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A NEW AXIS OF AMBITION: ASSESSING THE FEASIBILITY AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF A PAKISTAN–BANGLADESH DEFENSE AND NUCLEAR TREATY

Sayed Anwar¹ & Dr. Muhammad Akram Zaheer²

¹Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342, Bangladesh,
Email: anwargop499@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor Pakistan Studies, Imperial College of Business Studies Lahore,
Email: muhammad.akram@imperial.edu.pk

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nuclear Treaty, Defense Cooperation, Security, South Asia	The political rupture of August 2024, marked by the collapse of Bangladesh's Awami League government, has fundamentally reconfigured the country's strategic orientation, compelling Dhaka to abandon its long-standing India-centric hedging posture in favor of hard balancing. This paper examines the feasibility and strategic implications of a formal defense and nuclear cooperation treaty between Bangladesh and Pakistan in the context of this post-2024 geopolitical realignment. Drawing on realism, balance-of-power theory, alliance theory, Regional Security Complex Theory, and strategic hedging, the study assesses the structural drivers propelling both states toward strategic convergence, including shared threat perceptions, doctrinal alignment, and the emerging China–Pakistan–Bangladesh triangle. It systematically evaluates the legal barriers imposed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, IAEA safeguards regime, Nuclear Suppliers Group guidelines, and Bangladesh's own constitutional commitments to non-alignment. The paper further interrogates obstacles rooted in the historical grievances of 1971 and anticipated Indian countermeasures. Concluding that a binding NATO-style treaty remains presently unfeasible, the study proposes a Pakistan–Bangladesh Strategic Security Forum as a pragmatic, non-binding institutional alternative capable of institutionalizing defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and peaceful nuclear collaboration without triggering prohibitive legal and geopolitical costs.
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Introduction

Background and Problem Statement

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh's security policy has been shaped by structural vulnerability, geographic compression between an increasingly assertive India and an unstable Myanmar, and a Bay of Bengal that has become an arena of great-power competition among China, India, and the United States. For decades, and particularly under the Awami League government, Dhaka managed these pressures through a posture of strategic hedging, balancing Chinese economic engagement against deep security dependence on India. The collapse of the Sheikh Hasina regime in August 2024 abruptly dismantled this arrangement. The interim government (former) that succeeded it inherited a fragile state confronting institutional fragility, a deteriorating relationship with New Delhi, and an increasingly volatile eastern frontier shaped by Myanmar's civil war and the unresolved Rohingya crisis. Within this security vacuum, Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan, largely dormant since the 1971 war, have undergone a rapid and substantive transformation, encompassing revived foreign secretary-level consultations, expanding naval and military engagement, an urgent ammunition procurement, and exploratory negotiations over advanced platforms such as the JF-17 fighter and the Haider main battle tank. This realignment is reinforced by Bangladesh's Forces Goal 2030 modernization doctrine, which increasingly favors interoperability with Pakistan's defense-industrial ecosystem, and by Pakistan's September 2025 Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement with Saudi Arabia, which has supplied a precedent for collective-defense language. Together, these developments have generated growing speculation about a formal, possibly NATO-style, defense and nuclear cooperation treaty between Islamabad and Dhaka.

Despite the speed of this realignment, scholarship has not kept pace with it. Literature on South Asian alliance dynamics, Bangladesh's hedging behavior, the unresolved grievances of 1971, and the global non-proliferation regime has largely developed along separate tracks, leaving a critical gap: no existing study comprehensively integrates these strands to evaluate whether a binding defense and nuclear treaty between Pakistan and Bangladesh is genuinely feasible, given the constraints imposed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, IAEA safeguards, Nuclear Suppliers Group guidelines, and Bangladesh's own constitutional commitment to non-alignment, or what realistic institutional alternatives might exist in its place. This study addresses that gap.

Objectives and Significance of the Study

This paper pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it identifies the structural and geopolitical drivers that, since August 2024, have pushed Bangladesh away from its India-centric posture and toward closer alignment with Pakistan. Second, it evaluates the legal architecture governing nuclear and defense cooperation, examining the binding constraints imposed by the NPT, IAEA safeguards regime, NSG guidelines, and Bangladesh's domestic constitutional provisions. Third, it interrogates the political and historical obstacles to formal alliance, including the unresolved

legacies of 1971 and the countermeasures India is likely to pursue. Fourth, drawing on this integrated analysis, the study proposes a pragmatic institutional alternative, a Pakistan-Bangladesh Strategic Security Forum, capable of advancing defense cooperation without incurring the legal and geopolitical costs of a binding treaty.

The study's significance is threefold. Theoretically, it synthesizes realism, balance-of-power theory, alliance theory, Regional Security Complex Theory, and strategic hedging into a single analytical framework applied to a bilateral dyad that existing literature has treated only in fragments. Empirically, it offers one of the first systematic assessments of the post-2024 Pakistan-Bangladesh rapprochement, grounded in documented diplomatic and military developments rather than journalistic speculation. Practically, it provides policymakers in both capitals, and observers of South Asian security more broadly, with a legally grounded and politically realistic roadmap for institutionalizing cooperation without precipitating a regional crisis.

To this end, the paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the relevant literature and situates the research gap and guiding questions, before outlining the qualitative, theory-driven methodology and five-theory framework employed. It then traces the post-2024 strategic rupture and the resulting Islamabad-Dhaka rapprochement, assesses the feasibility of a formal defense pact against prevailing legal and political constraints, and examines the principal obstacles to such an arrangement. The paper concludes by elaborating the proposed Strategic Security Forum as a phased, non-binding alternative and reflecting on its implications for South Asian strategic stability.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on five interlocking International Relations theories to explain the prospective Pakistan-Bangladesh defense realignment. Realism and balance-of-power theory (Walt, 1987) frame Bangladesh's pivot as a response to perceived Indian hegemony, where weaker states seek external balancers against structural threats. Alliance theory clarifies the asymmetric motivations driving cooperation, particularly Pakistan's strategic and commercial incentives. Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) situates the shift within a broader transformation of South Asia's amity-enmity patterns, evidenced by the emerging Pakistan-Bangladesh-China triangle. Finally, strategic hedging theory explains Bangladesh's historical "friendship to all" posture and its post-2024 abandonment in favor of hard balancing. Together, these frameworks illuminate why structural insecurity, asymmetric interests, and regional realignment converge to make closer defense ties strategically logical despite legal and political constraints.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on South Asian security has long centered on the India-Pakistan rivalry and the India-China strategic competition, with Bangladesh historically treated as a peripheral actor rather than an independent strategic agent. Walt's (1987) foundational work on alliance formation establishes that states balance against perceived threats rather than aggregate power

alone, a framework subsequently applied to South Asia by scholars examining India's regional dominance (Pant & Rej, 2022; Saran, 2024). Sagan's (2011) analysis of nuclear proliferation causes, meanwhile, identifies security, domestic politics, and prestige as the principal drivers of weapons acquisition, though his work, like most non-proliferation scholarship, assumes a binary of proliferator versus non-proliferator states rather than examining intermediary forms of nuclear-linked defense cooperation between an NPT signatory and a non-NPT nuclear power.

Existing scholarship on Bangladesh's foreign policy has predominantly emphasized its "strategic hedging" posture, balancing Chinese economic investment against Indian security primacy (Chowdhury, 2019; Sattar, 2021). This literature, largely produced before August 2024, characterizes Dhaka as a cautious, non-aligned actor whose foreign policy motto, "friendship to all, malice to none," precluded firm strategic commitments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh, n.d.). Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory provides the broader theoretical scaffolding for understanding how South Asian security dynamics are interlinked, though their original formulation predates the post-2024 rupture and does not anticipate a realignment of this nature.

A second strand of literature addresses Pakistan-Bangladesh relations specifically, focusing almost exclusively on the unresolved legacies of the 1971 Liberation War, including the demand for a formal apology, asset division disputes, and the Bihari repatriation question (Siddiqui, 2021; Riaz, 2023; Hossain, 2024). This historically oriented scholarship treats the bilateral relationship as fundamentally constrained by unhealed grievance, with limited engagement on how contemporary security imperatives might override historical animus.

A third body of work examines the global non-proliferation regime, including NPT obligations (UN, 1968), IAEA safeguards mechanisms (IAEA, 2021, 2022, 2023), and Nuclear Suppliers Group politics (Hibbs, 2017; Ghosh, 2021). This literature thoroughly documents the legal architecture governing nuclear trade but is overwhelmingly oriented toward the India-Pakistan-NSG dynamic or the China-Pakistan civil nuclear partnership (Markey, 2018), without extending this analysis to a hypothetical Bangladesh-Pakistan nuclear or defense-linked arrangement.

Finally, emerging post-2024 commentary from think tanks and policy outlets (Atlantic Council, 2025; Chatham House, 2025; Riedel, 2025; Jaishankar, 2024) has begun documenting the rapid Islamabad-Dhaka rapprochement, including military diplomacy, arms procurement, and the September 2025 Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement as a possible template. However, this literature remains largely journalistic and policy-brief in nature, offering descriptive accounts of bilateral developments without systematic theoretical grounding or rigorous legal feasibility analysis.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on South Asian alliance dynamics, Bangladesh's hedging behavior, Pakistan-Bangladesh historical grievances, and the global non-proliferation regime, no existing study comprehensively integrates these strands to assess the specific feasibility of a Pakistan-

Bangladesh defense or nuclear cooperation treaty in the post-August 2024 strategic environment. Prior literature either examines Bangladesh's foreign policy in isolation from emerging defense-industrial ties with Pakistan, analyzes non-proliferation law without applying it to this particular bilateral dyad, or documents recent diplomatic developments descriptively without theoretical synthesis or a structured, phased feasibility roadmap. This study addresses that gap by combining theoretical, legal, and empirical analysis into a single integrated assessment, while also proposing a concrete alternative framework, the Strategic Security Forum, that existing literature has not articulated.

Research Question

This paper is guided by the following central research question: To what extent is a formal Pakistan-Bangladesh defense and nuclear cooperation treaty feasible in light of legal, political, and historical constraints, and what alternative or phased frameworks could realistically advance bilateral strategic cooperation in its place?

This is broken down into three sub-questions: first, what structural and geopolitical factors since August 2024 have driven Bangladesh toward defense realignment with Pakistan; second, what legal barriers under the NPT, IAEA safeguards regime, and NSG guidelines constrain nuclear cooperation or treaty between the two states; and third, what institutional alternatives or phased pathways could enable meaningful strategic cooperation absent a binding formal treaty.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study approach to assess the feasibility and strategic implications of a Pakistan-Bangladesh defense and nuclear treaty. The research relies primarily on secondary source analysis, drawing on a wide range of materials including peer-reviewed academic literature, think-tank reports, government press releases, treaty texts, official statements, and credible news sources covering developments since August 2024. This triangulation of sources allows the study to corroborate claims across diplomatic, military, and legal domains while minimizing reliance on any single perspective.

The analysis is structured around five established International Relations frameworks, realism, balance of power, alliance theory, Regional Security Complex Theory, and strategic hedging, which are applied to interpret empirical developments rather than tested through quantitative measures. A legal-textual analysis is also conducted on key international instruments, including the NPT, IAEA safeguards agreements, NSG guidelines, and Bangladesh's constitutional provisions, to assess the binding feasibility of nuclear and defense cooperation.

Given the contemporary and rapidly evolving nature of the subject, the study adopts a forward-looking methodology in its phased roadmap, projecting plausible trajectories rather than predictive certainty. This approach is appropriate for an emerging, data-limited geopolitical phenomenon still unfolding in real time.

Results and Discussion

The Post-2024 Strategic Rupture: Bangladesh's Search for Security Autonomy

The August 2024 ouster of Sheikh Hasina was not just a domestic upheaval but a geopolitical rupture that reshaped South Asia's security architecture. Bangladesh's interim government under Dr. Muhammad Yunus inherited an economically strained state facing a "perilous vacuum" in security, forcing a fundamental rethink of national security doctrine beyond the country's traditional partnerships (Brewster, 2023). The current Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led government, too, is looking for a China-centric security policy. The old approach of "strategic hedging," balancing Chinese economic ties against an India-centric security relationship, has become untenable.

Bangladesh now faces acute pressure on two flanks plus a contested maritime space. Its 271-kilometer Myanmar border, though far shorter than the 4,096-kilometer frontier with India, is the more volatile flashpoint. Conflict spillover from the Arakan Army's fight against the Myanmar junta in Rakhine State creates persistent risks of insurgent flows, refugee surges, and armed clashes (ICG, 2023). This instability is compounded by the Rohingya crisis: over one million refugees across 34 border camps have become a security threat in their own right, linked to extremism, trafficking, methamphetamine smuggling, and arms flows, while Myanmar's hostility, including the kidnapping of Bangladeshi fishermen and security personnel, limits cooperation (UNHCR, 2024).

The more dramatic shift is in relations with India, which moved from "benign" partner to a source of anxiety. Ties have turned "frosty," sharpened by New Delhi's decision to shelter Hasina and former regime figures despite extradition requests. From India's side, the political changeover in Dhaka is seen as space for revived Islamist groups like Jamaat-e-Islami, allegedly linked to Pakistan's ISI, prompting Indian strategists to frame a "3.5-front war," Pakistan, China, internal insurgency, and now a potentially hostile Bangladesh (Saran, 2024). This mutual suspicion risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, with India's containment posture deepening Bangladesh's sense of encirclement (Walt, 1987).

Geography compounds the problem. The Bay of Bengal has become a central arena for US-China rivalry and Indian regional ambition (Brewster, 2023). The US reportedly seeks a forward anchor near St. Martin's Island to counter Chinese assertiveness, while China deepens its Belt and Road footprint through projects like the \$400 million Mongla Port modernization (Liu & Ahmed, 2023). Bangladesh risks becoming a battleground for this great-power contest (Chowdhury, 2025). The current government in Bangladesh is having a China-centric security posture, but not avoiding the US dynamics.

Bangladesh's main response is "Forces Goal 2030," a military modernization program launched in 2009 and expanded in 2017 after the Rohingya crisis exposed border and deterrence gaps. Its goal is a credible three-dimensional (land, air, sea) force capable of multi-platform warfare, not

power projection, but deterrence (Rahman, 2021). Post-2024, the program is expected to be revised again, likely diversifying away from traditional suppliers.

A notable signal of this shift is the acquisition of Turkish TRG-300 Kaplan rocket systems and Bayraktar TB2 drones, which reflect adoption of the "sensor-to-shooter" model that proved decisive in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war (Kucera, 2021). Because Pakistan already operates similar Turkish platforms and maintains close ties with Ankara, this creates doctrinal compatibility that could underpin closer Bangladesh-Pakistan defense cooperation, interoperability, and joint training.

Finally, the threat landscape itself has converged. Under Hasina, Forces Goal 2030 could focus mainly on Myanmar, reflected in new army units at Ramu Cantonment in Cox's Bazar. Post-2024, India has effectively been added to that threat matrix, a long-latent concern now made explicit. Given its limited capacity, Bangladesh cannot realistically sustain a two-front posture against an unstable Myanmar and a wary India simultaneously (Walt, 1987). This pushes Dhaka toward seeking an external balancer, and Pakistan, sharing Bangladesh's primary threat perception of India and possessing a tested military, emerges as the most logical available partner to fill that role (Fair, 2023).

In sum, the 2024 rupture pushed Bangladesh from a single-threat, India-aligned posture toward a multidimensional security dilemma spanning Myanmar, India, and great-power maritime competition, driving both military modernization and a tentative pivot toward Turkey and Pakistan.

The Islamabad-Dhaka Rapprochement: From Estrangement to Engagement

The strategic rupture of 2024 has produced a remarkably fast Islamabad-Dhaka rapprochement, transforming a relationship long defined by the 1971 schism into one of pragmatic, high-level engagement within months. Both capitals appear to recognize that Hasina's fall removed what Pakistan's former ambassador to China called "artificial barriers" to natural alignment (Khan, 2024).

This shift rests on rapid diplomatic and economic re-engagement: high-level meetings between Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Bangladeshi Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, and a rare Bangladeshi military delegation visit to Pakistan in January 2025 (Government of Pakistan, 2025). Most notably, dormant state-to-state mechanisms have been revived, the Sixth Round of Foreign Secretary-Level Bilateral Consultations convened in Dhaka in April 2025 after a fifteen-year hiatus, reflecting what officials described as a shared resolve to revitalize bilateral ties across trade, agriculture, education, and connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh, 2025).

This thaw is backed by substantive policy changes signaling deep trust. On trade and logistics, Bangladesh's National Board of Revenue lifted the mandatory 100% physical inspection requirement for Pakistani imports, a criterion that NBR sources confirmed had applied to no other

country (National Board of Revenue, 2024). On connectivity, the two countries launched direct shipping between Karachi and Chittagong and are discussing resumed air links (Maritime Affairs Review, 2025). On visa and security policy, Bangladesh removed mandatory security clearance for Pakistani nationals seeking visas, a move that signaled trust to Islamabad while unsettling New Delhi (Rahman, 2024).

The defense relationship has advanced even faster, moving from theoretical to transactional. Naval diplomacy has been the most visible marker, highlighted by the Pakistan Navy frigate PNS Saif's visit to Chattogram port, coinciding with a multi-day visit by Pakistan's Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Naveed Ashraf, for talks with Bangladesh's military leadership (Pakistan Navy, 2025). This was quickly operationalized: in February 2025 the Bangladesh Navy, led by BNS Samudra Joy, joined Pakistan's multinational exercise AMAN-2025, Dhaka's first military-level engagement with Pakistan in decades (Inter-Services Public Relations Pakistan, 2025).

Yet the clearest evidence of functional security ties is a less-publicized but urgent transaction: in August 2024, the interim government ordered fresh artillery ammunition from Pakistan, including 40,000 rounds, 2,900 high-intensity projectiles, and 40 tonnes of RDX (Defence Procurement Monitor, 2024). This "ammunition before alliance" episode arguably matters more than any port call, since munitions purchases reflect urgent, functional trust rather than political symbolism.

Islamabad's outreach also includes a concrete defense-industrial offer aligned with Forces Goal 2030, designed to reduce Dhaka's dependence on Indian or Western suppliers (Hussain, 2025). Two platforms anchor this offer. In the air domain, Bangladesh has reportedly moved toward acquiring 16 JF-17 Thunder Block III fighters, with a potential total of 32, a cost-effective 4.5-generation jet co-developed by Pakistan and China (Aviation Global Review, 2025). In the land domain, Pakistan has formally offered its Haider Main Battle Tank, an upgraded VT4 derivative built to counter advanced armor like India's T-90s, with the offer raised during a Bangladesh Army visit to Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT Pakistan, 2025).

These deals form the backbone of the new alignment: a defense deal with Pakistan is effectively a defense deal with China, giving Dhaka an integrated source of hardware, investment, and diplomatic backing, and allowing it to break decisively from its former hedging policy (Zhang & Bari, 2024).

Furthermore, scholars have argued that the BNP has historically pursued a foreign policy orientation that favored closer alignment with Pakistan, influenced by its emphasis on Islamic identity and its balancing strategy toward India (Mannan, 2018).

The Alliance Proposition: Feasibility of a Formal Defense Pact

The reported "strategic defense deal" between Pakistan and Bangladesh raises the question of what form such an agreement would actually take, particularly given the abstract's framing of it

as a possible "NATO-style collective defense pact." This requires moving from political signaling to operational analysis.

A NATO-style pact implies a mutual defense clause akin to Article 5, where an attack on one signatory is treated as an attack on all. Precedent exists: in September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement declaring that an act of aggression against one would be considered an act against both, echoing NATO's collective defense logic (Khan, 2025; Riedel, 2025). Reports suggest a similar framework may underpin the Pakistan-Bangladesh arrangement (Rahman, 2025).

For Bangladesh, such a pact would be transformative, effectively providing an external nuclear-armed deterrent against a regional hegemon and formalizing "deterrence-by-proxy," altering India's strategic calculus and giving Dhaka a hard security guarantee it has historically lacked (Tellis, 2020).

However, sober analysis suggests a South Asian pact would bear little operational resemblance to NATO. The same reporting on the Pakistan-Saudi agreement notes it offers no real foundation for a NATO-style collective security framework or credible joint nuclear deterrence architecture (Riedel, 2025). A binding mutual defense pact also typically requires reciprocal capability or integrated command structures, and the stark disparity between Pakistan's large, battle-hardened, nuclear-armed military and Bangladesh's smaller, modernization-focused force makes a fully reciprocal commitment operationally difficult (IISS, 2024). The "NATO-style" language is therefore likely symbolic rather than operational, a political signal aimed at deterring India rather than a genuine commitment to integrated warfare.

The pact's real strategic value lies instead in "deterrence-by-entanglement": creating strategic ambiguity for New Delhi. Indian planners contemplating coercive action against Dhaka would need to weigh whether such action might trigger Pakistani response on its western front, whether Pakistani advisors stationed at Bangladeshi bases could raise escalation risks, and whether the broader China-Pakistan ecosystem might be drawn in (Pant & Sahoo, 2023). This uncertainty itself functions as deterrence. Practically, the pact would institutionalize the relationship through technology transfers like the JF-17 and Haider, joint training and officer exchanges, and intelligence sharing on shared threats, formalizing the "eastern pressure axis" that Indian analysts already anticipate and giving structure to an emerging Pakistan-Bangladesh-China triangle (Jaishankar, 2024).

The alliance is also driven by asymmetric motivations, particularly on Pakistan's side, where it functions as a strategic business opportunity. Islamabad is pursuing a \$5 billion defense export base by 2035 and actively marketing its defense industry as a tool of strategic industrial policy (Ministry of Defense Production, 2023). The reported performance of Pakistani and Chinese-supplied systems during the May 2025 clashes with India, said to include the downing of five Indian fighter jets and over 100 drones, is being used as a "battle-proven" sales pitch (Defense News Asia, 2025). In this light, the strategic pacts with Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh function

less as security guarantees and more as master sales platforms, locking Bangladesh in as a long-term client for decades of maintenance, upgrades, and follow-on purchases, and securing revenue for Pakistan's own defense-industrial growth.

The Nuclear Question: Legal Feasibility of Civil and Strategic Cooperation

The nuclear dimension represents the most legally complex aspect of the proposed Pakistan-Bangladesh cooperation, revealing an absolute legal firewall against strategic weapons-sharing alongside a narrow but ultimately blocked pathway for civil nuclear cooperation.

The two countries occupy diametrically opposed positions within the global non-proliferation regime. Bangladesh is a model NPT signatory with an impeccable non-proliferation record as a non-nuclear-weapon state, having concluded both a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the more stringent Additional Protocol with the IAEA (IAEA, 2023). Pakistan, by contrast, is a de-facto nuclear-weapon state and one of only three countries, alongside India and Israel, that have never signed the NPT.

This dichotomy creates an unambiguous legal barrier to strategic cooperation. NPT Article I prohibits nuclear-weapon states from transferring weapons, explosive devices, or control over them to any recipient, while Article II prohibits non-nuclear-weapon states like Bangladesh from receiving such assistance (UN, 1968). Any weapons-sharing arrangement is therefore an absolute non-starter under international law.

Civil nuclear cooperation, however, finds a legal basis in NPT Article IV, which affirms every signatory's inalienable right to develop peaceful nuclear energy and benefit from international cooperation (UN, 1968). This raises the question of how an NPT member like Bangladesh could engage a non-NPT state like Pakistan on civilian nuclear power. The IAEA's item-specific safeguards mechanism offers a potential route, as the agency already applies such safeguards to facilities in Pakistan, India, and Israel (IAEA, 2022). China's extensive supply of nuclear reactors to Pakistan, including the KANUPP K-2 and K-3 units, operates precisely under this model, with the facilities placed under project-specific IAEA oversight (Markey, 2018). Following this precedent, Bangladesh could argue it is exercising its Article IV rights by contracting with Pakistan, provided any resulting facility was placed under equivalent IAEA safeguards.

This narrow legal pathway, though, runs directly into a geopolitical obstacle: the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The NSG is a 45-plus member cartel controlling nuclear and dual-use technology exports, and its rules bind all major suppliers except Pakistan itself. In 2008, under US pressure, the NSG granted India a unique waiver permitting global nuclear trade despite its non-NPT status (Ghosh, 2021). Pakistan was denied equivalent treatment at the time, with China's push for "equal concessions" rebuffed (Hibbs, 2017), and this asymmetry remains the central obstacle today. For Pakistan to supply Bangladesh with a reactor, it would either need to secure its own NSG waiver, which is politically near-impossible given near-certain US and Indian opposition in a consensus-based vote, or defy the NSG outright with Chinese backing, an act that

would trigger severe sanctions on both Pakistan and Bangladesh, with damaging economic consequences for Dhaka (Hibbs, 2017).

This framing places the question beyond a simple bilateral matter. The 2008 US-India deal cemented India's recognition as a great power within the nuclear order, a status China has long sought for Pakistan but has been unable to secure. A Pakistan-Bangladesh civil nuclear deal, backed by Beijing, would effectively be an attempt to force open that same recognition, making it part of a broader contest between China and the US-India bloc over the non-proliferation regime's future. Given these barriers, realistic nuclear cooperation will likely remain confined to activities outside the NSG's trigger list, such as academic exchange, nuclear medicine training, or agricultural research, themes already raised in the April 2025 bilateral consultations (BD MoFA, 2025).

Legal Barriers to a Full-Fledged Defense or Nuclear Defense Treaty

A full-fledged defense treaty or defense-related nuclear cooperation deal between Bangladesh and Pakistan, when examined against the existing legal, constitutional, and international framework, appears highly improbable despite the strategic momentum described elsewhere.

At the domestic level, Bangladesh's constitution explicitly commits the state to non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and disarmament. Article 25 requires that state policy support international peace, security, and solidarity, which constrains Bangladesh from entering alliances that could escalate regional tensions or compromise its non-aligned posture (Government of Bangladesh, 1972). A military pact with Pakistan involving any nuclear dimension would sit awkwardly against this constitutional mandate to promote disarmament rather than strategic bloc entanglement.

Internationally, Bangladesh's status as an NPT non-nuclear-weapon state legally bars it from receiving nuclear weapons, assisting another state's military nuclear program, or engaging in nuclear weapons collaboration of any kind (NPT, 1968). Because Pakistan sits outside the NPT framework, any nuclear cooperation with Bangladesh risks violating IAEA-administered safeguards, particularly given the Additional Protocol and comprehensive safeguards agreements Bangladesh has signed, which require all nuclear activity to remain strictly peaceful and internationally monitored (IAEA, 2021). A defense-related nuclear treaty with Pakistan would therefore breach binding treaty commitments, making such cooperation legally untenable.

Bangladesh's adherence to broader arms control regimes adds further constraints. As a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, Biological Weapons Convention, and Arms Trade Treaty, Bangladesh is obligated to avoid arms-related cooperation that could heighten regional tension or contribute to violations of international humanitarian law (United Nations, 2014). Given Pakistan's ongoing disputes with India, a defense pact could be read as undermining regional peace and breaching ATT principles, with consequences for Bangladesh's international standing.

Regional diplomatic considerations compound these legal barriers. Bangladesh has long maintained security cooperation with India, including border protocols and counterterrorism mechanisms (Rashid, 2017), and a military alliance with Pakistan would be widely perceived as upsetting South Asia's strategic balance and undercutting these existing partnerships. The SAARC Charter likewise discourages actions that increase regional instability, a principle Bangladesh has consistently upheld (SAARC Secretariat, 1985), meaning a Pakistan-Bangladesh defense pact would run counter to this regional commitment by signaling strategic polarization.

Even a softer, NATO or Japan-US style nuclear umbrella arrangement, which provides deterrence without transferring nuclear materials, would not escape difficulty. While such arrangements do not technically violate the NPT, Bangladesh's constitutional non-alignment commitments make accepting a foreign nuclear deterrent politically fraught, and any nuclear-linked pact with a non-NPT state like Pakistan risks inviting international suspicion regarding Bangladesh's IAEA obligations (IAEA, 2021; Riaz, 2020). Reaction from other actors, especially India, would be another matter of concern. It would not be explicitly illegal, but it would remain diplomatically risky.

Taken together, constitutional restrictions, non-proliferation obligations, arms control commitments, strategic and diplomatic risks, regional legal frameworks, and unresolved historical tensions present formidable, overlapping barriers to any genuine Bangladesh-Pakistan defense or nuclear treaty.

Overcoming the Ghosts of History: Enduring Obstacles to a Strategic Compact

While the strategic logic for a Bangladesh-Pakistan partnership appears compelling, its realization confronts formidable obstacles that are not primarily military or legal but rooted in historical grievance and Bangladesh's volatile domestic politics.

The 1971 Liberation War remains the deepest fault line in the relationship, and these historic cracks continue to complicate trust-building more than five decades later (Riaz, 2023). Three specific, unresolved grievances persist. First is Bangladesh's long-standing demand for a formal public apology from Pakistan for the atrocities committed in 1971 (Hossain, 2024). Second is the unresolved financial claim over the division of pre-1971 state assets and revenues, which Dhaka maintains it is still owed (Siddiqui, 2021). Third is the unresolved status of over 200,000 Urdu-speaking "stranded Pakistanis," or Biharis, who remain in Bangladeshi refugee camps, with Dhaka long insisting Pakistan repatriate this population (International Crisis Group, 2019). While some Pakistani analysts argue both populations want to move on, Bangladeshi experts like Professor Delwar Hossain caution that Hasina's ouster has not fundamentally altered public sentiment about the liberation war (Hossain, 2024). Pragmatic cooperation can advance alongside this incomplete healing process, but the historical baggage remains a persistent barrier to full trust and a tool domestic opponents can weaponize against any pact (Riaz, 2023).

The single greatest obstacle to a binding long-term treaty, however, is the political changeover in Bangladesh. A change in domestic political actor might be any kinds of barrier to the implementation of such a treaty.

India's reaction to any formal pact is treated as a near certainty rather than a mere risk, viewed in New Delhi as a coordinated act of encirclement rather than a sovereign policy choice (Pant & Sinha, 2024). Indian analysts perceive not a bilateral agreement but the institutionalization of a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh triangle, compounded by the removal of visa security checks and JI's rise, which together are seen as transforming Bangladesh into fertile ground for ISI-backed militancy (Joshi, 2025), reviving the "3.5-front war" scenario feared by Indian defense planners (Pant & Krishnan, 2023). India has already begun responding: in April 2025 it ended transshipment privileges for Bangladesh and reinforced the strategically vital Siliguri Corridor with heavy military buildup, signaling willingness to impose economic costs (India Ministry of Commerce, 2025).

Finally, comparisons to Saudi Arabia's freedom to pursue defense ties with Pakistan are misleading. Saudi Arabia's central role in global energy markets and strong relationships with both Washington and Beijing afford it geopolitical insulation that Bangladesh simply lacks (Bronson, 2006; Blanchard, 2021). Bangladesh's economy, security, and regional stability depend heavily on balanced relations with India, the US, and multilateral institutions, leaving any Pakistan-aligned defense or nuclear arrangement diplomatically exposed and vulnerable to external pressure (Riaz, 2020).

Phased Alternative Frameworks: Pakistan-Bangladesh Strategic Security Forum

Given these constraints, a full, binding NATO-style defense and nuclear treaty appears presently unworkable. It is politically blocked on the nuclear front, since Pakistan's lack of an NSG waiver and the risk of international pressure rule out any major civil nuclear deal. And it remains historically tainted, as unresolved 1971-era grievances continue to limit full public acceptance.

The more plausible path forward is the alternative proposed here: a Pakistan-Bangladesh Strategic Security Forum, functioning as a non-binding, institutionalized "stealth alliance" that avoids the legal and political costs of a formal treaty while still securing most practical strategic goals.

This forum would serve three functions. First, it would institutionalize dialogue through permanent working groups covering joint defense planning, technology transfer, military-commercial relations, joint production of military facilities, and intelligence sharing, particularly on counter-terrorism and regional security monitoring. Second, it would oversee defense-industrial cooperation, acting as the primary government-to-government body managing the JF-17 and Haider programs through technology transfer, co-production, and joint training. Third, it would facilitate peaceful nuclear research under NPT Article IV, focusing on nuclear medicine, agricultural research, and academic exchange, building trust for any distant future energy cooperation.

This framework captures roughly 90 percent of a formal treaty's strategic benefits at a fraction of the cost.

Phased Alternative Frameworks: Matter of a Risky Bid

Bangladesh can bid for a risky decision of materializing a real, prompt defense treaty. But it would be strategically wrong. Surely, a long-term blueprint can be viable and implementable. It requires a futuristic understanding of the regional and international situation. In an era where great-power competition is intensifying and South Asia remains one of the most militarily volatile regions in the world, Bangladesh must navigate its defense choices with precision rather than haste. The notion of a comprehensive defense or nuclear-related treaty between Bangladesh and Pakistan is fraught with historical, political, and strategic challenges. A full-fledged nuclear or comprehensive defense treaty is not impossible for Dhaka, but it demands a deliberate, careful phased planning, long-term engagement, mutual trust building, and strategically grounded trajectory.

Conclusion

The post-August 2024 Bangladesh–Pakistan rapprochement reflects a genuine structural shift in South Asian security, driven by Bangladesh's abandonment of strategic hedging in response to Indian pressure, Myanmar border instability, and the imperatives of Forces Goal 2030 modernization. The two states have moved swiftly from estrangement to substantive engagement, reviving bilateral consultations after a fifteen-year hiatus, conducting joint naval exercises, concluding emergency ammunition procurement, and advancing negotiations on the JF-17 and Haider platforms, confirming that the strategic reconfiguration is already operationally underway rather than merely aspirational.

Nevertheless, a binding NATO-style defense or nuclear treaty remains presently unfeasible. On the nuclear front, Bangladesh's status as a model NPT signatory and Pakistan's position outside the regime create an absolute legal barrier under Articles I and II, while the Nuclear Suppliers Group's waiver mechanism, blocked by US and Indian opposition since 2008, forecloses civil nuclear cooperation beyond the NSG's trigger list. On the defense front, Bangladesh's constitutional non-alignment commitments, the unresolved grievances of 1971, and India's demonstrated willingness to impose economic costs collectively render a formal treaty untenable. These are not temporary obstacles but structural constraints that a phased, institution-first approach is better equipped to navigate.

The most viable path forward is therefore the Pakistan–Bangladesh Strategic Security Forum, a non-binding institutional framework that institutionalizes defense planning, intelligence sharing, and technology transfer while accommodating NPT-compliant peaceful nuclear research. This architecture captures the strategic logic of alignment without incurring its legal and geopolitical costs, and its non-binding character is a deliberate feature rather than a shortcoming: it allows cooperation to outlast changes of government, preserves Bangladesh's constitutional posture, and sustains the deterrence-by-entanglement that constitutes its primary security value. The post-

2024 realignment has fundamentally altered South Asia's Regional Security Complex, elevating Bangladesh from a peripheral actor to a strategic pivot state. What both capitals must now do is build the institutional foundations, carefully, incrementally, and within the bounds of international law, that will make a deeper partnership viable when conditions permit.

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