initiatives under the strategic partnership.

Financing and Investment: Advancing economic infrastructure, enhancing the investment environment, and strengthening regional connectivity require extensive financial resources. Both countries must explore financing options and create an enabling environment for businesses and investors. They should also ensure transparency and equity in development financing to achieve sustainable development goals.

Institutional Framework: Strengthening the institutional framework for the strategic partnership is vital for its success. This includes establishing and maintaining effective mechanisms for dialogue, coordination, and evaluation. Regular bilateral policy dialogues and continuation of the policy dialogue to facilitate development cooperation projects will help address challenges, assess progress, and make necessary adjustments.

Public Engagement and Awareness: Fostering exchanges in various domains, such as academia, and think-tanks, requires public engagement and awareness. Both countries should promote people-to-people interactions, cultural exchanges, and educational programs to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. Building public support and awareness about the benefits of the strategic partnership will contribute to its long-term success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic partnership marks a significant milestone in the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Japan. It sets the stage for deeper cooperation, broader engagement, and a shared vision for the future. It opens avenues for enhanced trade and investment, expanded development assistance, and strengthened regional security cooperation. The strategic partnership holds great opportunities for both countries. However, challenges must be addressed to ensure the success of this strategic partnership. By addressing the challenges and maintaining a continuous commitment to mutual cooperation, Bangladesh and Japan can unlock the full potential of their strategic partnership. Together, they can create a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous future, benefiting themselves and contributing to the stability and development of the South Asian region as a whole. The strategic partnership provides a solid foundation for a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship, paving the way for future shared prosperity and strategic alignment.